

The dissolution of the Other in contemporary communication

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Abstract

Based on a few analyses of contemporary culture and communication, we suggest that one can perceive an increasing dissolution of otherness in mediations carried out through the so-called new media, constructed from technological platforms which are increasingly distant from corporeity and its requirements. Experiences of enchantment are transferred from the senses to the apparatuses, dissolving the present time and the perception of the self in favour of supports or images generated by or for technological platforms. Technology becomes autonomous, generating hypnogenic subjects and objects around itself.

Keywords: otherness, imaging culture, technology, electronic media.

The crisis of the magic

One of the key issues in the process of ‘disenchantment of the world,’ as named by Max Weber, is the question of the crisis of the magic³. This question refers to the process by which concrete things ceased to be transubstantiations of the divine, of the sacred, and were absorbed by the logic of industrial production and transformed into commercial products.

The crisis of the magic – which created this new relationship with the world, disenchanted and reduced to value of raw material, also by the current Cartesian paradigm, has always been linked to the crisis of meaning⁴. It was this crisis which brought us to the condition of being increasingly incompetent to attribute symbolic value to worldly things and to the experiences we draw from them. As noted by G. Durand, the emptying out of symbolic capacities took place in the following context:

Not only the world is susceptible to scientific exploration but scientific exploration has the natural right to the status of knowledge. For two centuries imagination has been violently execrated. (...) In contemporary philosophy, a double haemorrhage of symbolism has been carried out under the incentive of Cartesianism. (G. Durand: 22: 1993).

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³ A. F. Pierucci pinpoints the relevance of this question to Weber in the book *The disenchantment of the world*.

⁴ The process of disenchantment of the world and its implications to Communications was the theme of Malena S. Contrera’s post-doctoral research supported by the CNPq in 2008 and is the central theme of a forthcoming book to be published in 2010.

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The author clearly notes what this refers to: “... *the pragmatic power of the sign triumphs on a daily basis*” (G. Durand: 2: 1993).

As the magic-symbolic possibilities of *worldly things* are emptied out, the search for the sacred and for meaning is transferred to *processes*, hence the centrality given to technology over the last centuries. For a while, our society has not been asking any longer about things, about what they are, what their motivations are. The only pertinent question in the modern and contemporary world is about the ‘how’ of the pragmatic power that Durand recognises. How to make, to use, to fix, to get the right answers in tests: life is almost reduced to a constant feeling of undergoing training for everything and for nothing.

This is because we are increasingly subjected to what E. Trivinho calls technological reasoning. This is how he presents this idea:

Technological reasoning in the sense of a quotidian, pragmatic, utilitarian, immediate reason, in relation with the machine. Implicitly ideological and vainglorious (...) with regards to technological society, this reasoning always presents a happy re-enchantment in face of technology’s feats and potential. As such, it is a type of reasoning non-mediated by symbolism, that is, lacking self-criticism about its external and practical manifestations, particularly with regards to technological objects (E. Trivinho: 88: 2001).

Capitalist ideology and economy coincided with the discovery of electricity, and were fully imposed through industrialisation and the creation of possibilities of mass production of technological apparatuses that served to create even more mass-produced merchandise. Modern technology and what we can call the ‘aesthetics of serialisation’ are indissolubly linked. This is the generating principle that E. Morin called the ‘industrialisation of the spirit’ (20th century mass culture), a central process in mass culture which, not accidentally, is centred in networks of mass mediation and in its technological power of enchantment through the magical action of electronic images.

More than a hundred years after the ‘disenchantment of the world’ presented by M. Weber, and after practically sixty years after E. Morin’s sharp reading of mass culture, the field of electronic media has changed a lot, but still has not abandoned its technological vocation to format spirits.

One must not mistake this with the need for continuous learning prompted by the increasing complexity of the world. In fact, the present situation aims at transforming us,

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ever more, into employees, as stated by V. Flusser (On religion) or into ‘hypnogenic subjects and objects’, according to E. von Samsonow⁵.

