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**Communicational Virtuality of Alterity  
(Otherness) in the New Media**

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**Abstract:** From the modernity which made communication secondary and dependent from knowledge and limited at the verbal type we inherited the idea that communication is in the first place a way of sending information. In this case the identity and otherness of the subjects that communicate are a clear and solid one. The postmodern and globalizing concept of communication put in the first place not the process of sending the information, but the building of relations. This ontological model of relationship describes the meaning of communicational reality as virtual, or, more precisely, describe communications action like a virtual reality. In this case the identity and otherness of the subjects that are in relation appear only as a weak occurrence of the modern idea of subject.

**Keywords:** communication as relations; subjective identity; other identity; reality; virtual; analog; digital

We inherited the idea that communication is, in the first place, a way of sending information from the modernity, which made communication secondary and dependent from knowledge and limited at the verbal type. Such type of definition was in top in the cybernetics' models of communication that is, for example, that of Claude Shannon model which used the image of telegraphic net for communication. In this case the identity of the subjects that communicate is a clear and solid one, because they are in the first place subjects of knowledge, not of communication. Only otherness became a little problematic, because of this solid identity of knowledge subject.

But the postmodern concept of communication puts in the first place not the process of sending or exchanging information, but the building of relations. Gregory Bateson and Milton Erickson contributed much to the changing of accent in communication definitions. This change of accent in communication definition is very well expressed in Paul Watzlawick axioms and especially in this: Every communication has a content aspect and relationship aspect such that the latter clarifies the former and is therefore a metacommunication (Watzlawick, Helmick Beavin, Jackson, 1972). This means that all communication includes, apart from the plain meaning of words, more information - information on how the talker wants to be understood and how he himself sees his relation to the receiver of information. Thus, if there are cases where the relationship is very low, as when we ask for information to a stranger In a foreign city, there are situations where the content is very low, while the relationship is everything, like that of the body communication of baby with the mother, or as in altered states of consciousness (trance, hypnosis), therapeutic communication between psychiatrist and mental patient or great love.

From another point of view, McLuhan thought similar: in widely known work from 1964 *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan proposed that media themselves should be the focus of study, not the content they carry: "the medium is the message". McLuhan's insight was that: medium affects the society in which it plays a role not by the content delivered over the medium, but by the characteristics of the medium itself. More controversially, he postulated that content has little effect on society — in other words, it did not matter if television broadcasts children's shows or violent programming, to illustrate one example — the effect of television on society would be identical. He noted that all media have characteristics that engage the viewer in different ways. The distinction between the concept of communication as transmission of information and concept of communication as relationships building is also close to that between utterance and enunciation. Enunciation - the relationship, the media - is the context in which we have to place the utterance - the contents of the message - to understand it properly: as a suggestion, an order, a joke, a threat etc.

But first axioms - and probably one of the most famous - of Paul Watzlawick, who logically precede others, is: "We cannot not communicate." Her axiomatic evidence is, as usual, direct, but it can be indirectly transcribed also into a more general formula as follows: "we cannot not enter into the relationship" or "we cannot not relate." The implicit but obvious basis of it is that we live in a world of relationships, that relationship is the reality foundation. Thus becomes clear that, like other previous theoretical models, the model of communication as building of relationships brings a change of ontological emphasis in the representation of world. For a long period of evolution of Western thought, the world was simply constituted from things that had the quality of entities. Then, for next period of time, world was represented as entities in relations. Nowadays Western thought considers that the relations constitute entities.

The climax of the world representations as a network of relations was the historical moment of French structuralism, that defined the sign as an entity *sui generis*, different to things or ideas, which result just from a kind of relationship between this two, and the language, in which the signs are simply differences, as a pure relations system. Today, however, not this moment already past, but a technological landmark achievement for our world, *World Wide Web*, which is the image of network, is appropriate for what that actually means communication as relationship. And in how does this work and in the effects of this operation, we see brought to completion the reality which communication conceived and practiced as relating can produce: virtual reality. Different from the old image of a world that has its principle beyond itself, in the transcendence, or that of the immanent world metaphor, the core-essence and shell-phenomenon, the corollary to the current representation of the world as a net of relations is the ontology of significant surface embodied in technological formula of the virtual reality.

