

## VIRTUAL TRIPS

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### Summary

We shall begin our chapter with a reflection on the epistemology of the journey, a device we use for narrating and representing our lives and the histories of our communities, to be continued by a brief analysis of the role that technological changes are playing in changing our perceptions of ourselves and others. We shall inquire into the nature of virtual trips as forms of disembodied communication and explore their possibilities as vehicles of intercultural awareness. Finally, we shall study the educational role that technological projects such as virtual trips and Webquests have and how they can contribute to help us share experiences across the world. This last section offers a comprehensive list of educational projects.

#### 1. The Epistemology of the Journey: Narrating our Life Stories

Awareness of time in its three categories of past, present and future has decisively contributed to human success in the struggle for existence. It has enabled us to draw upon past experience in the present to anticipate future needs (teleology). Thus, from the making of the first stone tools to the complex structure of modern technological civilization, we have sought to improve the standard of living.

Our very memory patterns are shaped by the passing of time, with short term memory transforming itself into long lasting memory, in a process which also discards a lot of unneeded and disconnected information. Spatial metaphors have an important role in this information compressing. Thus, it is not by chance that we perceive our very existence as a spatial metaphor expressed in the figure of a journey narrative.

Narrative is a literary genre that reveals the passage from an instantaneous temporality (description) to a sequence of independent events constituting a story. Therefore it has a structural temporality which gradually links the different parts into an organized

cohesion. Human beings use these narrative patterns to configure and order our temporal representation of the world, that is, the stories of our lives. The journey is, thus, a recurrent structural device, persistent in oral and written narratives in all cultures and virtually all theologies. The biblical myth of Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise is a journey narrative, where a theological idea, man's fall from God's grace, appears in terms of spatial movement. Spiritual connotations of place and movement appear variously throughout the Bible contributing to form the history of humanity on a nomad basis. The Jewish and later Christian conception of historical-theological time is not only the very foundation of most western narratives, but of western metaphysics, as Heidegger, Derrida, Kristeva, among others, have pointed out. These patterns of journey narratives are also found in the classical tradition, with Homer's *Odyssey* demonstrating the usefulness of journey motifs conveying non-spatial experiences. The hero's descent into the underworld became a regular feature of "night journey narratives", symbolizing the hero's spiritual experience (from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to modern works like Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, to name but a few). The journey can be used as a metaphor for the passage of time or for penetration into different levels of consciousness. It symbolizes mankind's efforts toward intellectual and moral goals, and even the search for meaning itself. Yet, in some journey narratives, it is the journey itself, the endless process of traveling what matters, not some end goal. For some authors, such as Walt Whitman, the journey means ongoing life and future possibility.

The association of the west (sunset) with death is a major source of directional ambiguity. In American literature, the journey west may symbolize quest and progress, whereas James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* ends with Stephen's intention of traveling eastward towards Europe. In other cultures the corresponding West/East values of the European and American traditions may be oriented to the North and South instead, as it is the case in some Semitic cultures. Walter Scott's narratives, *Waverly*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, etc., also have a North-South orientation, as the hero or heroine travels from or towards Scotland in search of his/her identity. In the recent *New York Trilogy*, by Paul Auster, wandering parallels a detective investigation on the nature of identity.

We can experience the passing of time in two ways: one is to contemplate it as an external absolute entity flowing away from us while we stay fixed. In the second model we experience ourselves as changing phenomena, a situation that requires a higher level of abstraction, producing relative perceptions of time sometimes called subjective: time stretching or contracting, elastic time, etc. These dual perceptions of inner and outer dimensions make possible the existence of Bergsonian "inward journeys" or processes of introspection, the object of much modernist experimentation (Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, etc). Thus, the journey can become a quest for identity, whether individual or socio-cultural (as in historical narratives) (for a recent example of a "life journey", in German, including reflections on hybridity, see Tötösy de Zepetnek).

## **2. Journeys, Representations and Technology**

Since our birth we are immersed in a world of messages and representations. Different narratives, emerging from oral and written literature, radio, television, film, and the other

products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities: our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality; and of "us" and "them." Individual and social identity is a product of a dialogue between sometimes conflicting voices, for every subject negotiates the divide between me/not me in the process of organizing an identity. All identifications are thus technologized, that is, accomplished by some means designed to secure the subject in relation to something other than itself. Thus, virtualization is an essential mode of our being. (Lèvy 1995)

Net Technologies provide new means for organizing our knowledge and our communicative capacities. They redefine our mental geography; entail the production of life worlds and, thus, the creation of culture. Technological changes emerge out of particular cultural conditions and in turn help to create new social and cultural situations. Thus, new technologies have opened up a whole domain of speculation on disembodied rationality, tele-existence, the pleasures of the interface, cyborg identity, and so on. The technological systems that convert primary bodily presence into tele-presence appear to be changing the nature of interpersonal relationships. Thus, the appearance of computer-mediated communities or "virtual communities" is also a crucial area of research.