Currently, we witness as the whole complexity of human communication becomes minimised and the centrality of communication exchanges and of linking processes shifts towards the issue of the appropriation or non-appropriation of communication technologies. We have been transformed, triumphantly, into users.

The autonomy of technology

It is true that humanity has always been surrounded by the techniques and technologies of their time. We are not talking about this inseparable relationship between humanity and technique. Instead, we are examining a specific moment in the history of this relationship, the moment when a set of techniques is transformed into a way of comprehending the world which is mainly based on criteria related to its own way of operating. Here resides its fundamentally ideological character, as proposed by J. Habermas (*Science and technique as ideology*). We are talking about electronic technology and its self-referential character.

This self-referential character is presented throughout the ideological system that collapsed either due to the lack of reflection and self-criticism or due to the inability to interact with other spheres of existence (such as feelings, intuitions, reveries, dreams), refusing to consider the importance of constituting an ecology of communication⁶. It all amounts to dreaming the dream of machines, previously dreamt dreams, as foreseen by D. Kamper (*Work as life*).

This self-reference is completely revealed in the *modus operandi* of modern technology: its core criteria have always sprung from the principle of self-maintenance or improvement of its own operations and methods. It self-executes a complex programme which positions it at the very centrality of life and of human questions.

⁵ The theme of the ‘employee’ as representative of the dissolution of will (*Auflösung des Willens*) in the increasingly technological environments is developed in *Flussers Völlerei* (Köln, 2005).

⁶ The theme of ecology of communication has been extensively discussed by a group of researchers from the Interdisciplinary Centre for Semiotic of Culture and Media / Centro Interdisciplinar de Semiótica da Cultura e da Mídia (CISC-PUC). We can also mention the homonymous book, *Ecology of Communication / Ecologia da Comunicação*, by Vicente Romano (in press).

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In this process, we perceive an inversion: technique is no longer a means, it becomes an end in itself, and Man, who should supposedly direct its use, starts to revolve around it. We are witnessing the beginning of a time when technological apparatuses are no longer human prostheses, when human beings are becoming the prostheses of technological apparatuses. This operation is carried out precisely through the project of self-execution and self-reference of ‘technological reasoning’ (E. Trivinho). The latter can be related to the phenomenon that the same author calls ‘technology as religion’. This is how he presents this idea:

Since Heidegger’s notes on technique as metaphysics of the 20th century, one can verify, in the current phase of technological society, due to our dependency on machines, an intensification of the character of technology as religion (E. Trivinho: 83: 2001).

M. Berman (*The re-enchantment of the world*) returns to the question that was also in the genealogy of M. Weber’s thoughts on the disenchantment of the world: that the attempt to dominate nature is born with magical thinking. This question was very well mapped by E. Morin (*The lost paradigm*)⁷, who showed how archaic societies conceived magic and technology as practically the same thing, since every knowledge about ‘making things’ was a prerogative of clerics or shamans, who were taught by the Gods⁸. Even seemingly common, everyday techniques such as preparing food, were circumscribed by a specific mythology that legitimated them. What seems pertinent to us in relation to this question is realising that magic and technology share the same initial motivation, becoming differentiated not in their purpose, but in their manner and tools of implementation and, particularly, in the source from where their power of intervening in reality emanates.

This common origin leads many to affirm that, under the supremacy of the technological, we are experiencing a re-enchantment. We can certainly call it a new enchantment, but surely cannot compare the current situation with what took place before rationalism, in the time when a ‘hermetic thinking about the world’, as defined by M. Berman, reigned. The main difference to be considered in this case is that what we can call

⁷ E. Durkheim also examined this issue, especially in dealing with animism in *The elementary forms of religious life*.

