The Medium is the Barrier

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Abstract

In this paper, we present a critical viewpoint of human dialogue in the modern age. In our view, the Internet, as the paramount cultural guidepost at the end of the millennium, is a stark reflection of the barrier in human communication in our time. By means of an analysis of conversation transcripts at virtual conversation sites, we shall endeavor to show that virtual communication, to use a phrase from Zen wisdom literature, is 'the clap of one hand.' The medium of the Internet does not permit authentic dialogue, which in our view is the key to creativity and culture; instead, it sells the illusion of communication. We shall make our claims on three levels. First, we shall analyze the virtual entity at the ontological level. We shall then go on to analyze conversations at virtual conversation sites. Finally, we shall adduce a number of social implications of the phenomenon under consideration.

Keywords: human dialogue, conversation analysis, virtual conversation, ontological perspective, interactive perspective, qualitative content analysis, small talk, serious topics.

The Medium of the Future

Some three decades ago, the sociologist of the future Alvin Toffler wrote: 'One important class of experiential products will be based on simulated environments that offer the customer a taste of adventure, danger, sexual titillation […] Customers entering these pleasure domes, will leave their everyday clothes (and cares) behind, don costumes, and run through a planned sequence of activities intended to provide them with a first-hand taste of what the original – i.e., unsimulated – reality must have felt like'(Toffler 1970:202). In the late 1950s and early 60s, the dominant idea in sociology and social psychology had been anomie theory. Post-World War II Western society, has undergone a disintegration of values, and viewed the apparent strengthening of values in the Communist world with envy. Liberalism and hippydom in the United States, and Marxism in Europe, set forth the disintegration of values in the Western world and the processes of estrangement of the individual from himself and society, as a critical political and philosophical question. Yet concurrently with the rise in sexual permissiveness and a degree of legitimacy for the use of hallucinogenic drugs from the 1970s onward, the electronic revolution also ushered in a new type of escapism. Virtual reality unleashed the pornography industry and self-gratified sexuality in an age under the pall of AIDS, enclosing the individual in a virtual cocoon. Two processes, the disintegration of values and the alternative reality offered by technology, have converged, reaching their joint peak with the spread of the Internet. Toffler's remarkable prophecy has been coming to life before our very eyes, in the form of virtual discussion rooms. It is such rooms, which we adduce as the prime cultural exhibition of the end of the millennium.

Ostensibly, the medium of the Internet – and virtual chat-rooms in particular –might seem as the ideal cosmopolitan discourse. Interlocutors may practice dialogic interaction while ascending above their cultural, social and political biases, and converging into a neutral mean of communication. In the virtual sphere, bindings to the real world seem to lose their grip; systems founded upon the ideas of center, margin, hierarchy and linearity are replaced with ones of multilinearity, nodes, links and networks (Jones & Spiro 1995:151). Hence, some fundamental barriers that are often erected while engaging in an intercultural interaction, such as the absence of shared social identity, common meanings, codes and symbols (see Carbaugh 1990), might be breached. The nature of this enterprise is twofold: technically, the medium of the Internet enables numerous participants from all around the globe to communicate casually one with the other; pragmatically, it does so by putting into usage simple Esperanto-like texts as the common language of all the participants. Thus, some arguments have recently been made about the prospects of the Internet to redeem intercultural gaps. However, with the growing interest in this

phenomenon, and especially in its implication upon intercultural communication, the prospects of this medium to provide a notable solution to the problems of intercultural communication is yet to be proved. Here we shall endeavor to prove this expectation to be false. The Internet discourse as it is revealed throughout the following pages, is best portrayed as the modern incarnation of the ancient myth of the Tower of Babel.

The Virtual Entity: An Ontological Perspective

A discussion on the Internet is a solitary act, one which transpires in the privacy and security of an individual's home, from which he can take flight to far-off regions in search of an interlocutor. From his familiar protected space, he moves onto another dimension, a fascinating parallel dimension, in which he can expect to converse with other surfers from the four-corners of the globe. However, as Joe Blow sits in his easy chair in front of a computer screen, typing strings of electronic information into the information highway, he undergoes a thorough metamorphosis. From a flesh-and-blood being, with a human personality, he transforms into a virtual entity. From now on, he is no longer a short, bald, over-weight man; he can now shed his physical appearance and present himself as someone else entirely.