Indeed, alongside the World Wide Web, the emergence of virtual reality is one of the defining characteristics of our world. It began with the extension and virtualization through technological means, usually electronic, of the perception. Of course, man populated the reality with artifacts from the very beginning of its existence. But only when, on a very vague energy support, these artifacts have been addressed directly to perception, the images, sounds or tactile sensations began to receive a virtual reality. At first, a little, thanks to the paintings and photos, and then, more, by telephone and radio, film and television, fragments of reality becoming virtualized, and surrounding reality has become increasingly what was potentially and initially, a hybrid between here and now of the material reality, and "reality" that is only in the human mind that perceives the effects of certain artifacts.

But virtual reality in this meaning comes along with the language as sign system in communication. Virtual reality is the best model of communication as signifying process: the linguistic sign introduced

virtual, building virtual reality of a link between thing and idea. Umberto Eco has observed that semiotics has one's own autonomous area, since besides the truth and false on the logic plane, there are also "lies", a reality nor false neither true, thanks linguistic constructed signs. Or how Baudrillard defines the virtual effect of communication in which everything is focuses in that to make them think and depleting in that effect of credibility: "You launch an information. As long as it is not denied, it is plausible. Except for any accident, it will never be disproved in real time. And even if it were denied a little later, it will never be absolutely false because it was credible. Contrary to the truth, credibility cannot be contradicted, because it is virtual." (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 59-60.)

Thanks to electronic technology, this original capability of signs was developed very much up to the possibility of producing a parallel, illusory reality. Under this aspect the relationist concept of communication and practices that accompany it approaches the idea of virtual reality also thanks to the interest in analog quality of signs, respectively for body language and image. Watzlawick's third axiom defines well this dimension of the new paradigm of communication: "Human beings use two communication modes: digital and analogue. Digital language has a very complex and very comfortable logical syntax, but lacks an adequate semantic, however, analog language has semantics, but not a proper syntax for unambiguous definition of relations." [Watzlawick uses the term digital to define the meaning of verbal language from point of view of Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas for the relationship between signifier and signified which is the sign linguistic is arbitraire et immotivé, French term untranslatable in English. Analog is, by contrast, the signs for reasons motivated by similarity, cause and effect or whole to part relationship (indexical signs and iconic signs in Peirce's classification).]

As reflected in the axiom, *digital* signs are attributed to content, information, and analogical signs, to relationships. The Jakobsonian model of communication distributed in the same way, but less explicit, message functions. Thus, between six functions of the message in the communicational situation, three - emotive (self-expression), conative (vocative or imperative addressing of receiver) and phatic (checking channel working) - may be attributed to the analog dimension of language, that of the relationship, and the other three - referential (contextual information), aesthetic (auto-reflection, auto-presentation) and metalingual (checking code working) - may be attributed to the digital dimension of language, that of content domain. Following neurosciences assumptions, it is believed that digital signs are in connection with the left hemisphere of brain which is in charge with the analytical reasoning, logical representations, the division of problems into parts, etc. Analogical signs are attributed to the right hemisphere which is hypothetically responsible for the perception of relationships, intuition, perception of the whole and recognition from his parts, etc.

But analogical signs are also more similar to the perceived reality than the digital signs. And the common sense imagines the virtual reality as an illusory perception. In this way the concept of communication as relationship building and technological effort to produce a virtual reality seem to be convergent. However, this understanding of what is virtual reality, although acceptable, is too simple. The main features of virtual reality are: simulation, interaction, artificiality, immersion, telepresence and networking. (Heim, 1993) Or if we grouped under the name of illusion the simulation, the artificiality and the immersion, and if we let the generic name of electronic technology for telepresence and communication network, that which remains as a key new feature is the interaction. And in it we find the essential common denominator of virtual reality and for communication as relation building.

Ontological aspect that defines virtual reality is rather that of interaction than simulation or illusion, because it presents a deliberately and explicitly constructed reality. Virtual reality appears first as a

sensorial simulating environment just as communication which cultivating relations is interested in analog signs. Of course, this can not overcome the illusion above invocated or falsehood attributed to simulate action. But if something that is simulated, something that is only illusion and forgery demonstrates that it have own life and it can answer, can react, can interact, receives thereby a consistency that gives them reality. This is the deeper meaning of the virtual, the result of the relationships, of interactions, which, as a result of the structure, can produce results substantially non-existent before. Virtual reality is, beyond the crucial support of electronic technology, the combination of sensory simulation with interactivity. Something, which as a simulation, was only apparently, acquires a consistency which, if it can not be essentially represented as a substance, is that of life conceived as relation. This expanded space of interactive and multi-sensorial image finds the best exemplifications in the theory of *performance art* and computer games.