⁸ For information on these societies and the relationship of their clerics with magic instruments, see *S El chamanismo y las técnicas arcaicas del éxtasis*, by M. Eliade.

enchantment of the world in archaic cultures was based on a very different relationship with the concrete world, including even the body. Contemporary technology erases precisely the marks of the concrete nature of the world; cyberculture is the greatest evidence of this type of behaviour that denies concrete conditions, that is, temporal and spatial limits given by concrete reality.

This is the main argument that precludes us from saying that we are living a re-enchantment of the world, in the sense that the word 'enchantment', as proposed by M. Weber, referred to a view of the world in which man was practically born out of the earth and was inseparably linked to it in all spheres of his life. The present moment is closer to the consummation of a process of dematerialisation of the world (following the disruption effected by industrial societies). In this sense, A. Gorz is right in treating the present moment as the triumph of immaterial economy (in the complex sense of the term, not only monetary).

This dematerialisation of the world, of which we talk about in another section, begins to take place effectively with the advent of patriarchal societies and, specifically, with monotheism, which considers the spirit as holy and the body as the residence of sin. We all know about the lengthy efforts of the Catholic Church to erase the symbolic relationship of pagan societies with the land and with the cults that involved the gods of nature, a process which culminated with Inquisition. Such hypothesis, which must be expanded and developed in another context, is based partly on Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji's study about the anthropology of landscapes and the emergence of the great monotheist (patriarchal) religions in the hostile environment of the desert and its cultures. It was there that the embryos of the first technologies were born: writing, astrology and mathematics. Vilém Flusser also points out in his book *Writing* the importance of the desert environment as the uterus of Western science.

The place of the gods is centrally altered with the establishment of patriarchal societies and monotheism. The gods, in pagan cultures (which in great part maintained relations with matriarchal culture) inhabited the seas, the land, the grains, the trees and all the enchanted beings of nature. The world conceived by patriarchal society places its gods initially on male power and on celestial phenomena, realising the transference of the

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worldly place to the distant and untouchable space of the sacred, now associated with the immaterial. The next step is the creation of social tribal gods, in the words of J. Campbell (*This is you*), associated to specific tribes and linked to them through ancestral lineages (which is evidently the case of Judaism).

The 'pure spirit' does not take long to reveal itself as the greatest process of effacement of the concreteness of the world, and its downgrading to raw material is a consequence which is easy to understand. The supernatural builds its value upon the remains of the natural, after having dissociated from it. The extreme consequence of this process is studied by G. Anders in his two volumes *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, which ultimately map out the transformation of man into the raw material of the civilising gears.

The irony is that our monotheist and patriarchal plot, after having undergone the supremacy of reason and of the cogito, leads us to re-edit the gods of thunders and lightning, the celestial and immaterial gods, in electronic technology which, during modernity, has imprisoned Zeus' lightning in the gleam of machines. Already in the dawn of the 20th century, the precursor of a general theory of image, Aby Warburg, observed the passage from pagan rituals of the lightning (associated to the serpent, symbol of the earth and of the great mother) and its domestication in the serpentine wirings of urban electricity lines. In his 1923 lecture *Schlangenritual* (Serpent's ritual), published as a short book only in 1939, he demonstrates, based on the observation of the Hopi Indians from New Mexico, USA, how a pagan symbol traverses epochs, eras and cultures, carrying archaic meanings into new civilising frameworks and formats. It is not a coincidence that Warburg proposes such archaeological studies as sources for understanding contemporary objects, creating the base for understanding the nature of mediatic images.

This process of reediting archaic images and symbols has attributed a special magic value to technology, the magic value which was previously attributed to the hierphanic apparition of the celestial god. Thus the electronic technologies used in social mediation processes, due to their ability to indefinitely reproduce exogenous images, empty out the creative power of the celestial god and seize its ability to enchant, transferring this to the machine. Frankenstein is perhaps the most renowned example of this technological

enchantment, of this faith in electricity and in the technology which feeds on it. Today, who would not still acquit the doctor and blame the monster?

The effacement of the other (are we all users?)