Much has been written about the link between the psychological and the physical in the shaping of man's soul. In another work, we have adduced the process of the formation of the ego, which is intimately connected to the link between a person's physical-environmental and psychological dimensions (Shoham1979: 34-41). The boundaries of the self, which remove the individual from a feeling of pantheistic participation and take shape in the course of this process, are nothing but the scar tissues formed from the wounds caused by the interaction of the individual with his surroundings. The process of the crystallization of the self is a succession of pain and suffering that progressively detaches the individual from his protective covering. Pursuant to the canons of Existentialist philosophy, we contend that our being in the world and our link to our surroundings, physical and human, involves relationships of deprivation and conflict, as part of our 'thrownness unto death', as Heiddegger had described life. This existence is marked by fear and trembling, as Kierkegaard put it. Furthermore, only the acceptance of the absurd existence can pave the way for the kind of solution that can pose a challenge to the metaphysical design. We embrace Husserl's claim, that phenomenological reduction is a means of attaining authentic existence, that is, an introspection aimed at disconnecting from the generalized other while 'peeling the layers of onion' that surround the self. For us, this process is an interaction, within the kernel of the human personality, between the physical, experiential anchor, upon which the pain of existence is etched, and the yearning anchor, which propels the individual to the idiosyncratic meaning of the reality of his life. The French phenomenologist Maurice Marleau-Ponty has claimed that: 'Matter, life, and mind must participate unequally in nature of form; they must represent different degrees of integration, and, finally must constitute a hierarchy in which individuality is progressively achieved' (Marleau-Ponty 1963:143). Kierkegaard used the phrase 'leap of faith' to give expression to the authentic rebellion of one who forsakes the good things in a hedonistic, and boring, world, and leaps by force of his faith into the sphere of authentic existence (Kierkegaard 1968). A similar motif can be found in the works of Albert Camus, who calls upon man to reach an authentic existence while embracing his limitations and finitudes (Camus 1959,1975). Thus, authentic rebellion is the conscious decision to calibrate all the human sensory receptors to take in the entire spectrum of possible feelings. The key to evaluating an experience is by raising it to the plane of authenticity.

An individual's involvement in reciprocal social activity, most of which is anomalous, is often accompanied by feelings of impotence, embarrassment, anger, and alienation, while the really pleasurable moments are few. Yet despite this, most people try to find solace in a human relationship, by trying to have the other view them as worthy. In many cases, when an individual is involved in a reciprocal human relationship, he must often present himself to his fellow in the way circumstances require. Discussion rooms undoubtedly comprise a sphere in which social activity takes place; at any point in time, thousands of people are in the midst of a dialogic relationship in one or several virtual discussion rooms. Conversation channels on the Internet afford absolute freedom of expression, even permitting the user to select any identity he wishes (Turkle 1995:179; Danet, Rodenberg-Wright & Rosenbaum-Tamari 1995). Since there is no possibility, technical or practical, of revealing the person punching on the keyboard, a man can identify himself as a woman, a child can identify himself as an adult, and the bashful can be aggressive.

