

POSTMODERNIST CHALLENGES OF THE VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION: THE BATTLE OF TITANS

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Abstract: The present paper, based on the socio-cultural arguments of the post-modern paradigm, demonstrates the necessity of theorising the concept of “virtual communication” as a specific element of the contemporary cultural and public space. From the methodological point of view, the research is based on a comparative approach: one that is originated in Jean Baudrillard’s ontological criticism, highlighting its dissonant elements and fear of an exaggerated technicism; the other one is rather an answer to the development of humanity as underlined in Pierre Lévy’s and Sherry Turkle’s works.

Keywords: virtual communication, postmodern paradigm, media effects, cyberculture.

1. Introduction

Virtual communication has known new definitions and has been analysed in different and sometimes antagonistic perspectives. Within this theoretical frame, two large perspectives are presented, specific to postmodernism: the first one originates in Jean Baudrillard’s ontological criticism and points out the dissonant elements and the fear of an exaggerated technicism, of a communication emptied from significations and humanism, as showed in Paul Virilio’s work; the second one is presented rather as an answer to problems forwarded by the first perspective. To this point of view pragmatic, creative and transformative elements were added, necessary to contemporary reality and to the development of humanity as pointed out by Pierre Lévy and Sherry Turkle.

The impact of virtual communication on every social field induces a series of challenges by using new media and new communication and information technologies and is meant to give adequate answers to these matters specific to contemporary debates in communication studies.

2. Pierre Levy’s *cyberculture*

The followers of virtuality propose a new vision focused by and on technique and new media. They consider the human as being improved and extended by technique, by the understanding and use of the media in an efficient manner. Despite the representatives of the media utopia, of extremes manifested in a schizo-technicist manner given by the fusion between man and machine, by a “reterritorialisation” of the body and human identity, the representatives of the moderate perspective start from the acceptance and analysis of human existence with the interaction from the interface of communication technologies, searching for the significance of technological mediation and of simulation in the virtual space.

Pierre Lévy is considered one of the most important writers, representative for the moderate vision upon the relation between technology and culture, between the

technicist and culturalist vision. Author of numerous writings related to the virtual space and the invasion of the new informational techniques, such as *Collective Intelligence. Mankind's emerging world in cyberspace* (1997) or *Cyberculture* (2001), P. Lévy is considered a visionary due to the way in which he presents the communicational revolution specific to the digital era, as well as an optimist as regards the future potential of cyberspace. Lévy argues that technology may have a transforming effect upon global society along with the unlimited exchange of ideas taking place in the cyberspace, exchange that will trigger the release from the political and social hierarchies that have been at the basis on human development. The domains he refers to in his analysis are rather diverse: forms of new art, transformations in knowledge, education and training, preservation of linguistic and cultural differences, emergence of collective intelligence, issues of social exclusion, impact of new technologies on democracy in general.

His core theses focus on the explanation of the cyberculture phenomenon. Although he does not consider the Internet able to magically solve the social or cultural problems of the planet, the author assumes the following: first, the expansion of cyberspace is the result of an international movement of the youth willing to experiment, to collectively live new forms of communication, other than those put at disposal by traditional media; second, the new communication space is now accessible and it is up to each individual how he or she exploits the positive potentiation on the economic, political, cultural and human level.

In order to clarify his position, Lévy parallels the movement of cyberspace and cyber culture denouncement with that of the '50s and '60s, which denounced rock music. It is considered mandatory to identify the cultural implications of cyberculture in all its dimensions. Quoting one of Albert Einstein's statements about the three bombs of the 20th century with global repercussions, i.e. the atomic bomb, the demographic bomb and the telecommunication bomb, Lévy reaffirms the overwhelming effects of telecommunications due to their chaotic, exponential and explosive expansion. The quantity of available data is multiplied at an accelerated rate. The density of the connections between diverse sources of information grows at a threatening rate inside the databases, hypertexts and networks. Moreover, we witness the anarchic proliferation of the non-hierarchic contacts among individuals. All these result in an uncontrolled flow of information, a flood of data absorbed by the rapid currents of communications, a deafening cacophony of repetitive media, a war of images, a propagandistic and intellectual confusion.