As a concept of knowledge, the possible assumes a single principle as the basis of reality and is based on the identity category, while virtual, as concept of communication starts from duality at least, and relies on difference and plurality, on the multiplicity. The virtual reality of communication means not the production of similarly to a principle, but establishing relations that set their terms. Virtual reality is as the solution to a problem or as creating a form from a dynamic configuration, from a system of forces and finalities. Virtual is an interactive *mis en scène*, as a *comedia dell'arte* scene, as a play of jazz instrumental music piece, something that depends on the structuring of interactions, relationships, so it is different from imaginary of knowledge, attached by possible.

The emphasis is not so much on space-time coordinates of traditional metaphysics, but on the relations of the communication process that always redistributes space-time coordinates between the transmitter and receiver and involves changing their positions: receiver take place of transmitter and vice versa. [Interactivity as a new sense of virtual raises the question of the distinction and reversibility between author and spectator.] Virtual is not localizable: its elements migrate, and are out of here as space. Therefore we also can ask: where takes place the phone call actually? Where a virtual community is whose members are nomadic, erratic?

Pierre Lévy responds indicating that virtualization put into question the unity of place and propose instead the unity of time (real-time communication through tele-participation) - and even accepts a disruption of duration instead the continuity of action (as in e-mail). Synchronization replaced unit space, and interaction replace the unit for time. Virtual is based not on anything related to space and time, than as on the continuity of action as communicative interaction, as the relationship. (Lévy, 1995) This ontological model of relationship describes the meaning of communicational reality as virtual, or, more precisely, describe actions of communication like a virtual reality. Not only because the text of the world became analogical in communication not only because that the communication simulate reality, but in the first place because of interactivity. The entities have the consistencies of signs and the reality loses its substantial density and become a virtual one.

Direct and immediate form of human communication is that of *face to face* communication, the relationship between I and you, idealized by Martin Buber. Of course, even in this case since it is not a strict bodily communications like that of mother and her baby, it is mediated at least trough the language that it requires any human communication. This mediation is one that increases continuously throughout human history. Thanks to the technical means and technologies, the direct relationship between the transmitter and receiver can be decomposed into two separate sequences: the relationship between the sender and the message and the relationship between message and receiver. Therefore, with the possibility of registering the message - written first, then audio and finally visual – the relation between transmitter and receiver may become and becomes actually indirect communication.

Additionally, first form, *ie* direct and immediate communication I-you is complicated in the context of group communication, due to the presence of several interlocutors engaged in hierarchies and power structures.

We may assume that messages such constructed have attempted to recover by way of aesthetic-spectacular dimension the loss of original situation of communication, the face to face I - you connection. In turn, technology has tried to recover the connectivity by way of providing broader ties, bringing into communication increasingly larger groups of people and moving away from written signs throughout audible signs towards the visual signs (images) for a more realistic simulation of conditions of the first direct communication. But becoming mass communication and utilizing images, electronic technology of communication can not overcome the passivity of receptors, which reproduces the group communication situation, structured through power hierarchies. The media tried to enter in connection with the largest possible number of people. Belonging to a same place and time, *face to face* communication involve an identity without rests or multiplicity of identity. But communication widespread has attracted attention that a rest of identity remains outside communication, as soon as it isn't going directly, *face to face*. Characteristic of new media technology is to ensure a connectivity that is closer to the original communication which enabled a type of quasi instant *face-to-face* relationship.

In this case the identity of self and identity of other (otherness) that are in communicational relation appear only as a weak occurrence of the modern idea of subject of knowledge. The otherness is another aspect that distinguishes perspective of modern knowledge from postmodern communicational one. For the human communication the difference between two partners that communicate is essential. The human communication doesn't accept nor the perfect identity, neither the absolute difference of two people that communicate. If they are identical, we have a redundant meaningless communication or a simply transmission of signal; if they are absolute different, without a common code, the communication isn't possible. In this way, otherness is the possibility condition of communication.