When a person enters virtual space, he passes from one sphere of existence to another and must adapt himself to the rules of the game in that sphere. Goffman claims that human interaction is something of a game, in which each participant stages his conduct in accordance with the definition of the circumstances engendered between the individuals concerned (Goffman 1971). The way an individual presents himself is interpreted by his environment on the basis of a wide variety of factors, among them his facial expression, tone of voice, and physical appearance. In the virtual conversation room the way an individual shows himself is limited to one element only – the nickname with which he chooses to identify. We contend that the choice of a nickname is not arbitrary, but rather reflects the normative projections of social myths and beliefs. Parents, for instance, name their children after the micro-myths of their particular world: names such as Charity or Hope are examples of the transcendental projection of yearnings, while names such as John or Samuel perpetuate past mythical experiences, either private or of one's group. The same principle obtains with nicknames in conversation rooms; here, though, the purpose of the nickname is to attract the amorphous other into a conversation and by means of the nickname to draw an attractive, even ideal, image of oneself as a virtual entity. Since one's actual identity has no meaning in a virtual conversation, even if one identifies oneself by one's true name, there is no way of verifying the fact. In most of the conversation transcripts we have examined, we found that most of the conversation participants had chosen to present themselves by nicknames. One may assume that a small number of the names had been real. Yet a large percentage of conversation participants used such names as *Heart-O-Gold* (indicating themselves as good-natured), *Wildcat* (a wild, enticing woman), *Pandora* (conveying mystery), *Face 2 Face* (honesty and candor), *Socrates* (indicating wisdom), as well as names such as *No Future* (perhaps as an indication of distress). In a conversation between Israelis and Palestinians such nicknames as *Dany Yatom* and *Ami Ayalon* (Israeli intelligence officials) had been used by the Israelis, and *Ibrahim* and *Zeus* by the Palestinians. Nicknames in this case signify a political or other viewpoint that touches upon the discussion; in other words, the very choice of a nickname involves a message the speaker wishes to convey. In a discussion amongst Israelis on American politics, neutral nicknames, which had no meaning for the participants, such as *t-man*, *RckHrr*, *Epleska*, *Pilay*, and *Addam*, were chosen. One may assume that if the nature of a subject was more or less informative, removed from the realm of fantasy, it contributed to the adoption of nicknames devoid of purpose other than identification.

We have found that in discussions on sex, nicknames are important. Since participants in such discussions have no other way of enticing others into an intimate exchange, the nickname constitutes the attraction. The image conveyed by the nickname will be what defines the character of the speaker in the context of sex and his expectations of the conversation. We would point out that off-times the intention is to continue the discussion directly and discreetly between two persons outside the original conversation room. Monitoring such cases has remained beyond the technical means at our disposal. Among the nicknames used in sex conversations: *Big Boy*, *slaveboy*, *erotica*, *Sex God*, *Evita*, *lady D*, *Too Good*, and *Nicelady*. Obviously, all of these nicknames had been chosen for their sexual connotations, as some of them were experiential sex myths (*Evita, lady D*) and others myths of longing (*Sex God, Too Good*).

Who is that virtual entity which lives in the fourth dimension? Is it possible to set forth an image and distinguishing characteristics in broad outline? Is it possible to say it 'exists?' The answer to these questions lies at the very point of reference from which we began this discussion – the virtual entity is an inauthentic entity by the very nature of its existence. A conversation on the Internet is similar to a meeting of shadows in a platonic cave, only here there are no bodies behind the shadows; the entities here populate a virtual ghost community completely detached from actual reality. The virtual entity, which flickers across the computer screen, is at most a projection of the interlocutor on the Web, which by identifying itself by means of a contrived image satisfies some mental need or other. That image is usually a sharply focused and one dimensional ideal, as identification by a nickname contributes to the construction of a setup of expectations amongst interlocutors, a setup that does not contain a speck of authenticity, since the images are entirely disconnected from their human anchor. The ordinary human social framework is not devoid of poses and of false game-playing; presentations of the self, as Goffman put it, are different in every set of relationships, as the persona one chooses changes in accordance with the surroundings one finds oneself in. Yet even in such circumstances, the persona interacts with the inner self. While the individual, as a bio-psycho-social composite presents himself differently in each situation, he does not erase his previous existence, his experiences, and his real self. Such is not the case, though, in a conversation room. Here events more closely resemble a dialogue between two or more marionettes, with someone behind a curtain controlling them and putting words in their mouths. If that

someone so wishes, the marionette will go mad, cry, laugh, or just prattle. The marionette operator, like the Internet surfer, is not responsible for what the dummy under his control does or says. The one is no more before the audience in the theatre any more that the other is among the participants in the discussion room. The virtual entity is thus a disembodied shadow, the projections of shallow kitschy illustrations, between which and an experiential anchor there is no connection. The important conclusion to be drawn here is that the removal of physical boundaries and the creating of an ideal image, offers a virtuoso solution to the psycho-physical dilemma: a creative clash between the conflicting inner essences of the active entity is prevented from the outset. When the interaction is between banal, stereotypical entities lacking any individuality, there is no longer any room for a search for one's deeper inner essence. And neither is there room for the authentic existence of creative conflict. Authenticity remains beyond the possibilities of the new kind of technological conversations; in its place we find ourselves up against an impenetrable barrier of facades.