A probable answer is that of training the necessary skills and competencies, of technical and media competencies. It is the practical, rational response.

Lévy's response to all the above is that of individual exaltation, of man's reconsideration as main source of values, a priceless and enchanting resource. On the other hand, by repositioning the human at the core of interrogations about cyberspace valences, Lévy joins the postmodernist current, formulating thus his answer to the humanist criticism regarding isolation, exploitation and massacre of the human. Furthermore, in order to underline this valorisation, one remarks the unusual effort to interlace connections between generations, genders, nationalities and cultures, despite all difficulties and conflicts. The solution is given by telecommunications which, in Lévy's opinion, imply the acknowledgement of *the other*, mutual acceptance, assistance, co-operation, association and negotiation beyond the divergent points of view. Throughout the world, telecommunications have expanded the possibility of

amicable contact, of contractual transactions, of dissemination of knowledge in exchange for the understanding and peaceful discovery of differences.

Lévy considers that humanity forms a network that is fragile, but also singular and fine, open and interactive, characterised in all its cultural forms (art and education) of generalised interactive communication.

One of Lévy's hypotheses is that cyberculture reinstates the co-presence of messages and their context, which were usual in the previous oral societies, but at a different scale and on another plane. The new universality no longer depends on the self-sufficient texts or on the fixedness and independence of significance. It is built and expanded by interconnected messages, by their continual ramifications throughout the virtual communities which, in their turn, are meant to assign them various and permanently renewed meanings. It is technology that makes this universality possible, it is technology that makes us collectively responsible for the way we use it.

One of the core concepts of the writings of P. Lévy (2001, XVI) is the concept of "cyberspace" (also known as *network*) that he briefly defines as the new communication medium born from the global interconnections of computers. The term refers not only to the material infrastructure of digital communication media, but also to the universe of information possessed and to the human being navigating and feeding its infrastructure. Moreover "cyberculture" represents the set of technologies (material and intellectual), practices, attitudes, thinking patterns, values which have developed along with cyberspace. Lévy's effort is to draw the attention upon the cultural implications of the development of the new information and communication technology, the general attitude towards the new technologies, the virtualisation of information and communication, the global mutations of contemporary civilisation.

Lévy's vision is optimistic and moderate at the same time by asking some natural questions regarding the implications of new technologies upon society and culture. His perspective is that technologies create new conditions and put at disposal unimaginable opportunities for the individual and societal development. Nevertheless, he is not a follower of technologic determinism and utopism by the unconditional affirmation of the causality relation between technologic development and the development of mankind.

The fundamental feature of cyberculture in the evolution of mankind is to maintain universality without dissolving totality. In Lévy's opinion, "totality represents the stabilised unity of meaning associated with diversity" (2001, 234). However, cyberculture does not impose a unity of meanings. Along the evolution of mankind, Lévy identifies three types of societies (2001, 234): small, oral societies focused on themselves who lived a non-universal totality; imperial "civilised" societies that used writing and led to the development of totalling universe; and cyberculture, that corresponds to the actual globalisation of societies and that invents the universe without totality.

Thus, the culture of the future is that of "the universe without totality" as far as "the universe" represents the virtual presence of humanity *in se*. The universal purpose of cyberspace is to interconnect all persons and to encourage them to participate in the collective intelligence in an ubiquitous environment. It corresponds to the moment when the human species, by economic globalisation and intensification of communication and transport networks, tends to form one single global community, even if that community is characterised by inequality and conflict. Furthermore, virtual communities, connected to the universal, constantly build and dissolve their own new

dynamic, immersive and changing micro-totalities within the turbulent informational and communicational flows.

