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**THE ECONOMICS OF DESIRE IN VIRTUAL
SPACE: TALKING CHRISTIANITY
IN THE NET
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The Economics of Desire in Virtual Space: Talking Christianity in the Net¹

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How communication is affected by the internet medium? How the subjects of communication respond to the possibility of being anonymous and "de-materialized"? Is dialogic possible within these conditions? Is alterity present in the so-called "democratic society" of the "chatting rooms"? These are the questions I explore here using, as a case study, usenet conversations on Christianity and the Bible.

Christian Sites in Cyberspace

Elsewhere, I have argued that it is possible to attain a new perspective to understand belief not from the point of view of its contents - ethos, precepts, and values - in particular historical contexts, but framing it on its route through a circuit of exchanges (Segato 1995). In the particular case of Christianity, as other expansionist religions, this becomes possible only when we realize that the Christian text is able to enter, as other texts, a matrix of desire quite independently from any particular doctrinary matter. Adhesions to one or another set of ideas, that is, creeds themselves, may serve as the circulating currency in a communication system. I examine here a structure where commentaries on the Bible and Christianity in general are exchanged among partners apparently marked by alterity, but, differently from my earlier ethnography of desire in the missionary setting, now along a non hierarchical structure. I refer to the case of the internet, where it is possible to find a large, and constantly growing, number of "places" where mutually consented encounters occur, launched by an equal input of individual initiative from every side involved. All of them are at the same (virtual) "distance" from this room, what implies that the same amount of effort and equal technological means are demanded, from every one, to reach the locale of the encounter. This sets, from the start, an equal ground for the exchanges. The theme or token of exchange for the encounters which I observed, intermittently, during a period of approximately three months, was, again, Christianity, and the direction of my enquiry was, as well, twofold: on the one side, towards the limits of internet communication and, on the

1. My analysis is based on a three month (from July to September, 1995) follow-up of the debates in various alt. and soc. newsgroups. I am grateful to George Marcus, because it was at the stimulating environment of his Department of Anthropology of Rice University that I conceived this article. For the technical information about internet sites, I counted on the generous advice from Chris Pound, a graduate student at the Dept. of Anthropology, Rice University. I also want to thank Jose Jorge de Carvalho for his careful reading and useful observations and Ernesto Ignacio de Carvalho for his technical help at the computer.

other, towards the role played by Christianity in this system.

To start with, and as a kind of cryptic epigraph intended to anticipate and condense the argument that follows, let me only mention one curious example. There exist two world wide web twin sites, broadcasting from the same floor of the same building (the seventeenth floor's office of the Electronic Engineering Group at Delft University of Technology, Holland), which can be located at <http://olt.et.tudelft.nl/fun/bible.html> and <http://olt.et.tudelft.nl/fun.pictures/porno.html>, whereby the first of them releases pornographic photos and the other Biblical texts. Both were organized by the same person, so that he administers jointly, at the same place, the "infamous digital picture archive of the 17th floor", which, in his words, "until recently,[...] was one of the busiest sites in the world", while also making available on-line the entire text of the Bible, indexed by subject or theme. Also, a "Bible theme of the day" is released daily. Please note that both addresses read the same up to the term "fun". Though these are not rooms for encounters but broadcasting sites at the www, I mention their existence as exemplary, and as a premonition of the fact that both items, though so apparently dissimilar, may be the circulating coins of the same economy, transversing circuits of the same nature. Their "function" in these systems of exchanges being the same.²

In order to precise the type of source from which I will draw my conclusions in here, it is important to make clear that there are six kinds of sites where the Christian discourse circulates in the "aether space" or network of electronic communication. To circulate means here either one or another of two types of activities: informing (requesting and releasing concrete data) or talking about religious issues. The first activity, i.e. taking and giving information, is processed at the following three types of sites: 1) places of the world wide web where previously edited informative texts, prepared by churches and Christian organizations on their own actualities, are published (a good example is the site called http://www.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Religion/Christianity/); 2) locations where on-line Bible reading can be obtained by telnetting to them (as, for example, at info.umd.edu's info database reading room on religion); 3) Mailing lists where information is either requested or shared with all people enrolled in the list. Fundamental agreement is the background assumed for the formation of the communities who share these services. Therefore, there is no exchange within alterity involved in these sites.

Conversations (though, evidently, some amount of data sharing may always occur) take place at the following three kinds of sites: 4) places where people spontaneously meet to talk by typing, in short colloquial phrases, often single lines, about matters related basically to what they are going through, and how they understand it within the frame of their Christian persuasions. The conversation flows loose and every now and then gets heated by an argument between persons who share opposed views and enjoy bumping on one another (this can be found at the chatting rooms of large, commercially run, networks,

2. Replying a message I e.mailed to him asking information about the creation of these to sites, Patrick Groeneveld, superseding my most daring expectations regarding his answer, wrote:

"...We were just a few computer enthusiasts exploring the new possibilities of the internet (this was in 1990, when this was quite new). Having the Bible on-line seemed just nice (I'm not religious at all), and so did having pictures (I'm not interested in the pics myself). Technically, it is no big *dear* [sic, his significative mistake for *deal*, as Jane Gallop, 1985, would read it], and it was amazing to see the 'power' of the internet with hundreds of thousands of people visiting" (patrick@ moldau.et.tudelft.nl).