Wedding rituals in the virtual space of the web, virtual wakes⁹, mobile phone-shaped coffins¹⁰; in all these (and many other) examples the true relationship is developed with technology, with the technological nature of the environment where it takes place. The specificities of the medium determine the possibilities of representation of the person who, through this medium, presents him/herself and establishes relationships. Consequently, such specificities also shape the possibilities of perceiving the other. We know that cyberpeople are possible inventions within the info-technological environment of the web, and even if we do not despise the imaginary role of these inventions, we are also aware that self-determination is at the forefront of this process.

Issues related to losses resulting from the spatiotemporal understanding of this process have already been extensively mapped (Virilio, Trivinho), but here we wish to examine a dimension which is also lost in this almost exclusive relationship with technology: the notion of otherness. Initially given by the gods, the doubles, the magic and enchanted objects charged with the supernatural (which here was a kind of intra-natural), the notion of otherness is effaced by the immediate identification of man with technology, insofar as technology is something perceived as exclusively human, too close, a prosthesis.

We still have to consider that, as technological objects are inserted into the modus operandi of productivist society, this identification is exacerbated, acquiring clearly narcissistic features, as suggested by V. Flusser:

This gradual transformation of things into instruments explains the progressive deterioration of our religious feeling. Things used to be revelations of nothingness and, as such, charged with sacredness. The instruments obstruct the vision of nothingness and are, therefore, the opposite of the sacred, they are the commonplace. Things used to represent something, they were symbols of something, and it was possible to worship this something behind things. Instruments represent, at their best, the manipulating work of human existence, and the only thing that can be worshipped in instruments is the human work

⁹ All these phenomena are analysed in Jorge Miklo's PhD thesis, accessible via the PUC/SP Thesis Portal.

¹⁰ Article published by Terra in 2007 <http://tecnologia.terra.com.br/interna/0,,OI1532250-EI4802.00.html>. Accessed in January 2010.

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behind them. The only religiousness of which we are capable is therefore self-worship, narcissism. (V. Flusser: 2002: 94-95).

This self-worship, which has an evidently narcissistic character, hides something even worse, namely, the effacement of otherness, precisely in a world which, ironically, revolves around infinite interconnections.

The success of social networks based in ‘having¹¹ something in common’ is a symptom of this. The most striking fact at the time of Orkut’s explosion in Brazil is that so many people wanted to meet based on criteria of absolute ‘sameness’, which was evident in the names of the groups, the majority named as ‘I love this’, ‘I hate that’, nauseatingly reproducing a typically teenage discourse of self-affirmation through grouping together with equals – ‘me and my gang’, this time in a virtual space. The support changes but the markedly narcissistic content remains. In addition to this, there are a few regressions: it is almost a consensus that teenagers today are more conservative than 30 or 40 years ago, and in some moments one can also perceive the advance of the most backwards kind of morality that is not even based on religious practices or beliefs. Perhaps what really matters is merely the cult of self-image and the quantification of one’s apparitions on the web. The popular and the tasteless prevail through their high recurrence and frequency, bringing as their sole obligation quantitative criteria of mediation. Demoscopy is no longer an instrument of diagnosis, it justifies existence and permanence (the old tackiness of the most popular, now transposed into the space of networks in an obsessive search for mediating aggregates or followers).

This makes more understandable the fact that the Internet - which emerged with prophetic discourses that it would become a great unifier of human species - has been the ideal environment to foster all kinds of intolerances. We have witnessed the return of a popular form of fascism in the moralist messages of homemade videos that circulate amongst teenagers¹², at the same time as neo-Nazism¹³ and the whole social production of

¹¹ Sameness is a term proposed by Z. Bauman, in *Liquid love*.

