CYBERSPACE, OR THE VIRTUALITY OF THE REAL

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The two predominant myths about cyberspace are both based on the commonplace according to which we are today in the middle of the shift from the epoch of modernism (monological subjectivity, mechanistic Reason, etc.) to the post-modern epoch of dissemination (the play of appearances no longer grounded in the reference to some ultimate Truth, the multiple forms of constructed Selves, etc.).

In cyberspace, we witness a return to *pensée sauvage,* to "concrete", "sensual" thought: an "essay" in cyberspace confronts fragments of music and other sounds, text, images, video clips, etc., and it is this confrontation of "concrete" elements which produces "abstract" meaning... Are we not here again back at Eisenstein's dream of "intellectual montage" - of filming Capital, of producing the Marxist theory out of the clash of concrete images? Is not hypertext a new practice of montage?[1]

We are witnessing today the move from the modernist culture of calculation to the postmodernist culture of simulation.[2] The clearest index of this move is the shift in the use of the term "transparency": modernist technology is "transparent" in the sense of retaining the illusion of the insight into "how the machine works", i.e. the screen of the interface was supposed to enable the user to have direct access to the machine behind the screen; the user was supposed to "grasp" its working, in ideal conditions even to reconstruct it rationally. The postmodernist "transparency" designates almost the exact opposite of this attitude of analytical global planning: the interface screen is supposed to conceal the working of the machine behind it and to simulate as faithfully as possible our everyday experience (the Macintosh style of interface in which written orders are replaced by simple mouse-clicking in iconic signs...); however, the price for this illusion of the continuity with our everyday environs is that the user becomes "accustomed to opaque technology" - the digital machinery "behind the screen" retreats into total impenetrability, even invisibility. In other words, the user renounces the endeavour to grasp the functioning of the computer, resigning himself to the fact that, in his interaction with cyberspace, he is thrown into a non-transparent situation homologous to that of his everyday *Lebenswelt*, a situation in which he has to "find his bearings", to act in the mode of tinkering *(bricolage),* by means of trial and error, not simply to follow some pre-established general rules - or, to repeat Sherry Turkle's pun, in the postmodernist attitude, we "take things at their interface value". If the modernist universe is the universe, hidden behind the screen, of bytes, wires and chips, of electric current running, the postmodernist universe is the universe of the naive trust in the screen which makes irrelevant the very quest for "what lies behind it". "To take things at their interface value" involves a phenomenological attitude, an attitude of "trusting the phenomena": the modernist programmer takes refuge in cyberspace as a transparent, clearly structured universe which allows him to elude (momentarily, at least) the opacity of his everyday environs in which he is part of an a priori unfathomable background, full of institutions whose functioning follows unknown rules which exert domination over his life; for the postmodernist

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[1] As to Eisenstein, see V.V.Ivanov, "Eisenstein's Montage of Hieroglyphic Signs", in <u>On Signs,</u> ed. by Marshall Blonsky, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP 1985, p. 221-235.
[2] See Sherry Turkle, <u>Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet</u>, New York: Simon and Schuster 1995.

programmer, on the contrary, the fundamental features of cyberspace coincide with those described by Heidegger as the constitutive features of our everyday life-world (the finite individual is thrown into a situation whose co-ordinates are not regulated by clear universal rules, so that the individual has to find his way in it gradually)...

In both these myths, the error is the same: yes, in cyberspace, we are dealing with a return to premodern "concrete thought" or to the non-transparent life-world, but this new life-world already presupposes the background of the scientific digital universe: bytes, or, rather, the digital series is the real behind the screen, i.e. we are never submerged in the play of appearances without an "indivisible remainder". Postmodernism focuses on the mystery of what Turkle calls the "emergence" and what Deleuze elaborated as the "sense-event": the emergence of the pure appearance which cannot be reduced to the simple effect of its bodily causes; nonetheless, this emergence is the effect of the digitalized Real.