as the American Online's site Christian Fellowship; 5) a subtype of the previous category are the places created by BBS (bulletin boards) formed by and accessible only for a membership who share the same creed or compatible views on Christian matters; and, finally, 6) "newsgroups", the Usenet message areas, organized by topic of interest and accessible through Netscape generally for free or little charge, where people mostly affiliated to universities meet to put forward, at considerable length, issues of their Christian belief or disbelief. Newsgroups can also be accessed by members of commercially run networks, like American Online or Prodigy. From these, the fifth, like those in the previous group, implies pre-existing agreement, since only those who share the interest of the association enroll to a specific BBS, paying its fees. Therefore, the fourth and the sixth are similar in the fact that their exchanges are supposed to involve engagement within alterity. Their difference resides in the fact that, in the last one, the discourse of the participants is more substantial and statements go to more length, leaving them more exposed. I took this type of location as the basis for my discussion.

Apparently, "a little more than 85 percent of the folks online are male[...] (and) despite the global span of the technology, the aether's population is still relatively homogeneous, at least in terms of gender and race" (I am quoting Gary Wolf and Michael Stein, 1995: 18-20, gathering from regular surveys done by the editors of *Boardwatch* magazine. One is left wondering what is the relationship between "global span..." and "gender and race", aren't gender and race 'others' also Americans?). Minorities participation being greatly restricted to minorities' specialized groups. Also, "there is no question that Americans predominate in the areas we've visited [...] (on the internet,) Americans outnumber other nationalities many times over"

"Having narrowed down these online demographics -mostly male, mostly American, mostly white - can we still argue that the population is diverse? Perhaps surprisingly, we think we can. For one thing, the millions of people online diverge in numerous ways other than race, sex, and nationality. There is no unanimity here [...] (but) the remarkable variety of online cultures" (Ibidem)

Here, we find hints of the peculiar utopia of voluntary society (instead of the alternative, and also peculiar, utopia of the global village), as put forward by Esther Dyson (1995:27): "in cyberspace, communities are chosen by the users, not forced on them by accidents of geography [...] Most people are stuck in the country of their birth, but if you don't like the rules of a cyberspace community, you can just sign off. Love it or Leave it. [...] What's likely to happen in cyberspace is the formation of new communities, free of the constraints that cause conflict on earth"

The ideal of radical equality and unpolluted homogeneity within boundaries constitute the axiomatic background here, and designs a neat contrast with the kind of situation described elsewhere (Segato 1995) - the Bible tracking down the missionary trail, unsettling borders and, still, in some cases, promoting reversals. The "love it or leave it" depicts a world with no room for persuasion or surrender, a world of equals, a scene of conflagrating, evenly "empowered" egos, free in their whims to stay or to leave. But also a stagnant reality, where nothing puts a challenge to those whims.

Following my project, I went through a variety of newsgroups, mostly of the

categories **soc.** and **alt.**, where the Christian creed and Bible reading and understanding are the coins of the encounters. There are, at the moment, three newsgroups on Christianity in the **soc.hierarchy**: **soc.religion.christian**, **soc.religion.christian.bible-study**, and **soc.religion.christian.youth-work**. The opening of new **soc.** newsgroups, where **soc.** alludes to their focus on cultural issues and socializing, is submitted to approval and more restricted than that of **alt.** newsgroups, and the conversation in them tends to give a little bit more room for exchange of informational items - historical, scriptural and institutional concrete sharing of data -. Anyway, this is what the authors of *Aether Madness*, a technical book on internet for the wide public, have to say about the UseNet newsgroups, particularly the **soc.** ones: "the Christian-oriented Use Net newsgroups have a certain fascination, derived partially from the fact that you never know who will wonder in and post their thoughts. Topics on **soc.religion.christian** and **soc.religion.christian.bible-study** range from whether angels can be perfect to whether Jesus suffered from nocturnal emissions" (p.129).

The newsgroups of the **alt.hierarchy**, where **alt.** means "alternative", are even more lively and they generate the heaviest traffic in the Usenet (about half, according to Wolf and Stein, op.cit.: 248). An incomplete list of the newsgroups to which the argumentative messages are posted give an initial idea of the wild nature of this field: **alt.religion.christian**, **alt.fan.jesus-christ**, **alt.bible.profecy**, **alt.religion.sexuality**, and the whole set of **alt.chrisnets.*** groups: **.atheism**, **.second-coming.real-soon-now**, **.bible**, **.christianlife**, **.christnews**, **.ethics**, **philosophy**, **.prayer**, **.hypocrisy**, **.nudism**, **.sex**, **.sex.fetish.fat.furry.asian.watersports**, **.crybaby.mine.mine.mine**, **.dinosaur**, **.dinosaur.barney**, **.bible-thumpers.convert.convert**, **convert**, **.eucharist.eat-me.eat-me.eat-me**, etc. Someone has even introduced the possibility of an **alt.fuck.the.skull.of.jesus!**.