The idea of relation is that it constituted its related, its elements. Then, otherness is constituted in communication: otherness isn't only condition of possibility of human communication, it is also a byproduct, and a virtual reality generated through communication. The idea of otherness appears between the age of knowledge and the age of communication. In the modern age situation not only relation, but also the related have some importance. But in ours age an accent on communication as relation makes otherness less real and more virtual. The new media like internet and social network intensify the relational aspect of communication. In the modernity age the Hegelian fight for recognition was the place of the otherness assertion. But for the internet users it has less meaning: they can assume the identities that they desire. With less responsibilities and obligation, they search only contacts for contacts, only to be connected. It's a triumph of communication as relation; it's a triumph of contact (fatic) function. But it is a "past time" (Eric Berne) that consume our time of life and our intimacy.

I - other communication relationship, and alterity, is a relationship which we can understand better if we think the paradigm as proposed by Walter Benjamin when he discussing *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936). (Benjamin, 2002) The concept of other destiny is similar to destiny of copy in modern and postmodern culture; otherness destiny is similar to the destiny of relationship between original and copy. The media are in similar relation to identity that is the means of technical reproduction of a work of art in relation to the original. Modern identity of the subject and otherness - the presence of other communication - are constituted on the basis of modern mass communication at

the very moment they begin to lose! With all claims and qualities, the new communication media are not perfect, as modern technical means can not perfectly reproduce the original. As we are surrounded by copys, so we are surrounded by others and will soon be surrounded by the cloned bodies or robots. Ego identity has a history and belongs to a certain place. What matters most to ego is history, which it locates. Otherness, the quality of being other, is without real history, a virtual potentiality. As for the original, now and here of the ego got in the own history is a guarantee of identity. We can imagine a clone, an organic copy of an individual: the original will be recognized by its history...

The difference original - copy, as I - other depend only on communication context. Here and now, that about speaks Walter Benjamin, is a location in history. Origin and history are intertwined: what matters is the starting point, he, as a transcendental, replaced the old transcendent. Of course there are many theoretical positions that attack the self metaphysical consistency and identity. But if it is to correctly interpret the value of original, we must admit that it is linked by history and that history is a perceptual-conceptual category of modernity. During our age what appear unexpectedly is our interest in otherness, for the other (alter ego) as different from ego. Nobody wants the original, in all his ego, but he wants a limited relationship with an avatar. If in art the network is where copy is restored to the original the network seems to be where the avatar takes the identity of original. (Groys, 2007, p. 2)

If this is the way to build a common consciousness for the future humanity (a singularity?) for that the novel of Adolfo Byoi Casares - *La invención de Morel* (1940) — translated as *The Invention of Morel* or *Morel's Invention* - is very illustrative. [This novel is a very powerful one: it is one of sources of inspiration for *Last Year in/at Marienbad* (*L'Année dernière à Marienbad* 1961, French film directed by Alain Resnais.), for video game *Myst* and for the television series *Lost*.] It is the story of an unnamed narrator, a fugitive writer from Venezuela sentenced to life in prison after some unnamed crime. He hides on a deserted island, which is infected with a mysterious fatal disease, somewhere in Polynesia. On the island, the narrator finds he is not alone. A group of men and women - that seem like holidaymakers - arrive. Hiding from view, he falls in love with one of the women, and tries to make his feeling known to her. The fugitive decides to approach her, but she does not react to him. He assumes she – the name is Faustine - is ignoring him, but his encounters with the other tourists have the same result. Nobody on the island notices him.

He points out that the conversations between Faustine and Morel, a bearded tennis player who visits her frequently, repeat every week and fears he is going crazy. Struggling to understand why everything seems to repeat, he finds out the truth when Morel tells the tourists he has been recording their actions of the past week with a machine which is able to record not only three-dimensional images, but also voices and scents, making it all indistinguishable from reality. He claims the recording will capture their souls, and through looping they will relive that week forever and he will spend eternity with the woman he loves. Although Morel does not mention her by name, the fugitive is sure he is talking about Faustine. After hearing that the people recorded on previous experiments are dead, one of the tourists' guesses correctly they will die, too. The fugitive learns the machine keeps running because the wind and tide feed it with an endless supply of energy. He learns how to operate the machine and inserts himself into the recording so it looks like he and Faustine are in love. On the diary's final entry the fugitive describes how he is waiting for his soul to pass onto the recording while dying.

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