The Virtual Discourse: An Interactive Perspective

Authentic dialogue can transpire only when a person brings himself into the field of the dialogue, and is willing to reach the inner self of his interlocutor, and completely accept that self. A human being comes to the field of dialogue with his limitations, expectations, and experience of previous dialogues; he presents himself to his fellow as he is and invites his fellow to open up a communication with him. Yet the search for a meaningful dialogue with one's fellow man, in most cases, is doomed to failure. Elsewhere, we have expanded upon the crisis in communication between human beings sharing this absurd existence on earth (Shoham 1983). In our view, the dynamic likely to be engendered is no more, but also no less, than a meeting of yearnings for a dialogue; that is the most a human being can hope for in his existential thrownness in this world. Never the less, that very yearning contains the possibility of rare meetings in which an authentic dialogue does take place. In his writings about the Philosophy of Dialogue, the philosopher Martin Buber discerns between two definite kinds of relationships: the I-It relationship and the I-Thou. The world we live in is inundated with I-It relationships, in which the subject is estranged from his surroundings and regards the objects and subjects around him alike as something to be used. On the other hand, an I-Thou relationship is devoid of barriers and of compulsion. By taking the object from its place and changing it from a phenomenon in time and space to the object of an affinity, the 'I' is reflected in the 'Thou' and from it derives its authentic existence. Here the 'I' does not exist in itself and the 'Thou' does not exist in itself; what does exist is the I-Thou affinity that precedes logically and ontologically both the 'I' and the 'Thou'. Buber has written: 'We are at liberty to name this philosophy as the Philosophy of Dialogue, for it lays in knowledge of the soul that our being does not find its amendment in itself, but rather in the touch of man to man, in the affinity of I and Thou. This is an affinity that manifests itself as a Dialogue' (Buber 1963:47). Such an affinity, according to Buber, is a flow of grace from which a person becomes acquainted with the experience of creativity, and of divine Creation.

The modern technological age opens for us an enormous range of means of communication, which are reaching the peak of their development at the close of the millennium. In the past half-century, the pace of innovation in the field of communications – in such diverse fields as radio technology, satellites, and computer communications – has been greater than all of recorded history until then. Yet, does such proliferation of communication channels enhance the condition of inter-personal communication? Does the array of technology at our disposal open up for us improved possibilities for dialogue between human beings?

There can be no doubt that Internet technology has brought about a revolution in this realm; limited space simply does not permit us to describe the possibilities contained in that tool. Here we discuss the Internet as an ultra-modern communication channel rather than a source of information. The lion's share of on-line communication takes place on conversation channels, in which one may enter a virtual conversation room and 'talk' to the other visitors there. At any one time, thousands of people 'gather' from all around the world looking for conversation partners.

The sample of virtual conversation sites used in this article was taken in the period August-November 1997, comprised the transcripts of some 30 randomly collected conversations over Internet Relay Chat servers (IRC). This does not of course comprise a representative sample, as the research concept of random sample is meaningless in the present context. The idea of a representative sample relates to a

circumstance in which the entirety from which the sample has been obtained is a known quantity. However, when we set out to conduct research on the behaviour of Internet users, we come up against problems concerning sampled population the size of which we have no way of gauging. It is extremely difficult to know how many users are on the conversation channels at any given time. Furthermore, conversation channels appear on an ad hoc basis and vanish just as quickly. Thus, a quantitative estimate would be of no use here. Our aim in adducing this random sample is to demonstrate our claims, as they have been developed thus far and will be developed henceforth, and to relate them, to the extent possible, to the focus of our argument. The axis around which this study revolves is dialogue on the Internet, and the analysis of conversations has been undertaken with the theoretical tools of the philosophy of dialogue, especially Buberian dialogue.