Besides this, the same message is generally crossposted to a set of other newsgroups and, therefore, the same debate cuts across networks involved in discussing religious faith and cultural diversity as much as sexual drives. The combinations range from including not so remote groups like: **talk.origins**, **alt.blasphemy**, **alt.atheism**, **alt.satanism**, **alt.pagan** and the **soc.culture.*** groups, like **.african.american**, **.arabic**, **.asian.american**, **.jewish**, etc., to **alt.sex.*** groups like: **.swingers**, **.wizards.**, etc. One typical exponent of this extreme was a message I found already responding to the previously proposed subject: "getting fucked in the ass by a german shepard", crossposted on date 31st July, 1995 to the newsgroups: **alt.religion.christian**, **alt.atheism**, **alt.sex**, **alt.sex.masturbation**, **alt.tv.mtv**, **alt.sex.stories.d**, **alt.sex.sounds**, **alt.sex.prom**, **alt.sex.pictures.female**, **alt.sex.breast**, **alt.sex.stories**, **alt.sex.fetish.waifs**, **alt.sex.trans**, **alt.sex.exhibitionism**, **alt.binaries.pictures.erotica**, **bestiality**, **alt.sex.wanted**, and **alt.binaries.pictures.tasteless**. Obviously, this is one of many cases of juvenile sense of humour, and, of course, some other topics in debate are more composed than that.

Talking Belief in "Aether"³

Portraying how discourse unfolds in this medium is not easy. After turning down several ethnographic strategies I end up believing it is an impossible task. Exchanges fill dozens of printed pages from the computer, where the argument sometimes appears wordy to microscopical detail and other times patchy and fragmented by inconsistent extrapolations. Extravagances abound and have a great impact on the overall style. I came out with a general report of what goes on and aware that my own contribution will be a statement on the quality of dialogue in the "aether". I am strolling on the subtle border where reflection is barely able to touch empiria and sensing the practical impossibility of that contact. It is a well known experience for anthropologists: your perception goes, painfully, far beyond the competence of your inscription. But, before this attempt, I had not realized how much non-verbal dimensions came to our aid in normal ethnographic descriptions. In the usenet thoroughly wordy universe of relationships, it is really difficult to describe, to insert your own voice. However, there is at least one advantage for work in this peculiar field: using the addresses I provide, the reader can visit the sites by herself.

Examples of the more popular topics raised and addressed over the months are: "Did Adam and Eve have navels?"; "prove to me that God exists"; "do atheists exist?"; "find errors in the Bible"; "Rome is a filthy, drunken, whore"; "catholic bashing"; "the truth about Roman Catholicism"; "where does the Bible condemn homosexuality?" and several variations of this question; and "are we all controlled by the reptilian section of our brain?". The question about Adam and Eve's navels, followed sometimes by an scandalized "out of Who's bellies?", and the way it is dealt with, seem to me paradigmatic of the internet exchanges:

"-It is written in the christian bible that Adam was the first created man. Since Adam came from the christian god, and not from the womb, I am led to wonder. Did Adam have a navel? And what about Eve, who reportedly came from Adam's rib?. Get a (new) life.(Signed Swami Go Beyonda BeyondAnanda)"

Ideally, in this type of question, imagination flows loose, and contestants, freer than ever from the constraints of any supporting evidence, are able to display their full argumentative power. Greatness for nothing, I am entitled to say, because, though discourse appears as directed to an "other", no amount of hesitation is ever inoculated in the opponent. This, indeed - I correct myself - does not equal nothing, but justifies the question of to whom this discourse reaches out? Is any imagined "other" there, in the horizon?. Moreover, despite the fact that, at certain moments, the biblical text seems to be playing a part as "food for thought" and discourse approaches the genre of popular theological meditations, the outcome is, nevertheless, for reasons I will explore later, stagnant. There is no ascensional direction as in Socratic dialogue or authentic philosophical inquiry.

It is not uncommon that imaginative questions are posed to doctrine and addressed by participants in amazing detail. Still, as this is a radically non hierarchical atmosphere, there is no authority; therefore, themes that have been scholarly discussed to exhaustion,

3. "Aether" is an alternative name given to virtual space.

like, typically, the polemics creation Vs. evolution, free-will Vs God's choice, the nature of good and evil, the fairness of original sin, proofs of God's existence, etc. are naively revisited without much respect for the history of the arguments in such old kind of debates.

"...if you pay attention to the logic of the account, it's really not so hard to grasp. At the time there were only two human beings on the entire planet, which means, of course, that the whole species of Homo Sapiens consisted of just two individuals. Whatever these two individuals did was as done as a species. It follows, then, that whatever judgement affected these two -necessarily- included the entire species. The judgement would affect all succeeding generations since it was a judgement on the entire species -at that time-. The whole category of human beings was condemned meaning that it's the category and not the individuals that is at risk. For those who trouble themselves to investigate all of this, it's not that big of a mystery; even the major elements of Christian doctrine become accessible."

Interventions are, naturally, always overtly on the mode of very personal *doxa*, that is to say, of the kind: "I believe ...", "I feel...", "I think...", "I cannot accept...". Unescapably, all sorts of ingenious confrontations end abruptly with a temporary collapse of communication, to recommence, shortly after, with renewed strength. To the observer, no one bends, no one defeats, while, to himself, each partner leaves the contest as a consecrated winner. The long engagement of the belligerent souls is usually dismantled with phrases like:

"-Oh, so you are not willing to examine the evidence because of some superstitious claptrap written some 2500 years ago, and even then it was cribbed from even older sources ...!

-What evidence am I supposed to have that demonstrates that any portion of the Bible is allegorical?

Or:

"-This what you have called my beloved savior is blasphemy (sic), and I wish I can stone you to death like what the ancient Jews did. However, god said "Vengeance is mine!" I'll leave it to God to deal with you.