At the same time, cyberspace is the medium and one of the main conditions for the development of “collective intelligence”. Nevertheless, the growth of cyberspace does not automatically determine the development of “collective intelligence”, but only a favourable environment. Thus, P. Lévy (2001, 11) identifies a variety of new forms that come to live in the orbit of digital interactive networks.

Such a form refers to cognitive isolation and overload determined by the stress provoked by the use of computers and useless communication. Dependency, understood as addiction to the web or games in the virtual space, represents a form originated from the inside of digital networks, along with domination and exploitation. The last two present an economic and political load due to the unequal distribution of the decision and control centres, to the monopolist control of economic powers and to the unequal relation with the states of the Third World. *The collective stupidity* to which Lévy attributes rumours, conformism to the network and virtual communities, accumulation of data without information, “interactive television” represents, in its turn, a new form that was born within the digital networks.

These specific forms are characteristic to non-participants who will be left aside, outside the positive cycle of change, influencing comprehension and closeness. This time, non-participation means radical exclusion and determines a mandatory active participation from the part of the others in order to reduce the negative effects of cyberspace.

Grace to participation, socialisation and emancipation, collective intelligence offered by cyberculture represents the best remedy for the destabilising, sometimes exclusivist effects of the fast rate of technologic transformations. In order to support the conception according to which collective intelligence accelerates this mutation (2001, 12), Lévy refers to the Greek concept of “*pharmakon*” (root of the word “pharmacy”) that meant both poison and remedy. Thus, the new *pharmakon*, i.e. collective intelligence triggered by cyberculture, behaves both as a poison for non-participants (and nobody, individually, can fully participate because of its size and complexity) and as a remedy for those who are willing to dive into its turbulent currents.

Consequently, Lévy implicitly promotes the idea of training media and informational competencies for two reasons: to protect the non-participants from the possibility of failure and deviation once entered into the virtual world, and, for the initiates, to increase their capacity of an optimum use of cyberspace in accordance with their needs.

Following the lines previously sketched by Marshall McLuhan and Douglas Engelbart who promoted the idea of a global community and that of using technologies not only as mere instruments, but also as means of intellectual development, P. Lévy creates an original symbiosis between the tradition of the French socialist theory and the technologic and media domain specific to the Anglo-Saxon area. His ideas and conceptualisations remain valid even now, especially due to their significant-metaphoric power. The new space of knowledge, dynamic and interactive, called by Lévy *cosmopedia* (1997) is a reality, more powerful than a desideratum. Thus, *cosmopedia*, the space of knowledge around collective intelligence, goes beyond image and text, as communication forms specific to a certain period, and combines “*static images with video images, with sounds, with interactive simulation, with interactive maps, with virtual reality, virtual life etc.*” (1997, 174-175). Moreover, this concept supposes the relativisation of boundaries among subjects and domains,

rendering knowledge an “immense patching” in which each domain may fuse with another. The power of uni-disciplinary knowledge is dissolved, whereas “collective intelligence” becomes possible. Collective intelligence becomes a form of “*universally distributed intelligence*”, a juxtaposition of individual intelligences. Individual intelligences are the result of competencies acquired by our interaction with signs, information and objects. Thus, knowledge is accumulated, and through our relation with the others comprehension and community are born.

With the help of new communication systems or digital information technologies, the members of the community possess the means to coordinate their own actions in relation with the others within the same virtual universe of knowledge. Lévy (1997, 14) claims that this is not a modality to describe a conventional physical environment, but an opportunity to offer the members of a delocalised community the possibility of interaction within a mobile field of significances.

The shared virtual universe is a continual communicational flow, both by method and by way of being, where permanently perpetuated and enriched significances manifest themselves. In this respect, cyberspace becomes the turning space of interaction between knowledge and people within deterritorialised intelligent communities – “the collective intelligence”.