Our analysis has been divided into three stages. In the first, the conversation transcripts were divided into three groups, according to topic: small talk, serious topics, and sex (1). In the second stage, the transcripts of each conversation were analyzed by the method of qualitative content analysis, by which we tried to identify recurring characteristics (2). In the third stage, we tried to identify common motifs in all three groups. The results of our analysis are presented below, by topic, with illustrative examples.

The Small-talk Group: In the small-talk group, there had been recurring attempts to create a relationship and a dialogue despite the technical difficulties on the channel. However, when a relationship was achieved there appeared to be no genuine intention of deepening it. The general impression we got was of a desire to relieve loneliness. The words ‘cold’ and ‘warm’ had been used on several occasions as a metaphoric expression for one’s feeling outside and inside the Web channel. Escapism was palpable here all the time and the real world is depicted as cold and distant, while the world of Internet fantasy provided the illusion of warmth. For example:

Stella: What planet are we on?

Boopster: Don’t know…a green and blue one. Let’s dance or something?

Elminister: Ok. Here’s the beat. Its its its its.

Stella: Let’s dance. Gonna be a cold night.

* * *

Spruit: Was supposed to go out again tonight, but I just couldn’t face it! :o(

* * *

…Magicck gives jakfrost a nice warm blanket.

* * *

The conversing images put out virtual hands, in an attempt to come to a relationship, by means of a medium that cannot convey such an attempt. One can feel the tension between the virtual world and the real world:

Bushy: Nice to see [you]

Sub-Zero: You mean nice to read.

There are parts of conversation that are surrealistic and devoid of meaning, while other parts are thin and flat to the point of boredom - representations from the real world are translated into Web forms, namely words and numbers.

Maraj: Hello everybody. Whoever wants a drink just ask me. I shall be everyone’s server tonight…enjoy your stay.

Each side usually tries to pull the dialogue if one is achieved, into his turf, and have the conversation about a topic of interest to him. There was never an attempt to try to achieve a somewhat deeper

dialogue, and attempts to find common ground have been banal. All attempts to open a conversation began with the set formula: 'Sex/Place/Age'. These fixed parameters were for establishing the common denominator for a conversation. Needless to say such is a barren attempt, because these parameters provide at most a dim contour of the other party. Furthermore, as we have mentioned previously, it could be that these dry data are false:

Lee 38: How old are you (gotta know that before I really start talking! :)

The Serious Topics Group: The conversations surveyed in the serious topics group dealt with political and social matters. As long as conversations were maintained on the informative level, they seemed to answer the needs of their participants. Problems arose as soon as a debate began and people started stating positions. Technical problems, namely language, disconnection, and considerable confusion, only impeded understanding each other's positions. Nevertheless, they did not give up and repeatedly tried to clarify their positions, continuing to struggle with the medium and its limitations. The conversations were marked by accusations and tagging negative labels on the other side (for instance, Jews versus Arabs), without making any attempt, even pro forma, to listen. Conversations were confused, interrupted and violent, with members of each side showing contempt for the other and closing themselves inside the collective 'I' of the side they represented. Below is an excerpt from a conversation on the topic 'Islamic Resistance'. We joined the conversation after there was supposed to have been a debate on the subject with a senior official of the Hizbuallah organization (3).

Mike 17: The Koran doesn't have any bad words or says bad things about people.

Abraham: What do you think about Kana's massacre and about the ambulance in April 96?

Mike 17: These are not terrorist acts. They were in a state of war. We don't go blow ourselves and killing and killing ourselves to kill others.

Abraham: That's wonderful, to kill kids in an ambulance is not a crime.

Mike 17: It is.

Abraham: Nor t kill people in the UN camping.

Mike 17: But it's different.

Abraham: Nothing is different my dear. To kill is to kill.

Mike 17: If Hizbullah stops firing rockets Israel will leave Lebanon.

Abraham: Hahhah. That's funny.