- First of all, how about wishing you could spell 'blasphemy'? And - - please, do leave it to god. We don't need any stonings from a True Believer like you."

Or:

"-And you are willing to discount the Bible even though it has more 'evidence' toward authenticity than most of the historical 'discoveries'"

"-Show me one bit of evidence for anything theological in the bible. Don't come back with historical events. Myths are always based on historical accounts to some degree - - but they are still myths because they interject fantasy alongside the

history. SO? I'm waiting."

"-I see. Your requirement is not for evidence that makes the Bible valid but for evidence that makes it invalid. You don't need me for that".

Or, on the arbitrariness of original sin:

"-If someone stole a fruit from your tree, you might forgive him. Being human, you just might get mad as shit and kill him. But, being human, I seriously doubt that you would punish his innocent DESCENDANTS for that transgression. ...the, humans are more humane than God."

"-Man, however, is quite unlike God. The American Whites, for example, after chasing the American Reds from their gardens, give neither they nor their descendants recompense nor recourse, now and for the foreseeable future.

On the same topic, listen to this conclusive outcry:

"-Anyhow, you completely ignored my point:
I.AM.NOT.THE.ONE.WHO.ATE.THE.FUCKING.FRUIT !!!!!!!!
you say maybe I would be bad and eat it. BUT THE FACT IS, I DIDN'T !!!!!
Is God so \$#%#\$ stupid He can't tell me from Adam???"

Or, on whether homosexuality is a sin:

"Ever wonder why it's so easy for Christians to find new scripture every time (condemning homosexual behavior)...while you'r still re-hashing the same few lines (absolving it)? It's because scripture is permeated with God's disgust toward homosexuality"

"-It's because scripture is permeated with God's disgust, period.

To the pure, all things are pure; to the disgusting, all things are disgusting. The God of the Christian scriptures is among the most disgusting of all humanity's creations"

Or, on proofs for the existence of God:

"-...my answer to the 'prove to me that God exists': Do I exist? You don't see me, you don't hear me, you only have my words...

- We have direct evidence that someone wrote these words and yes you could be writing under a false name and technically not exist. This is what happened in the Bible. Men wrote it and used the pseudonym Moses or whoever..."

This final quote of a few signatures⁴ synthesizes the well known impasse on which the

4. A set, short motto that may follow the identification of the internet user.

conferences dwell upon:

"Once upon a time there was a police detective who was a Scientific Creationist. He used to solve his cases very quickly - by looking around for a few seconds and saying: 'I don't understand this. God must have done it. Case closed'"

"- John 3:3:I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again"

"- You see, the logic goes like this: you, for fun, rip down everything in which we bigfooters believe. Sort of a trashing of icons"

Conversations in these newsgroups are reenactments, all of them extremely similar and repetitive, of the well known conflicts between standard sets of beliefs in the Western world. Seen from that perspective, virtual communication does not introduce any novelty in the scene of religious ideas. However, what compels the opponents to come back here, to this medium, tirelessly, with a persistence so disproportionate with the outcome reached? In other words, if, as I have shown, the talks lead unescapably to unbreachable impasses, a disengaged observer is entitled to wonder: where gratification is derived from, in this time insuaming exercise? Because, if it is true that what we witness here is the usual dead end of conflicting views, there still remains the problem as to why the energy spending, the renewed effort to come and return to the battle ground. What kind of quest leads the opponents to repeat the experience from which they seem to emerge always with the same empty hands?

It would be still possible to wonder if we are before some kind of game, but it would be a game without winners or losers, whose end is always an impasse, a standstill. A game where every single participant is a gladiator, a champion who exhibits its championship with exclusivity before his own eyes, without ever submitting it to a test of value or strength. Because deadlock is what this ethnography is all about.

"-To study early Church history...is to cease to be Protestant (Cardinal John Henry Neuman)"

"-To be regenerated by a sovereign act of the spirit of God is to cease being a Roman Catholic"

"-You are hostile, and very stupid. Not to mention narrow-minded, you take everything you read and interpret in word for word. Use your brain if it isn't flooded with hatred."

"- [and the opponent speaks back with exactly the same words:] You are hostile, and very stupid. Not to mention narrow-minded, you take everything you read and interpret it word for word. Use your brain if it isn't completely flooded with hatred"

"-God doesn't hate anyone...you do... proof right there!"

"-'God' doesn't hate anyone. Because until you can show, it is anything more than

some character in an old book..."

The field of religion emerges as particularly well suited for this kind of venture, since this is the prototype domain for uncontested belief. In *tete-a-tete* exchanges, persons on an individual stand seldomly raise issues of belief in environments where they could be openly confronted, in contexts where contented alterity could be sensed with no arbiter or judge to mediate (in mass behaviour, like rallies, for example, the crowd obliterate the presence of the "other"). In the internet, though the individual is alone and there is no arbitration⁵ the "other" is, for some reason that I will try to analyze, a safe "other". This comfortable, unchallenging "other" leads us to belief that alterity may be illusory and dialogue inauthentic, and that we may be before a genre of self-addressed discourse.