A propos of the notion of interface, the temptation here is, of course, to bring it to the point of its self-reference: what if one conceives of the "consciousness" itself, the frame through which we perceive the universe, as a kind of "interface"? However, the moment we yield to this temptation, we accomplish a kind of foreclosure of the real. When the user playing with the multiplicity of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels says to himself "What if real life (RL) itself is just one more IRC channel?", or, with respect to multiple windows in a hypertext, "What if RL is just one more window?", the illusion to which he succumbs is strictly correlative to the opposite one, i.e. to the common-sense attitude of maintaining our belief in the full reality outside the virtual universe. That is to say, one should avoid both traps, the simple direct reference to external reality outside cyberspace as well as the opposite attitude of "there is no external reality, RL is just another window".[3]

In the domain of sexuality, this foreclosure of the Real gives rise to the New Age vision of the new computerised sexuality in which bodies mix in the ethereal virtual space, delivered of their material weight. This vision is *stricto sensu* an ideological fantasy, since it unites the impossible: sexuality (linked to the real of the body) with the "mind" decoupled from the body, as if - in today's universe where our bodily existence is (perceived as) more and more threatened by environmental dangers, AIDS, etc., to the extreme vulnerability of today's narcissistic subject to the actual psychic contact with another person - we can reinvent a space where one can fully indulge in bodily pleasures by getting rid of our actual bodies. In short, this vision is that of a state without lack and obstacles, a state of free floating in virtual space in which nonetheless desire somehow survives...

So, instead of indulging in these ideologies, it is far more productive to begin with how computerisation affects the horizon of our everyday bodily experience: the progressive immobilisation of the body overlaps with bodily hyperactivity. On the one hand, I rely less and less on my proper body, my bodily activity is more and more reduced to giving signals to machines which do the work for me (clicking on a computer-mouse, etc.); on the other hand, my body is strengthened, "hyperactivated", through body-building and jogging, pharmaceutical means, as well

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[3] This double trap is homologous to the double trap apropos of the notion of ideology: the simple reliance on pre-ideological external reality as the measure of ideological distortion is strictly correlative to the attitude of "there is no external reality, all we are dealing with is the multitude of simulacra, of discursive constructs". See Slavoj Zizek, "Introduction", in Mapping Ideology, London: Verso 1995.

as direct implants, so that, paradoxically, the hyperactive superman coincides with the cripple who can only move around by means of prostheses regulated by a computer-chip (like the Robocop). The prospect is thus that the human being will gradually lose his grounding in the concrete life-world, i.e. the basic set of co-ordinates which determine its (self)experience (the surface separating inside from outside, the direct relationship to one's own body, etc.). Tendentially, total subjectivization (reduction of reality to electro-mechanically generated cyberspace "windows") coincides with total objectivization (the subordination of our "inner" bodily rhythm to a set of stimulations regulated by external apparatuses).

Progressive "subjectivisation" is thus strictly correlative to its opposite, to the progressive "externalisation" of the hard kernel of subjectivity. This paradoxical coincidence of the two opposed processes has its roots in the fact that, today, with VR and technobiology, we are dealing with the loss of the surface which separates inside from outside. This loss jeopardises our most elementary perception of "our own body" as it is related to its environs; it cripples our standard phenomenological attitude towards the body of another person, in which we suspend our knowledge of what actually exists beneath the skin surface (glands, flesh...) and conceive the surface (of a face, for example) as directly expressing the "soul". On the one hand, inside is always outside: with the progressive implantation and replacement of our internal organs, techno-computerized prostheses (bypasses, pacemakers...) function as an internal part of our "living" organism; the colonisation of the outer space thus reverts inside, into "endo-colonization"[4], the technological colonisation of our body itself. On the other hand, outside is always inside: when we are directly immersed into VR, we lose contact with reality, i.e. electro-waves bypass the interaction of external bodies and directly attack our senses, "it is the eyeball that now englobes man's entire body"[5].