Ami Aylon: Tell me something Abraham. Doesn't the Koran tell not to kill?

On a number of occasions, concrete ideas were intermixed with abstract ones that had no connection to the topic of conversation, and the level of estrangement reached new peaks: the 'speakers' set forth solipsistic monologues across their interlocutors' screens. The reality thus reflected was one of a blurred fantasy:

Tom 967: I advise you to go out and talk to the trees.

IkhLas: Yup.

Tom 967: We are here…therefore the great tree exists.

IkhLas: But I heard it say lailaha Ilillah.

Tom 967: It must have been singing…After you die its great branches will nourish you.

The Sex Topics Group: In the group of conversations on sex, the speakers had no desire to reveal their true identity. The 'other' remained generalized and amorphic. The veil of anonymity furnished the protection and freedom to reveal sexual fantasies. Many descriptions are exaggerated; feelings are sweeping, deep and fluctuating, but are not realistic or conducive to credibility. The exaggerated descriptions were apparently to make up for the coldness of the medium, and its inability to convey authentic feelings:

Jana: grabs AngelHrt and pull her close, running her fingers through AngelHrt's hair and gently but firmly takes from her kiss, while stealing the one thing that has alluded her ... her heart.

LI Beth: We've got you all nervous now Angel ;)

Thea: gives AngelHrt a Really Hot…Long Super and Really Erotic…Earth Shattering, Soul Burning, Oh My Gawd, If I Stop Now I'll Die, Better Than Heaven, Yet Hotter Than Hell, Groping, Don't Stop Touching Me, Blood Boiling, OhOhOhOhGawdOhGawdOhGawd Soul Stealing, Dream Making, Close to Xrated, Hand Trembling, Knee Buckling, Heart Stopping, Body Tingling, Earth Quake Making, Passion Exploding…

Fantasy is the most real thing there is in the virtual environment, and absorbing it involves complete unilateral detachment from reality. The physical descriptions are exaggerated, both in their dimensions and as models of emulation:

Trager picks Athena up.

Athena: What you gonna do now Trager?

Athena: Hey!

Trager Cradling her in his arms.

Athena is very light.

* * *

Stony 7 take arrianna in his arms…holding her so close they can feel each others' heart beat…He looks deep into arrianna's eyes and then kisses her so passionately, the room disappears as they float to cloud 9…leaving reality for a moment of pure pleasure and sensual full body tingling.

The identity before the speaker is enshrouded in mist in every sense. Every bit of feedback obtained from the other side of the screen encounters the most inventive interpretation by the listener. In other words, the dialogue is between two virtual images, each of which projects on to the other its sexual desires. Thus, what is arrived at is a kind of group onaneism in which each participant is involved in the fantasies he himself indulges in. The barrier is impermeable.

In the bi-sexual channels, matters are even more complicated. It is as if it were not enough that the sexuality of the speaker is not known; now it is not even clear what his or her sexual identity is. On such channels we have encountered specific statements by speakers what their sex and sexual identity are to win the trust of their interlocutors. Naturally, such declarations do not win trust, and at times the very crudeness of such declarations arouses further suspicion, beyond what exists in any event.

Straycat: I hope you don't mind me asking, but are you a MALE or a FEMALE. It will make a difference.

Kicker 26: Female, butch.

Mercedez: Kicker, your butch??

Kicker 26: ahmmmm, yes I am, stone butch and love it.

The attitude to the other is not consistent. On the one hand, there are expression of sensitivity and gentleness, and on the other, immediately afterward, sadism and cruelty. The yearning for a relationship and the inability to attain one rouses aggression, which the noted psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan identified as the breaking of the ideal I pursuant to the tension engendered between a fantasy and painful reality (Lacan 1977; Kurzweil 1996:143). We shall illustrate the tension between reality and the world of fantasy with the following interesting example:

TrustNo1: I wanna fuck!!!! Anybody wanna help?

The speaker, who, as his name indicates, trusts no one, calls for a relationship through the estranged medium, and through it looks for help.