Even when some sort of agreement seems to be reached, it is reached upon no break through points. In those cases, contestants exhibit, in pride, their knack for pinpointing, formulating and dwelling on painful paradox:

"- For that matter, I have tried asking several people who believe in "Hell" exactly who it is that determines that you go there. They seem to hold two contradictory beliefs, but will neither defend nor relinquish either one: 1. Satan wants you to go to "Hell" to be his subject. 2. God decides to send you there as a punishment. Scripture seems to be silent on this one, but people still like to believe in this combination. Like maybe Satan and Jehova are in some Conspiracy against us.

"- First bubble: Satan and Jehova are the *same being*. They have to be. Jehovah is supposed to be all-powerful, but he cannot defeat Satan. Conclusion: if he is omnipotent, the only being he can be fighting is himself. Satan is just a pseudonym that Jehovah takes when he's feeling his mean streak"

"-God could simple give Me free will, let Me sin all day and fornicate My eyes out. And He could STILL give Me Heaven and spare Me Hell. You are deceitful when You pretend that He HAS to stick Us in Hell if We screw up. WHY should He HAVE to do that?"

This is not a world of merely disagreeing souls, the stuff that makes up a plural society. This is a world of conflagrating, wrestling, and illusory victorious souls, willingly coming out one against the other: overpowering, outsmarting, bashing the other, that goes without arbitration and without outcome - paradoxically, in a world devoid of plurality, where the same fantasy of dominion is shared by every one.

5. In the newsgroups or talking rooms where there exists a moderator (most of those I observed, being **alt.** groups, did not have one), his role would be simply keeping out any intruder who does not comply with the thematic orientation of the group or whose expressions violate its rules of etiquette, so that such intervention would not be let in.

"-Does being an idiot hurt, boof? I mean, it obviously hurts others; does it hurt <you>?"

"-As to whether it hurts to be an idiot, not being one, I would have no idea. I know whom to ask, however: Ted, does it hurt to be an idiot? And likewise, does it hurt to be a fool?"

"-How convenient!"

"-How Typical!"

"-As to my claim, I have made some, with explanations that you seem unwilling to accept because of your bias against theism."

"-No, it is because you are a deranged raving imbecile.

"-So you, and others have said. How nice of you to notice though."

A tournament of jokes?. Even accepting this possibility, it would be necessary to recognize, first, that there are moments that are not funny at all but serious engagement in argumentation and, second, that competition is never settled. So, why do they engage and reengage in an exercise with absolutely no progress? Because, despite belligerency, there is no experience of frustration ever. The attempt does not seem to fail but reach its goal, since it leads to further engagements of the same kind. Therefore, what sort of gratification it renders, which compensates the effort? The fact that we are in front of a device created to elude the experience of failure at all costs is what I believe should be analyzed, since failure and defeat mean the challenge of the "other". It is the factor of the "other" what introduces the possibility of surrender. What kind of rhetoric is this with no "other" truly addressed, where failure is not contemplated? I will argue that it is the self-feeding rhetoric of fantasy: untouchable, sacred, solipsistic fantasy.

"Is Anybody There?"

Given the stable repertoire of contents and the predictable profile of each conversation towards its resolution in an impasse, it becomes then justifiable posing a question that surpasses the matter of belief and its topics, to ask about the structure behind the talking. This is a question on the economy that channels those exchanges, independently of the currency that circulates through them. Christianity items are swallowed in a route where other goods also circulate and may be interchangeable. In other words, currencies, here and elsewhere (see Segato op.cit.), are convertible, and use value is superseded by change value. Also, when I speak of economy I refer particularly to how the other enters the circuit of which the subject is a pole, and how subjectivity is constituted by the fluxes in that circuit.

An inventory of the conversational strategies found in the conference rooms may serve as a lead: the partners oscillate between charming the others with spirited questions raised on Biblical teachings, to overpowering them by dint of a display of rational or moral superiority. All participants, though circumstantially using differing tactics, end up in

parading their worth, a kind of overt exhibitionism for which the internet shows to be a fertile milieu. But whatever happens, the charming and conquering always succeed, what makes us believe that this is a medium where every one may act out his dream of power - argumentative power, joking power or gun power, it amounts to the same. Graphically, it appears as if discourse is launched by the subject towards the "other", hits an always available and blank surface, and returns as a confirmation. For the engaged subject, the deaf-blind surface is only a rebounding screen; and for the observer, the scene is a Babel (though, I would say, a Babel of the same: same language, same illusion). Discourse is ultimately self-addressed, and it is not to be inscribed by (another's discourse), to be for another, but to inscribe yourself.

On the other side, there is no "you" but "whoever", for whom ego, free from constraints, is able to play the character that he chooses for himself. This is not new, and became well known, for example, in relation with the numerous cases of net cross-gender impersonating or travestitism, as very much publicized by the media and explored by Allucquere Stone (1992, 1995). But I am not merely speaking of masquerade - which occurs as much in virtual life as in ordinary terrains or, better, whose practice everywhere demonstrates the virtuality inherent in all reality. I am saying that the interlocutory partner is only a position, a site, a prolongation of that screen. If the computer is a prosthesis, an extension of the body (whose touch gives the user erotic pleasure), the other along the line is a prolonged axon with no autonomous being, by definition (the "Like it or Leave it" combined with the conjunctural self-consciously created character of the "other", provides for the latter's dead as soon as ego quits).