At a more fundamental level, however, this "derailment" - this lack of support, of a fixed instinctual standard, in the co-ordination between the natural rhythm of our body and its surrounding - characterises man as such: man as such is "derailed", it eats more than "natural", it is obsessed with sexuality more than "natural", i.e. it follows its drives with an excess far beyond "natural" (instinctual) satisfaction, and this excess of drive has to be "gentrified" through "second nature" (man-created institutions and patterns). The old Marxist formula about "second nature" is thus to be taken more literally than usual: the point is not only that we are never dealing with pure natural needs, that our needs are always already mediated by the cultural process; moreover, the labour of culture has to re-instate the lost support in natural needs, to re-create a "second nature" as the recompense for the loss of support in the "first nature" - the human animal has to re-accustom itself to the most elementary bodily rhythm of sleep, feeding, movement.

What we encounter here is the loop of (symbolic) castration in which one endeavours to reinstate the lost "natural" co-ordination on the ladder of desire: on the one hand, one reduces the bodily gestures to the necessary minimum (of the clicks on the computer-mouse...), on the other hand, one attempts to recover the lost bodily fitness by means of jogging, body-building, etc.; on the one hand, one reduces the body odours to a minimum (by regularly taking showers, etc.), on the other hand, one

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[4] Paul Virilio, <u>The Art of the Motor</u>, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 1995, p. 113.
[5] Ibid., p. 148.

attempts to recover these same odours through toilet-waters and perfumes; etc.etc.

This paradox is condensed in the phallus as the signifier of desire, i.e. as the point of inversion at which the very moment of "spontaneous" natural power turns into an artificial prosthetic element. That is to say, against the standard notion of phallus as the siege of male "natural" penetrative-aggressive potency-power (to which one then opposes the "artificial" playful prosthetic phallus), the point of Lacan's concept of the phallus as a signifier is that the phallus "as such" *is* a kind of "prosthetic", "artificial" supplement: it designates the point at which the big Other, a decentered agency, supplements the subject's failure. When, in her criticism of Lacan, Judith Butler emphasises the parallel between mirror-image (ideal-ego) and phallic signifier[6], one should shift the focus onto the feature they effectively share: both mirror-image and phallus qua signifier are "prosthetic" supplements for the subject's foregoing dispersal/failure, for the lack of co-ordination and unity; in both cases, the status of this prosthesis is "illusory", with the difference that, in the first case, we are dealing with imaginary illusion (identification with a decentered immobile image), while in the second case, the illusion is symbolic, it stands for phallus as pure semblance.

Cyberspace thus poses a threat to the fundamental limit between "inside" and "outside", surface and bodily depth, which accounts for our everyday experience; the threat to this limit determines today's form of the hysterical question, i.e. today, hysteria stands predominantly under the sign of vulnerability, of a threat to our bodily and/or psychic identity - suffice it to recall the all-pervasiveness of the logic of victimisation, from sexual harassment to the dangers of food and tobacco, so that the subject itself is more and more reduced to "that which can be hurt". Today's form of the obsessional question "Am I alive or dead?" is "Am I a machine (does my brain really function as a computer) or a living human being (with a spark of spirit or something else irreducible to the computer-circuit)?"; it is not difficult to discern in this alternative the split between A *(Autre)* and J *(Jouissance)*, between the "big Other", the dead symbolic order, and the Thing, the living substance of enjoyment. According to Sherry Turkle, our reaction to this question goes through three phases: first, the emphatic assertion of an irreducible difference: man is not a machine, there is something unique about it...; then, fear and panic when we become aware of all the potentials of a machine: it can think, reason, answer our questions...; finally, disavowal, i.e. recognition through denial: the guarantee that there is some feature of man inaccessible to the computer (sublime enthusiasm, anxiety...) allows us to treat the computer as a "living and thinking partner", since "we know this is only a game, a computer is not really like that". Suffice it to recall the way John Searle's polemics against AI (his Chinese Room thought experiment) was "gentrified" and integrated into the user's everyday attitude: Searle has proven that a computer cannot really think and understand language - so, since there is the ontological-philosophical guarantee that the machine does not pose a threat to human uniqueness, I can calmly accept the machine and play with it... Is this split attitude in which "disavowal and appropriation are each tied up with the other"[7], not a new variation on the old philosophical game of "transcendental illusion" practised already by Kant apropos of the notion of teleology - since I know a computer cannot think, I can act, in my everyday life, as if it really does think? - At a different level, this same ambiguity determines the way we relate to our screen personae:

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[6] See Chapter 2 of Judith Butler, <u>Bodies That Matter</u>, New York: Routledge 1993.
[7] Turkle, op. cit.,p. 126.

- on the one hand, we maintain the attitude of external distance, of playing with false images: "I know I'm not like that (brave, seductive...), but it's nice, from time to time, to forget one's true self and to put on a more satisfying mask - this way, you can relax, you are delivered of the burden to be what you are, to live with yourself and to be fully responsible for it..."

- on the other hand, the screen persona I create for myself can be "more myself than my "real-life" person (my "official" self-image), insofar as it renders visible aspects of myself I would never dare to admit in RL. Say, when I play anonymously in MUD, I can present myself as a promiscuous woman and engage in activities which, were I to indulge in them in RL, would bring about the disintegration of my sense of personal identity... This is one of the ways to read Lacan's dictum "truth has the structure of a fiction": I can articulate the hidden truth about my drives precisely insofar as I am aware that I'm just playing a game on the screen. In cyberspace sex, there is no "face to face", just the external impersonal space in which everything, inclusive of my most intimate internal fantasies, can be articulated with no inhibitions... What one encounters here, in this pure "flux of desire", is, of course, the bad surprise of "repressive desublimation" (if we are to borrow this term from Herbert Marcuse): the universe freed of everyday inhibitions turns out to be the universe of unbridled sadomasochistic violence and will to domination...[8]

In order to conceptualise the two poles of this undecidability, Turkle resorts to the opposition between "acting out" and "working through" the difficulties of RL[9]: I can follow the escapist logic and simply act out my RL difficulties in VR, or I can use VR to become aware of the inconsistency and multiplicity of the components of my subjective identifications and work them through. In this second case, the interface screen functions in a way homologous to the psychoanalyst: the suspension of the symbolic rules which regulate my RL activity enables me to stage-externalise my repressed content which I am otherwise unable to confront. The same ambiguity is reproduced in the impact of cyberspace on community life. On the one hand, there is the dream of the new populism, where decentralised networks will allow individuals to band together and build a participatory grass-roots political system, a transparent world in which the mystery of the impenetrable bureaucratic state agencies is dispelled. On the other hand, the use of computers and VR as a tool to rebuild community results in the building of a community inside the machine, reducing individuals to isolated monads, each of them alone, facing a computer, ultimately unsure if the person s/he communicates with on the screen is a "real" person, a false persona, an agent which combines several "real" persons or a computerised program... Again, the ambiguity is irreducible.

However, this ambiguity, although irreducible, is not symmetrical. What one should

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[8] In other words, computerization undermines performativity. By claiming this, we are not resurrecting the myth of the good, old pre-computerised times when words really counted. As Derrida, but also Lacan, emphasised again and again, performance can always, for structural reasons, go wrong, it can only arise on the background of radical undecidability - the very fact that I have to rely on the other's word means that the other remains for me forever an enigma. What tends to get lost in virtual communities is this very abyss of the other, this very background of undecidability in the "wired universe", the very opaqueness of the other tends to evaporate. In this sense, the suspension of performativity in virtual communities is the very opposite of the suspension of performativity in the psychoanalytic cure where I can say anything to the analyst, all my obscene fantasies about him, knowing that he will not be offended, that he will not "take it personally".

