Closing the Gap: Sexual Difference in Cyberspace

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This paper attempts to deal with the difficult question of the impact the internet has upon the human psyche and our relationships. Despite the internet having been around for some time now, very little is understood of how it affects us as distinct but also interrelated subjects. The last great upheaval in communication technologies of comparable magnitude occurred back in Elizabethan times with Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, bringing about a lasting revolution in consciousness and human relations. Today "we are experiencing the same confusions and indecisions which [the Elizabethans] had felt when living simultaneously in two contrasted forms of society and experience.[1] Caught between the two worlds (pre-internet and internet worlds), we strive for understanding of this phenomenon which moves faster than we can hope to understand it. The tentative thesis here put forward is that cyberspace is a realm which plays on the difficult *gap* between subjects and sexes, removing the threatening edge presented by difference and the reality of our bodies – yet for all that we gain in comfort from flights into web-based refuges, we perhaps lose the potential for an encounter with a true other.

Any casual observer of the impact of the internet on our lives cannot but have helped to notice a sort of levelling-out of individual character accompanied by the globalisation of culture and the concentration of the power of information dissemination in the hands of an ever more concentrated few. The irony, of course, lies in our desperate and constant attempts to affirm our individuality through self-publication and self-publicisation online, despite the continuing undermining of those life-particularities that would permit us to distinguish our-*selves* from other-*selves*. This process is perhaps better understood if we adopt a somewhat modified version of Marshall McLuhan's viewpoint that electronic media eventually lead to the creation of a "global village". As seductive as McLuhan's turn of phrase is in pithiness, it is misleading.[2]The medium of today's internet would more accurately be termed a *global metropolis*, though such a coinage would hardly have had the same enduring appeal. Yet this lure plays precisely on the fact that the warm nostalgic implication of the term "village" fools us into thinking that we are all brought closer together by the web.

The "village" is reassuring in terms of security and identity – everyone knows who everyone else is and they know what to expect. Identities are fixed in place by the stability and regularity of village relations; familiarity, in a word. The medium of encounter in the city, however, is that of anonymity. An exciting but also anxiety-provoking space is opened-up in which, uprooted from a grounded particularity, one can reinvent oneself in the city. Meetings in the online 'global metropolis' may be taken as evidence of a continuation of this trend, only a further root grounding being is torn up – subjects now come together as disembodied voices. It is precisely against this radical possibility of disconnection of identity from physical origin presented by the internet that the imperialism of Mark Zuckerberg's "one identity" philosophy operates. Through its insistence on unifying disperse elements in one enduring 'history', facebook would appear to be an example of the re-creation of the familiarity of the village online, but is in fact only a reactionary formation against the manner in which the internet reveals the fragility of our attempts at singular identity formation.

In the global metropolis things occur much as they do in the city, with the stratification of society into groups of like-minded people who find the confirmations they are seeking in this cultural niche or

another that permits them to affirm '*who they are*'. If in the village we are either comforted or frustrated by the fact that we are 'other-defined' by the words and gaze of our neighbours, in the city our nearest neighbours may speak another language and live in an altogether different world, leaving us the room to define our own one as we see fit. Yet this experience is unsettling and anxiety-provoking as concerns our identities, because we are confronted with the very nothingness of the subject without its various external supports – in Lacanian terms, we come face-to-face with the void that is the subject, "a pure gap sustained by the endless sliding from one signifier to the other.[3]The internet is the place where these signifiers multiply endlessly with the end of reassuring us in the face of the *dis*-quieting decontextualisation which is the mark of our postmodern time – the internet as a medium is symptomatic of this destabilisation of subjectivities that had already been set in motion long before its conception.

Online, we shape our "*second selves*", to borrow Sherry Turkle's term.[4] While this new possibility of personal reinvention can rightly be seen as permitting a proliferation (or plague) of fantasies, one would be in error in assuming that as such one encounters a greater level of difference on the net. With the advent of google we now have a tool which permits us to find the precise information, object, person or other we are looking for with a minimum of effort, bypassing all else. It is now commonplace knowledge that sites such as facebook, far from opening us up to the world at large, provide us with a closed-loop through an appropriately-named '*feed*' of information already-known to conform to our tastes and opinions. As algorithms improve, we are even now told what we are looking for through targeted advertising before we may even be aware ourselves what it is that we see – all in the name of what, in 'googlespeak', is known as providing the user with a '*seamless experience*'.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, the notion of a seamless experience is highly interesting but also one that arouses suspicion – if the analysand claims that nothing whatsoever is wrong, one is almost certain to suspect the opposite. The production of a seamless experience assumes that no gaps, bumps, inconsistencies or rough edges remain – all of which are characteristic of real life (RL) experience. We are given, then, the promise of a glitch-free existence, and it is no wonder that many prefer it to the everyday reality we have to face when we exit cyberspace. *There*, we can float from space to space, project our ideal-images and feed our fantasies. *Here*, we are limited by the physical weight of our bodies and their imperfections but also the awkward difficulty of the meeting with the other. These two inconvenient glitches that we face in RL are part of what ground us, providing shocks that jolt us out of our flights of fancy and bring us crashing back to 'reality'.