Moreover, because the person on the other side of the line is imbibed in exactly the same play from equal perspective, he cannot truly relate. When s/he does, the result is she having to become ego's idealized fantasy, mimic what she goes perceiving of that fantasy, as the phone sex specialists do (Stone op.cit.:94) or the middle aged psychiatrist turned crippled sympathetic elderly woman in a women's net group (Ibidem: 70 ff.). The participating "other" can enter the scene only fitting in into the set landscape of the subject's fantasy, not to release the "Leave it" of the "Like it or Leave it" democratic mechanism. In the examples given above, no matter what they do, neither of the partners' fantasies is ever challenged, and all contenders leave the battlefield untouched. The figure of the "other" does not exceed the status of a merely formal pre-requisite, what makes us think that, once more, "to keep the conversation going" could not be enough guarantee for dialogic.

It could also be said that, very much like the monitor serves as a projective screen for the subject, the other enters the scene as a support for the mirage in which ego's desire can be heard. Through his virtual entrance, ego is allowed to live up his chimera in a process very similar to psychoanalytic transference. The other's anonymity and his shadowy appearance cooperate to set up an analytic ambience. But with no lead, no progress, no unveiling of these circumstances. While the reality principle keeps such a low profile that never puts any constraint onto the pleasure principle, which remains at all costs rampant. We are in the realm of fantasy.

Anyway, I do not intend to represent the voice of the censor here, and mine is not a moral discourse. Much to the contrary, I appreciate the existence of rooms for fantasy, and believe that whatever occurs within their confinement, it may be contributing to warrant morality outside those boundaries. What I am trying to do is uncovering and exploring the meanings as well as the conditions of possibility for internet libidinal economy beyond the

apparent exchanges on biblical readings. For the sake of that, I have to ask how they compare with the processes at work in daily exchanges, that is to say, how relationships sustained in a key that I defined as fantasy compare with those which unfold in the register of the imaginary, where fantasy plays a role in knowing the other but where the reality principle enforces the relative autonomy of the other in the relationship.

I am not unaware, in my critique, of the Lacanian axiom that nothing is conceived where fantasy is not inscribed (1982: 153). But Lacan, despite his assertion of the phantasmatic nature of all speech, also tells us of "progress" of discourse in the path to truth

"the art of the analyst must be to suspend the subject's certainties until their last mirages have been consumed. And it is in the discourse that the progress of their resolution must be marked" (Lacan 1977:43)

And Freud insisted in the capacity of ego for testing reality : "This function of orientating the individual in the world by discrimination between inner and outer" (Freud 1963 b:161). This predicament of the ego - which is also the predicament of Psychoanalysis itself - is well characterized by Elizabeth Grosz (1990). She identifies already in Freud two conceptions of the ego, which she describes as a "realist" and a "narcissistic" view of this agency (Grosz 1990: 24). Lacan, as Grosz shows, relied more heavily on the second view.

In other words, the phantasm, though theorized by Lacan as the historical nucleus of fantasy or foundational matrix upon which all ensuing relationships are unescapably cast, it is also conceived as a formation which can be faced, which is good to face, and whose envisaging marks the end of the projective technique we call Psychoanalysis. But there is more to it: the process of approaching such envisaging is constitutive of the gradual and progressive unfolding of all authentically dialogical relationships. Perhaps no one has ever said it better than Ricoeur (1974), describing the role of the "other" in (therapeutic) dialogue as a barrier on which discourse has to rebound and return to us, processed by the other's hearing, transformed. So that we are enlightened by the way we perceive the other's reception of our own discourse or, more exactly, from our own perception of the other's perception. An other, as a contudent alterity, has to be assumed there, in order for us to become detached from our own utterances and incessantly enlarge our own consciousness. A displacement of subjectivity is a prerequisite of truth.

So, authentic dialogue comes out from this excursus as a compromise between the impregnation of the "other" with projective fantasies and its engulfing by ego as an internal entity, on the one hand, and the surrendering, on the part of the subject, to the partner's persistency as an autonomous agency that not always complies which the projects ego holds for it, on the other hand. Having this in mind, the thread of my question is: what do I see as exceptional as regards virtual space dialogue? It is my contention that in the anonymous chats of the internet, the interlocutionary partner is only an excuse to stage self fulfilling desire, a (prosthetic) toy in the subject's hands. Sex or Bible, the theme rendered is incidental. In order to understand that, we have to explore the consequences of the body absent in net intercourse.

The Body Absent

It is evident in Freud the importance of the eye in the organization of desire. The eye is at the basis of all identifications (see, for example Freud 1963 a). Also, in the Lacanian idea of the imaginary as the objects of reality impregnated by fantasies, the visual dimension of the recognition of the other as a support for fantasy is strong. Resemblance is crucial to actualize fantasy in social interaction. However, as Allucquere Stone well points out, we witness, in this medium, what some theoretical work on Anthropology of Gender had in a way already anticipated: the merely incidental association of body shape with meaning. In virtual communication, the awareness that the body is construable and that it is a text to be read is heightened. It is true, as this author says (1995: 88ff.), that, in the internet, the decoupling of body and self is finally achieved, and it is also true that, as in other narrow widthband media (she also mentions radio, and telephone erotic services), the visible image is substituted by a verbally described image. Text has to account for the whole body. In my particular case of talks on Christianity, it is true as well that the subject may give the other an image according to the positions he supports, based on passed experiences. Points of view are, in a way, embodied by accumulated experience. But there are two impediments for the attainment of dialogue in these circumstances: First, this imaginary formations go unchecked, since there is no resistance on the other side. Second: they take a longer processing than face to face intercourse, what means that it results more economic to do without the partner altogether, substituting the other for a thoroughly internal image, a dummy, whom I can charm, intellectually smash or morally defeat at my wish. The monitor is a mirror where alterity is only a mirage. This is a truly narcissistic scene.