[9] Turkle, op.cit, p. 200.

introduce here is the elementary Lacanian distinction between imaginary projection-identification and symbolic identification. The most concise definition of symbolic identification is perhaps that it consists in a mask which is more real and binding than the true face beneath it (in accordance with Lacan's notion that the human feigning is the feigning of feigning itself: in imaginary deception, I simply present a wrong image of myself, while in symbolic deception, I present a true image and count on it being taken for a lie...[10]). A husband, for example, can maintain his marriage as just another social role and engage in adultery as "the real thing"; however, the moment he is confronted with the choice of actually leaving his wife or not, he suddenly discovers that the social mask of marriage means more to him than the intense private passion... The VR persona thus offers a case of imaginary deception insofar as it externalises-displays a wrong image of myself (a fearful man playing a hero in MUD...), and a symbolic deception insofar as it renders the truth about myself in the guise of a playful game (by way of playfully adopting an aggressive persona, I disclose my true aggressivity).

In other words, VR confronts us, in the most radical way imaginable, with the old enigma of transposed/displaced emotions at work from the so-called "weepers" (women hired to cry at funerals) in "primitive" societies to the "canned laughter" on TV: when I adopt a screen persona on MUD, the emotions I feel and "feign" as part of my screen persona are not simply false: although (what I experience as) my "true self" does not feel them, they are nonetheless in a sense "true" -the same as with watching a TV mini-series with canned laughter where, even if I do not laugh, but just stare at the screen, tired after a hard day's work, I nonetheless feel relieved after the show... This is what the Lacanian notion of decentered subject aims at: my most intimate feelings can be radically externalised, I can literally "laugh and cry through an other". More generally, this mystery is the mystery of the symbolic order as such as exemplified by the enigmatic status of what we call "politeness": when, upon meeting an acquaintance, I say "Glad to see you! How are you today?", it is clear to me and to him that, in a way, I "do not mean it seriously" (if my partner suspects that I am really interested in how he is, he may even be unpleasantly surprised, as if I am aiming at something too intimate and of no concern to me). It would nonetheless be wrong to designate my act as simply "hypocritical", since, in another way, I do mean it: the polite exchange does establish a kind of pact between the two of us - in the same sense as I do "sincerely" laugh through the canned laughter (the proof being the fact that I effectively do "feel relieved" afterwards).

At a somewhat different level, we encounter the same paradox apropos of TinySex: what TinySex compels us to accept is the blurred line of separation between "things" and "mere words". Their separation is not simply suspended, it is still here, but displaced - a third realm emerges which is neither "real things" nor "merely words", but demands its own specific (ethical) rules of conduct. Let us consider virtual sex: when I play sex games with a partner on the screen, exchanging "mere" written messages, it is not only that the games can effectively arouse me or my partner and provide us with a "real" orgasmic experience (with the further paradox that, when - and if – I later encounter my partner in RL, I can be deeply disappointed, turned off:

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[10] Or, to take a rather vulgar everyday example: being slightly overweight, I have at my disposal two strategies to conceal this fact. I can put on a shirt with vertical lines which makes me appear slender, or, I can, on the contrary, put on a shirt with horizontal lines, counting on the fact that the persons I meet will (mis)perceive my overweight as the illusion created by my inappropriate dressing: "Look, this stupid shirt makes him fat, whereas he really is not so fat!"

my on-screen experience can be in a sense "more real" than the encounter in reality);
it is not only that, beyond mere sexual arousal, me and my partner can "really" fall in
love with each other without meeting in RL. What if, on the net, I rape my partner? On
the one hand, there is a gap which separates it from RL - what I did remains in a
sense closer to impoliteness, to rude, offensive talk. On the other hand, it can cause
a deep offence, even an emotional catastrophe, which is not reducible to "mere
words".... And, back to Lacan: what is this middle-mediating level, this third domain
interposing itself between "real life" and "mere imagination", this domain in which we
are not directly dealing with reality, but also not with "mere words" (since our words
do have real effects), if not the symbolic order itself?