With the internet, then, one is tempted to ask whether or not we might speak of an *economy of the same* – everyone on the planet using the same programmes, confirming their pre-existing senses of self with the help and complicity of like-minded people. On the net, we get what we are looking for – surprises are rare. What, then, of difference? Online dating sites are a perfect example of the manner in which the internet attempts to remove the pesky question of difference – acting as if we could rationally pick the perfect partner based upon a matching of criteria, minimising the risk of failure, but above all the risk of having to change. As a result, in the majority of cases the relationship that forms presumes as its background a form of hypothetical contract in which each participant in the arrangement either agrees or does not agree to give up on one or other of their requirements to accommodate the functioning of their 'being together' and the game goes on until one or the other decides that the relationship is not worth as much as one of his or her criteria of 'what they are looking for in life'. At no point does one or the other allow themselves to fall into the gap in the middle – the gap called love. The new mode of relationship-formation abhors the dangerous possibility of falling in love with someone other, but also destabilises the link to *the* other of our current relationships by opening idealised the possibility of *an*-other who might suit us better.

Indeed, a new form of amorous bond is made possible by the internet – a virtual one in which two individuals consider themselves to be in love with one another though they have never met in real life. The fact that such a form of relation often occurs when one or both of the active members in this 'union' are already in a real life relationship suggests that fantasmatic projections play a large role in such an arrangement, where each projects in the virtual love-figure that which they believe to be missing either from their current relationship. Of course, fantasy plays an important role in any relation, but in RL the physical and emotional presence of the other keep such fantasies in check. All this is not to deny that relations that take place solely on the internet do not provoke very real emotions, for there can be a very intense investment that takes place.[5]This begs the question, however, of *what it is* that we become invested in but also from what position this investment takes place.

Accounts of intense virtual relationships show that very often when it comes to meeting in RL the results are catastrophic – the fantasy frame that had been built through the intermediary of the screen had permitted a freedom of expression not found elsewhere, but the confrontation with that person in the flesh can be unbearable precisely because of the bodily presence of the other that interrogates us in our intimacy. On the net bodies don't exist, and the threat of sex does not appear.

Despite the Freudian theoretical edifice's great capacity for acceptance of variations in amorous and sexual practices, a purely virtual relationship cannot help but appear as lacking when taken within the parameters of psychosexual development. Freud demonstrates how the individual passes through various stages whose ultimate 'goal' is full genital coitus with a partner, which signals the mark of full maturity. Why insist on this sexual relationship? Because without it one also loses the encounter with the other. In a psychoanalytic register this radical encounter with the other occurs in coitus, where each of the participants is reduced to a 'zero state' of bare subjectivity in the sexual act. In the age of the internet, this encounter is most frequently replaced by that which has so far remained conspicuously absent from this essay – *pornography.* Porn is another in the series of examples of how on the net the Other is effaced in favour of the Same, for the Other demands our attention and respect while the familiarity of the Same does not – we can find the exact sexual practice that fits our fantasy without having to deal with the reality of an- *other* person, *closing the gap between a fantasy and its realisation*.

Indeed, such a characterisation is well-suited to a conclusion of our analysis of the internet, and leaves the old Freudian notion of a 'reality principle' as seeming to pertain to a past time in which one's fantasies could not easily be realised. Now, along with advances in science, virtual technologies such as the internet have permitted precisely such a closing of the gap to take place. Nowadays, can we be justified in asking someone to 'come back to reality'? If one is contented to remain in this virtual space then we need never encounter alterity or our own lack. Yet the impression remains that were we to abandon any reference to 'reality' altogether then something proper or authentic would be lost. For psychoanalysis, the ultimate 'real' difference is *sexual difference* – in the stages of psychosexual development the crucial turning point is the recognition of sexual difference and its acceptance as a resolution to the Oedipus complex. Until that point, sexual difference and therefore *difference as such* do not exist. In recognising that there is another that is not like me I accept difference and the possibility of the Other who I need to live a full life. The internet and its logic of the Same threaten the possibility of this crucial recognition.

Bibliography

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[1] McLuhan (1962), p.1

[2] McLuhan later recognised this and after *Understanding Media* began referring to a “global theater.”

[3] Zizek (2008), p.104.

[4] See Turkle (2005).

[5] See Zizek (2008), p.179-180.