But there is much more to it. Stone rightly speaks of the technically instituted transgression, long expected I add, of "the body's physical envelope" (Ibidem: 16), but I want to turn the attention towards the body's vault. Plain vault, physical obstacle, as an index for alterity. It has to be the body. It, by itself, is the signifier for otherness. By its mere contiguous presence, it imposes challenge, discomfort, and labour to the subject. Its immediate opacity stands in communication for the possibility of otherness. The other's body is the embodiment of the reality principle, the anchor that makes dialogic possible. It is, at the same time, a text, but also a resistance to be text.

In her book *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler has attempted to transcend the metaphysical trap of the split body/psychic formations (which entails the opposition nature/culture) to which her earlier work (Butler 1990), as well as all anti-essentialist feminist literature, may be seen to conduct. Her search for an argument to support the presence of the material body in signification is a struggle to retreat from the idealist framework of constructivist and voluntarist conceptions of gender and imagination in general, which end up endorsing what I described above as the incidental relationship between body and meaning. The question is: If the body is solely present in and through imagination, where lies its materiality? On what stands does it continue to be "that(site) without which" no psychic operation can proceed?" How is it that it consists not merely in "the blank slate or passive medium upon which the psyche acts, but, rather, the constitutive demand that mobilizes psychic action from the start?" (Butler 1993:67). And Butler, in the course of her enquiry about how body exists in language, gives us a clue to understand the phenomenon of the net:

"The linguistic categories that are understood to 'denote' the materiality of the body are themselves troubled by a referent that is never fully or permanently resolved or contained by any given signified. Indeed, that referent persists only as a kind of absence or loss, that which language does not capture, but, instead, that which impels language repeatedly to attempt that capture, that circumscription - and to fail. This loss takes its place in language as an insistent call or demand that, while *in* language, is never fully *of* language." (Ibidem)

She warns us that, although signifiers are material, materiality itself, the referential horizon for speech, cannot be "summarily collapsed into an identity with language" and that material horizon is what "makes its demand in and to language" (Ib.68-69). And how and when the establishment of this contiguity, transmutation and impregnation of psyche and body takes place? The clue of the relationship between fantasy and body is clearly the original loss of the maternal body, inaugural of speech: "language [...] carries the trace of that loss [...], "it is the materiality of that (other) body which is phantasmatically reinvoked in the materiality of signifying sounds".

And here, my argument, though indebted to Butler's, has to depart from hers to call the attention to the fact that the loss of the maternal body is, simultaneously, a foundational experience and a constantly present one. Lack - which, as we saw, has become a lack of the body - is what is structurally there, at the core of self, not only by original loss but also by being constantly re-implanted in it. Search for the fulfillment of that lack and renewed loss is a daily event in the chain of signifiers. In this sense, it is not enough to say that "The materiality of signifier is thus the displaced repetition of the lost material body" and that "the referential impulse of language is to return to that lost originary presence, the maternal body", which becomes "the paradigm or figure for any subsequent referent" (Ib.: 70)

In fact, to understand net relationships, that difference becomes crucial. This is so because in everyday, post-Oedipal life, the horizon of irretrievable materiality installed by that original loss continues being referentially there to be incessantly transmuted into an index and actualization of the incompleteness of self. And only after this recognition, are we prepared to finally unmask the anomaly in this ultimate of narrow widthband communications: it is done as if there were no bodies. Materiality as reference is disposed off, treated as if could be fully collapsed into language. Materiality, as that which is forbidden by the law of the father, by the law of language, as that which by its very irretrievability reminds us of that law, becomes foreclosed. And the law -that forbids it- goes with it. It is my contention that, once it is assumed that it is possible to do without the materiality of the body, then the self becomes endangered of being trapped in fantasy, unable to relate.

But, again, mine is not a moral discourse, and I need to emphasize that, in the way I understand this, it should not be attributed to any particular meanings attached indelibly to body shape, but to the necessity of a referential horizon outside language, to signal the limits of language, and with this to limit the power of the subject.

Three interconnected consequences can be appointed for the abolition of the hindrance of the body in virtual communication, which I will try to explore briefly: the nullification of the split of self, the nullification of the Third, and the nullification of others.

They bring with them a pathological aggrandizement of ego.

I have maintained that the presence of the body as matter outside language acts as a reminder of the loss of self and actualizes, in social interaction, the split of the subject into a part that can be inscribed in discourse and a part which forever eludes it. The obliteration of the materiality of the body in this medium allows for the subject to speak as if full of himself, faking, for all purposes, his own fullness. So, a "postorganic form of anthropology", as the one proposed by David Thomas to understand society in cyberspace (Benedikt 1992:33) cannot fail to take into consideration the emergence of this aggrandized, totalizing self, for whom the Lacanian and also Bakhtinian maxim that the human being never coincides with himself does not seem to hold anymore.