When deconstructionist cyberspace-ideologists (as opposed to the predominant New
Age cyberspace-ideologists) try to present cyberspace as providing a "real life",
"empirical", realisation or confirmation of the deconstructionist theories, they usually
focus on how cyberspace "decenters" the subject. However, it is crucial to introduce
here the distinction between "Self" ("person") and subject: the Lacanian "decentered
subject" is not simply a multiplicity of good old "Selves", i.e. partial centres; the
"divided" subject does not mean there are simply more Egos/Selves in the same
individual, as in the so-called "Multiple Personality Disorders". The "decentering" is
the decentering of the $ (the void of the subject) with respect to its content ("Self", the
bundle of imaginary and/or symbolic identifications); the "splitting" is the splitting
between $ and the fantasmatic "persona" as the "stuff of the I". The subject is thus
split even if it possesses only one "unified" Self, since this split is the very split
between $ and Self... In more topological terms: the subject's division is not the
division between one and another Self, between two contents, but the division
between something and nothing, between the feature of identification and the void.

This pure substanceless subject beyond imaginary and/or symbolic identifications is
correlative to the dimension of the Real - it is, as Jacques-Alain Miller put it, an
"answer of the real". One can approach this Real through the difference between
imitation and simulation[11]: VR doesn't imitate reality, it simulates it by way of
generating its semblance. Imitation imitates a pre-existing real-life model, whereas
simulation generates the semblance of a non-existing reality - it simulates something
that doesn't exist. Let us take the most elementary case of virtuality in a computer,
the so-called "virtual memory": a computer can simulate far greater memory than it
actually has, i.e. it can function as if its memory is larger than it effectively is. And
does the same not hold for every symbolic arrangement, up to the financial system
which simulates a far larger extent of coverage than it is effectively able to provide?
The entire system of deposits etc. works on the presupposition that anyone can, at
any moment, withdraw his or her money from the bank; - a presupposition which,
although it can never be realised, nonetheless renders possible the very "real",
"material" functioning of the financial system...

The consequences of this difference between imitation and simulation are more
radical than may appear. In contrast to imitation, which sustains belief in pre-existing
"organic" reality, simulation retroactively "denaturalises" reality itself by way of
disclosing the mechanism responsible for its generation. In other words, the
"ontological wager" of simulation is that there is no ultimate difference between

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[11] As to the distinction between imitation and simulation, see Benjamin Wooley, <u>Virtual Worlds</u>, Oxford:
Blackwell 1992.

nature and its artificial reproduction - there is a more elementary level of the Real with reference to which both simulated screen-reality and "real" reality are generated effects, the Real of pure computation: behind the event viewed through the interface (the simulated effect of reality), there is pure subjectless ("acephalic") computation, a series of 1 and 0, of + and -. In his Seminar II[12], where Lacan develops for the first time this notion of the series of + and -, he reduces it precipitously to the order of the signifier, for that reason, one should reread these passages from the perspective of the opposition between signifier and letter (or writing) established in Seminar XX[13]: subjectless digital computation is neither the differential symbolic order (the symbolic realm of meaning is part of the pseudo-reality manipulated on the screen) nor reality outside the screen of the interface (in bodily reality behind the screen, there are only chips, electric current, etc.). The wager of VR is that the universe of meaning, of narrativization, is not the ultimate reference, the unsurpassable horizon, since it relies on pure computation. Therein resides the gap that separates forever Lacan from postmodernist deconstructionism: the latter conceives science as one of the possible local narrativizations, whereas for Lacan, contemporary science enables us to gain access to the Real of pure computation which underlies the play of multiple narrarivizations. This is the Lacanian Real: the purely virtual, "not really existing", order of subjectless computation which nonetheless regulates every "reality", material and/or imaginary.

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[12] See lecture XXIII ("Psychoanalysis and cybernetics") in <u>The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II</u>: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis (1954-1955), New York: Norton 1988.
[13] See Chapter III of Jacques Lacan, <u>Le Séminaire, livre XX</u>: Encore, Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1975.