¹² It always seemed shocking to me that university students circulate homemade videos online of this or that girl, normally a colleague, having sex, accompanied by swear words and moralist and hypocritical speeches in the 21st century, making it clear that technological media can bring novelty and progress but its users still subscribe to fascist practices. This type of fascism in human relations was treated masterfully in the film *Malena* (2000), by Giuseppe Tornatore.

intolerance and xenophobia also found in the Internet an aseptic enough space to house essentially violent ideals and values. The maximum technological advance houses the maximum behavioural backwardness in so-called liberal societies. Is there a nexus between the two things? Is the disenchantment acting as the abandonment of ethical civilising principles, or even of the simply humanitarian principle of tolerance? Or has the loss of the regard towards diversity emerged from technology's inherent inability to look at the other?

Z. Bauman pinpoints this tendency of contemporary societies to regress in their ability to negotiate otherness with complexity and, not coincidentally, he does so in a fairly eloquent fashion in a book titled *Liquid love*:

The impulse towards a 'community of sameness' is a sign of retreat not only in relation to external otherness but also to the commitment with internal interaction (...) The longer people remain in an uniform environment - in the company of others 'like them', with whom they can 'socialise' in a superficial and prosaic way without the risk of being misunderstood and the annoying need for translation between different universes and meanings -, the more they become prone to 'unlearn' the art of negotiating a *modus convivendi* and shared meanings (Z. Bauman: 134-135: 2004).

Bauman appears to have found the tone that defines contemporary forms of sociability, centred on occasional affinities and on the aesthetic of the echo: superficial, but without the benefit of the tact; prosaic, but without the lyricism of prose.

Vision, image machines and the terminal ophthalmia for the other

If with technical reproducibility exacerbated to infinity, visibility is in crisis and the eyes start to suffer from a terminal ophthalmia; if remote communication makes touching impossible; if the white noise of sonic proliferation precludes hearing, all types of otherness disappear. Thus disappears the self, the myself, the sphere of the self, the last refuge of the present, as the self requires a here and now as much as it requires an instance of otherness that legitimates it. However, it is worth remembering that our civilising strategy has put all its faith in vision. Once vision became man's main warning sense - ever since he took to the

¹³ The MA thesis, presented at the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences / Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas (IFCH) of the Unicamp, titled *The Anachronists of Virtual Teutonism: an ethnography of Neonazism on the Internet*, by Adriana Abreu Magalhães Dias, mapped out the universe of websites, portals, communities, forums, chats, blogs and discussion lists that are concerned with the racist and revisionist theme (that seeks to invalidate the historical truth of holocaust in WW2 and the number of Jews killed by Nazi agents). This ethnographic research verified that there are approximately 12.6 thousand racist, revisionist and neo-Nazi entries on the Internet in Portuguese, Spanish and English, amongst personal and institutional websites, blogs and forums.

savannahs - it has been marked by two important characters: the search for anticipation (to foresee the future as a form of alert) and fear. This is the feeling that precludes us from anticipating and propels us into the future: fear. Incidentally, fear is a prospective feeling, a project or a projectile. Thus vision has been transformed and, in its unstoppable ascent, took a phobic meaning, becoming an attempt to accelerate time. Due to fear from what is to come, we no longer wait, but move towards danger as a counter-phobic strategy. And we repeat this act of escaping ourselves in an anti-wait, an anti-present, since wait is the affirmation of the present, of presence and of the body. Because there is no self, because there is no other, there cannot be any present, any wait, any body. All the hope is placed on the image, the offspring of technique, which, because it is a projection, escapes the afflictions of wait, of presence, of the body.

Fellini once said that cinema is the art of wait. We must ask ourselves today whether the massive products of the movie industry of tension, with their exacerbated timing of image and sound, have not abolished wait in favour of injecting ourselves in the future before our proprioception allows us to feel that we exist here and now. Blockbuster movies, with their spectacular sets and soundtracks, extravagant special effects, intergalactic heroes and villains, full of intentions and adrenaline and constructed according to a warlike aesthetic and a testosterone-project, as well as the videogames of similar nature, are exemplary models of anti-wait or of the aesthetic of the alarm, the effacement of reflective and proprioceptive rhythms that permit the construction of otherness.

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