3. Sherry Turkle’s *Always On Self*

Within the virtual space, Sherry Turkle analyses, from the perspective of the postmodernist discourse, the competition between the physical and digital identity as a form of mutual exclusion, which cannot place them one in the continuation of the other. The counter-arguments forwarded refer to the construction of an enriched identity, fulfilled by the intersection between the physical and digital world as a reply to Baudrillard’s and Virilio’s criticism regarding the disintegration of the subject in the virtual world, the loss of self-identity by the translation of several simultaneous worlds and roles, the disappearance of the human swallowed by the network. Turkle (1995) analyses the Internet from the perspective of post-modern human identity built as a result of the use of computers, in which, under the metaphor of “windows” and of “multiple egos” the self is rebuilt. The existence of this multiple perpetuated ego can become pathological, as Lévy also has shown, and cyberspace can lose its integrity. Furthermore, the author analysis, from the perspective of the transformation process of computer users’ psychology in the first period of the ’80s, the modification of the traditional man-machine distance that was reduced due to the modification of communication contexts. The clear demarcation line between what is technologically specific (*just a machine*) and what is specifically human no longer represents a standard the moment the present digital universe and people (especially young people: children and teenagers) emotionally interact via computers, personify them and assign them psychological traits of personality and character (“the Pinocchio effect”, where the machines, i.e. computers come to life). Whereas the debate about artificial intelligence was focused on the answer to the question if machines will think like people, in the introduction to *Second Self* (2005) Turkle thinks that it would more relevant to ask if people may have always thought like machines. This point of view can be considered the key to the analysis of the entire theoretic-analytic endeavour conducted by the American researcher along time.

The relation between man and machine is one of the themes analysed by Turkle. In *Construction and Reconstructions of the Self in Virtual Reality: Playing in the MUDs*

(1994), Turkle presents, by an X-ray of some of the most popular virtual games, the modification of the self in the virtual space, created by the relation between man and computer. The worlds presented in the virtual space produce social interactions, are worlds where one can introduce oneself as a character, one may remain anonymous, have and play a role or several roles similar or not with one's actual self (1994, 158). In MUD (acronym from the English *MultiUser Domains* referring to the virtual social space existing by means of a machine) the projections of the self are anchored in a post-modern context shaped by the dissemination of authority, by the unlimited multiplication of the self. In this space different cultural forms coexist and interact, and the authority does not belong to one single person (like in modernism), but is concomitantly possessed by hundreds of persons situated in different geographic and cultural spaces. According to Turkle, in the relation with the self, the computer used as communication means helps the human self not only to explore a certain social context, but also to meditate on its own nature and power (1994, 159). Thus, virtual games are used for the reconstruction of the self: projection in other worlds, share of ideals, acquisition of new relations, friendships, knowledge. Turkle admits the influence of the psychoanalytical tradition in the analysis of the "ideal ego" by the possibility created for the MUD gamers to identify themselves with persons they like or hate in their real life. In this manner, the virtual space has a cathartic effect and may be regarded as a frame for personal development.

In *Second Self* (1984/2005), Sherry Turkle calls the computer an "evocative objet", as it triggers self-reflection and stimulates thinking (1984/2005, 2). Thus, in the virtual daily reality people explore, build and rebuild their own identities, achieving this in a medium penetrated by the post-modern ethos of multiple identities. The virtual space leaves room for the birth of a new culture, built on the relation between man and machine, where the self becomes built. *Second Self* remains one of the first writings granting a special attention to the psychological relation between man and machine. The author considers that through virtuality the impact of computers is considerable, as they create the possibility for people to think about themselves, and by putting into practice dreams and ideals it allows the contact with taboo preoccupations, with the aggressive side, with sexuality or hidden, unconscious desires.