In summarizing our analysis thus far, and drawing conclusions from them, we would suggest a number of principles, which embody main essence of Internet conversation:

1. Escapism: As a conversation channel, the Internet appears to be a protected space in which a person can, without fear, give free reign to his impulses. The individual is free to become absorbed into the virtual sphere and vanish in it.

2. Fantasy: Disconnection from the bonds to the real world. One can enjoy surrealistic fantasies, which for the most part take on the form of a superficial, reproduced reality.

3. Virtual fetishism: The Web is perceived as an organic, breathing, moving space, and so too are the images that populate it perceived.

4. Multiple entities (4): Participates in conversation rooms frequently changes their nicknames in the course of a conversation, and sometimes even participate concurrently in several conversation rooms. This means that a speaker is capable of having several concurrent identities, and acting in accordance to each.

At this point we can say, in the light of our analysis, that virtual interaction cannot be considered a dialogue. One's attitude to one's interlocutor is not in the nature of an affinity. The entity at the other end is perceived in object-like stereotypical terms, which cannot be a partner in authentic dialogue. The images flickering over the screen are indifferent to one another, merely seeing each other as something to exploit for the purpose of indulging in fantasies. Furthermore, we witness here to a double estrangement: on the one hand, there is the barrier between the speakers and the images they create as virtual entities, and on the other hand, there is the estrangement between the various entities, by virtue of their being figments of the imagination. It seems we would not be off the mark if we said that Internet conversation is not even an I-It dialogue, in the Buberian sense, but an It-It dialogue. The ability to aspire to attain unique moments involving a flow of grace between man and man is beyond the realm of the possibilities of any given technological conversation. Authenticity, as a value and something yearned for, simply does not enter the picture. In a world of 'Its', there is no need for any demands to be made of a conversation. The superficial or the It-object does not demand particular exhaustion of our strength. Therefore, escape from the demands of the 'Thou' to the easy world of the 'It' is ostensibly natural (Bergman 1974:261).

Kierkegaard wrote in *Either/Or*: 'In the Middle Ages, much was told about a mountain that is not found in any map: It is called Mount Venus. There sensuousness has its home; there it has its wild pleasures for it is a kingdom, a state. In this kingdom language has no home, nor the collectedness of thought, nor the laborious achievements of reflection; there is heard only the elemental voice of passion, the play of desires, the wild noise of intoxication' (Kierkegaard 1987:90).

Kierkegaard was speaking of an inauthentic way of life, about aesthetic existence. Aesthetic man lives an imaginary existence - what is possible, not what is real and concrete. By force of his imagination he searches for stimuli, going through life from one matter to another, without any loyalty, perseverance, or responsibility, without any inclination for binding spiritual involvement, and without real connectedness. He is a dreamer who creates an imaginary world of dreams to escape from the clutches of reality.

Discussion

The Internet is without doubt at the forefront of contemporary communications technology. As an information source, it is possible to reach an enormous range of sites on practically any subject of interest; as a communication channel, one may view the Internet as the technological infrastructure of the medium through which an increasing amount of human communication will be conducted. Our analysis of conversation transcripts is preliminary testimony concerning the kind of communication the Web is likely to engender. The Internet is not only an extremely important technological invention, but also, or perhaps mainly, a cultural icon of the first order, and the virtual conversation rooms fulfil in this context the function of a 'signifier' towards a much broader phenomenon.