Two opacities are missing here, the opacity of ego's body, and the opacity of the other's. Neither agency opposes resistance to full apprehension, engulfment in language. There is no more pain for "the indifference of the world" in Kolakowski's sense. The long search of the West for a disembodied life and for a substitution of the body through prosthetics seem to have come to an end. Nothing remains outside, there is no re-issuing of the experience of lack, everything is netted in the text. Internet, doing without the material sign of the body itself, does without the most radical expression of the human drama of separation. The inherent amount of narcissism inbuilt in all speech, with their partial return to the subject in a self-feeding, self-referential shift, here takes over the whole direction of discourse.

That becomes possible because, in virtual space, this tendency finds its ideal medium. With the obliteration of the body and the thorough textualization of the self in discourse without residues, the speaking subject and his whole possibility of being become conflated, the latter being reduced and fixed to the first. The "I believe" becomes a wholehearted "there is nothing outside that agency that believes". The coincidence of the self with a particular textuality is total. And, as there is no split, there is no movement of aspiration for fulfillment, no opening towards the world outside. Therefore, there is no other. If the impetus to reach the other emanates from an absence within, in internet, the other and the outreaching gestures are purely simulacral, because there is no absence within, since self is conflated with a pre-conceived, textualized I. No opacity, no resistance defends the subject from being entirely swallowed by his frozen, repetitive text of dominion. It is a ritual of titanic completeness⁶.

This can be achieved here as nowhere else could, due to the introduction of a fake other, a simulacrum of alterity. A completely different operation from what happens when the writer creates his work. Comparing Bakhtin and Lacan, David Patterson explains that the first comes close to the second in his view of the hero as "a relation of the self to itself mediated by the other", for which the operation is: "finding oneself outside", whereby "the

6. This subject has a resemblance with Donna Haraway's mythical cyborg (1991:149 ff.). Both are warriorlike, both live in a strictly non hierarchical landscape, none have origin. But I cannot share Haraway's optimism. I cannot see how this subjectivity, formed by the apendicular grafting of machine to humanity can be said to "skip the step of original unity" (op.cit. 151). Much at the contrary, it seems to me a re-enactment, a reversion into that original unity, where "otherness" is not accepted, has not got a place. The completion of these beengs is simulacral, they simulate a phallic existence, full of itself. Their masturbatory activity is unescapably phallic. They are truly primitive, in the exact sense of the word - they are pre-originary. Origin means subjectification coming from others, means ability to relate. Origin is coming out from undifferentiated fusion towards relationship, towards diversity. These beings are deplod to remain pre-gendered, not post-gendered.

I comes to itself by way of the other" (Patterson 1988:69). While "the novelist's primary task is to become other to himself" (Patterson 1988:20, on Bakhtin's theory of the novel), our subject's only task is to parade before himself his own wholeness with his text, which, in a twofold turn, nullifies his lack and nullifies the other. The monologic nature of such endeavour is evident in the fact that the subject is always satisfied, returning over and over again to his preconceived set of beliefs, to a set slogan. He and his textualized beliefs are only one, a matter of identity.

Through the process that Vincent Crapanzano has called "possessive reflexivity" (1992: 89), is in text that the I becomes an other to himself, at the same time that looks for himself in that text. (However, let me remind that none of these identifications and searches are ever complete, because, as I said, there are residues left aside, not encompassed in these movements. Residues of which, as I said, the material dimension of the body is emblematic. Therefore, self only enters partially in its utterances.) As opposed to what this author calls "mechanical reflexivity", "possessive reflexivity", is "mediated by desire" and implies "the movement from a dual relationship between self and other to a triadic relationship which is achieved through language". There is no emergence of the self as text without interpellation, without the contendent presence of another to which desire is directed, arising from a lack in the self : "To become a self, the individual must seek recognition by demanding the other to recognize him-self or his desire". And there is, so to say, the caution put by a Third upon the I-thou relationship. A caution or custody which could be an encompassing "frame, convention, law, and authority" (ibidem: 88). To these, I would add the materiality of the body, with all its consequences for the deficiency of language. The body has a place within the function of the third because, as I said, by signaling the limits of the text and by pointing its inadequacy to capture the plenitude of the subject, it casts a limit in his freedom and potency.

When I say that in the internet chats on topics of Christianity - or perhaps whatever - we are in the most private realm of fantasy, I am saying that there is no "possessive reflexivity", no authentic dialogy, no split, no eyes of the other upon oneself, no outside, no Bakhtinian or Lacanian estrangement either exterior in relation to another or interior towards an irretrievable section signaled by the body. We are on pre-Oedipal grounds, where the computer is the phallic prosthesis on which I masturbate faking the presence of the mother, faking completeness. In this sense, the "other" emanates fully from oneself, whose perception on the part of the subject goes unchecked because there is no Third as a guarantor of truth, as restriction, as arbitration and mediator of interpellations, for every one to keep his place in relationship to others. We are in an agglomerate of solipsist, equal worlds, where there is no surrender. As there is a pretension of no lack, the engine from which springs the dynamism of self in biography and history is also missing, so no belief or adhesion is ever modified, nothing ever changes, in giving idle talk away reality is stagnant. A repertoire of opinions, all in equal right, all stuck in the same totalizing and totalitarian dream. No internal room for demons inoculating doubt, no ascensional movement, no Socratic lesson, no sublimation. Only the same narcissistic, masturbatory caress.

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