In another work published in 1996, *Virtuality and Its Discontents*, Turkle reaffirms her position about MUD as the new public space revigorating the public space described by Habermas. Along with the social atomisation produced after the Second World War, with the singularity of the suburbs individual, computers are considered able to modify this state, by revitalising the community. But this means still an individual who is alone in front of the computer, but who, however, makes friends by socialising in virtual cafes or malls. Thus, computers and virtual worlds add a new dimension to mediated experience. Turkle thinks that the easiness and naturalness of computer use (that she analyses in a series of interviews with diverse users) comes from the similarity of the habit of watching TV programmes, activity which has constituted the dominant social experience in the last 40 years (1996, 52). Nevertheless, I find this comparison contradictory, as, in McLuhan's terms, television represents a cold medium, whereas the computer, the Internet and virtual games fall within the category of warm media. This is due to a high degree of emotional and cognitive involvement, debated by Turkle also. The researcher adopts a moderate optimism about the future of virtuality, and thinks that the virtual person may become a source of self-reflection and self-transformation. Furthermore, virtual communities may become in their turn factors of improvement for the relations in the communities

exterior to the virtual space. “*Like an anthropologist who comes home after having studied a foreign culture, the virtual world traveller may return to the real world more capable to understand the arbitrary and the things that can be changed*” (1996, 57).

While in *Second Self* computers raised the debate about the experience of the second self, in *Always on / Always On-You: The Tethered Self* (2008), Turkle grasps a new state of the self, the self as object (itself). The modern communication media are anchored in a permanent contact with the others, and Turkle explained that fact by the preposition *on* used in a series of English set phrases: *online*, *on the Web*, *on my cell* etc. These set phrases express not only the connection people have with these means, but put social relations in a new light – they permanentise contact. In this context, Turkle forwards a new social form of connection, i.e. with those who “count” and which is determined by the distance to functional communication technologies. She illustrates this with a series of behaviours due to the use of new media, behaviours that people manifest daily, irrespective of the place where they are (a random public space such as a subway station, a cafe, a means of public transportation etc.). The mobile phone, the connection to the Internet throw the individuals into the virtual space. This dive is based on its anonymity, on its absence from the physical space where it is, on immersion (2008, 123).

In this context, Turkle further draws the attention on a certain type of “addiction” to the media due to the very fact that they are never in the shadow, but are always ready to be used. Thus, the self-risks to lose its sense of consciousness when he chooses to communicate. Turkle’s perspective in *Always On/ Always On-You* is similar to Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticum described by Foucault (1997) in which the sensation is created that you are permanently followed without the guard’s presence. For Foucault the task of the modern state is to have citizens who do not need surveillance and observe the laws by themselves. Starting from this idea, Turkle affirms that we attempt to keep the pace with our lives as they are presented by disciplinary technology. In other words, “*we try to have a self who keeps the pace with our e-mail*” (2008, 130). The *always on* technology accompanies the individual everywhere and undermines the traditional rituals of demarcation between on and off. This technology represents a new form of culture which characterises certain social layers, certain persons from different geographic areas, which have in common the possibility to access and use the new communicational technologies.

Consequently, Turkle affirms the necessity to reconsider the relation with the virtual space, now enriched also by certain emotional-affective connotations, not in the sense of stopping the evasion from reality, but towards the optimisation of overcoming the daily life psychological complexes, in the physical or virtual reality.

4. Conclusion

Whereas Pierre Lévy comes from the French critical space and has roots in the European culture, Sherry Turkle is situated in the Anglo-American cultural space. I consider it representative to present the work of the two authors in this theoretic endeavour about the impact of virtuality due to the fact that the two authors dismantle the prejudice of a certain specificity of analysis characteristic to a cultural space (the technicism and empirism of the Anglo-American space and the criticism of the French one), and on the other hand, due to the moderate positioning adopted in their writings and results of their researches on the issues of the effects of the new information and communication technologies upon contemporary society. Moreover, the highlighting of

certain elements from the work of Pierre Lévy and of Sherry Turkle aim at identifying an image, a representation of the stakes of virtuality, the grasping of a overall vision within the most powerful positions expressed in the postmodernist current. The choice of these representatives in the comparative analysis I conducted was grounded on their mutual critical positionings, on their similarities and conceptual affiliations and on their successive constructions and dismantlings regarding the impact of virtuality upon society and the individual, both on the process level and on the structural and symbolic level.

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