Ultra-modern interactive technology, which is presented as a means of contributing to human dialogue, can at most provide the illusion of dialogue. Authentic dialogue, the foundation stone of all cultural and spiritual creativity, cannot derive from the medium under consideration. By its very definition, the medium shatters the subject-speaker to bits with a broad sweep of the hand, which basically negates the authentic existence of the individual, and without such an authentic existence, we may not strive for authentic dialogue. According to Buber, creativity is speech, is dialogue; the teacher who engenders dialogic contact with his students, the painter who leaves his imprint on canvass, and the author who spins words and sentences on paper, are all creative by means of dialogue. Buber mentions Beethoven as an example of the process of creativity as dialogue: Beethoven listened to the notes in his mind's ear. When he wrote down the scores, he would listen to what came next, and write again (Bergman 1974:264). The process of creation is a revelation within the soul of men, through an internal discourse, without boundaries. James Carey proclaimed that the structure of cognition is molded by the structure of communication, thus eventually we might become the thing which we have created (Carey in Postman 1982:30). This assertion has an important bearing on our argument: The murder of dialogue, as can be seen here, is consequently the murder of culture. Buber writes: 'When a culture is no longer centered in a living and continually renewed relational process, it freezes into the It-World…'(Buber 1970:103). The Internet, as a cultural engine, drags behind it a long line of cultural cars toward the world of the 'It'. The result is likely to be that we 'crash the train' and lose the spiritual existence embodied in the reflection of the 'I' in the 'Thou'. In a reality in which the chance of attaining dialogue is denied in advance, we cannot expect rich cultural life and this is manifest on a number of levels.

First, it appears that the technological overlapping of the Internet's role as a source of information and as a communication channel puts it in position to inherit the roles of school and teachers. Sites purporting to be virtual schools, in which various subjects can be learnt, have already been established. Such modern trees of knowledge cannot supplant education as an undertaking in human creativity or the creative educator. A distinction should be made between the imparting of knowledge and education: the former is a basically technical matter, while the latter is an art. The task of the educator is not to force knowledge, but rather to engender an affinity with his pupil. This is an egalitarian Socratic dialogue, in which the educator scatters the seeds of knowledge on the virgin soil his pupil, and on which trees of knowledge unique to him will grow. It is a process that is complimentary and mutual, involving affinity and without coercive one-sided persuasion. The educator is indirectly midwifed to the inchoate ideas in the mind of this pupil. Thus, both are likely to experience the sensation of revelation.

The end of a cultural era is also likely to be felt in another way. The Web holds an enormous number of sites and conversation channels devoted to sex. This state of affairs derives, inter alia, from the anarchic character of the Web, which permits it to answer man's natural inclination towards voyeurism. The Web is a medium that offers new ways for sexual release (or rather the illusion of such). The virtual world takes fantasy to the threshold of realization, and at the same time negates real existence. Culture, Freud tells us, is the sublimation of man's sexual impulse. So what will come of it if man can no longer attain a refining of his urges, and instead directs his libidinal energy to the creation of virtual visions?

Internet culture is well integrated into the post-modern age. In a culture where 'everything goes', even the antinomy 'virtual reality' does not raise an eyebrow. Post-modern schools of thought, such as deconstructionism, have shattered the connection between what signifies and what is signified. Likewise, they have erased the referent behind phenomena, exactly as the virtual existence of entities in conversation rooms erases the concrete existence of those who actually speak. The Internet is the ultimate post-modern instrument – it is based on the relative and temporary nature of relationships and creates an impenetrable barrier between phenomena and their representations.

One of the most popular figures on the Internet is the American anarchist poet William S. Burrows, and one site named for him displays the slogan, 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted'. In reply to that slogan, which so well reflects the spirit of our claims, all we can do is rephrase Dostoyevsky's Karamazov: 'If everything is possible, then nothing is true.'

Notes

1) The discussion topics were reflected in the names of the conversation rooms: # cybercafe, # cafe1, # sexroom, # politics etc'.

2) The analysis was conducted by means of the analytic induction technique (Cressey 1971:14-17). Out of each conversation group, a single conversation was selected randomly and then analyzed in the light of the Buberian dialogue terminology. The principles found were then used as the analytical reference for the analysis of the whole sample. Most of the principles we had deduced beforehand supported our assertions.

3) We note that several of the Israeli participants used the names of Israeli generals. Thus, the field of discourse had been from the outset marked by militarism.

4) We are paraphrasing the psychological term 'multiple personalities'. In our context, multiple entities mean ontological multiplicity of one subject, which identifies over the Web as several entities. An interesting aspect of this phenomenon is adduced in Turkle's work 1995: 258-260.

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Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, 1999, November, issue 2.
Editor: Prof. Jens Allwood
URL: http://www.immi.se/intercultural/.