The rise of media communications in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century have produced a revolution in the way information is transmitted. The telegraph, for instance, marked a decisive separation between transportation and communication and symbols began to move independently of geography and independently of and faster than transport. Radio and television also changed our perception of the world, for distances apparently became narrower and things and people which were far from us, somehow seemed closer at hand, even if perceived passively. As the speed of communication over geographical space increased, space became decontextualized, deterritorialized, and more recently, with the introduction of Net technologies, it has been replaced by a kind of non-geographical space - *cyberspace* or *hyperspace*.

Another crucial difference between the old and the new media technologies is that towards the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century communication media experienced a decisive turn towards more interactive forms of communication. The use of mobile telephony allowed viewers to send their messages to television studios almost instantly. Spectators could see their messages displayed on the screen, which produced an immediate feedback and a sense of participation and involvement where hierarchical structures and distances could dissolve.

The Internet has also propitiated the creation of virtual communities through mediated conversation, abolishing physical (and social/hierarchical) distance between communicators. Its different uses (hypertext, chats, discussion forums, videoconferencing, etc.) enable information to be moved, transformed and manipulated, bringing into question the issues of authorship and authenticity of material. Thus, the Net has been depicted as a liberating technology for its information is accessible to many users and it is interactive in form. A growing number of writers present the Internet as an exciting technology offering new forms of exploring self-identities and forming virtual communities. Kerckhove (1997), for instance, has noted that web

technologies are producing an effect of loss of our own personal and concrete limits. He explains that the Net is helping us to project ourselves digitally outwards, so that we are losing our sense of physical separation and gaining power of action at a distance. Because subject and body are neither separable nor coterminous, using an unfamiliar means of communicating one's self can produce a powerful sense of disembodiment, heightening the subjective awareness of the lack of congruity, what Kerckhove has termed 'webness'.

### **3. Embodied and Disembodied Communication, Identity and Intercultural Awareness**

Research in Cognitive Linguistics has shown that the body functions as a symbol, a metaphor which locates us both in space and time. Our perceptions of a certain situation and context determine meaning. But meaning is also negotiated and, as Michel Foucault theorized, identity is a power construct. Individuals do not have fixed, stable identities but assume changing subject positions determined by language, gender, and other social and cultural institutions.

If the body is the metaphor for our situation in time, space, language and culture, then, how is that situation discursively produced and maintained through the flesh? How are identifications technologized? This is the problem Judith Butler addresses with the concept of 'materialization', her term for the processes through which gender, race, and other shaping discourses actively locate the body. Butler holds that gender is not a biological characteristic determined by genetics, but is socially constructed through performative utterances. According to Butler's definition of performativity, gender is a series of actions (like gender naming a person, using clothes or cosmetics) that do not just indicate a person's gender, but create it, reinforcing the maleness or femaleness of the subject it identifies.

It has not been adequately theorized, however, the extent to which these discourses ground themselves in the flesh through the field of vision. How do we orient ourselves and make sense of our interactions with others on the Internet, for example, where the visual realm is absent and we have no clues about the person's sex or race? Do certain discourses, like sex or race, which operate through the visual performativity of the flesh, cease to matter in the new media domains, or do they just signify differently. How might flesh signify when it is not visually performative? The problem lies in trying to conceptualize where the "I" stops and "my" communicative tools start. Nowadays it is increasingly necessary to think in terms not of 'body and technology' but 'body as technology' (Lèvy 1995). McLuhan (1964) also noted that a technological instrument can be thought as an extension of our physical body.

Some theorists -Derrick de Kerckhove or Sherry Turkle among others- argue that communication mediated through new technologies can produce a powerful sense of disembodiment, heightening the subjective awareness of the lack of congruity, since the body is no longer visually perceived and we have the sensation that we can have power of action at a distance, with just the click of the mouse. They also suggest that the dream of the ability to be everywhere can help to shape new forms of identity, to unseat one's historically and culturally specific mode of subjectivity from its position of privilege and explore, mobile, multiple positions of subjectivity. When someone changes

identities in the Net, she or he leaves part of herself/himself behind, a fragment of her/his life to be resumed later. The hypertext *Patchwork Girl*, published by Eastgate Systems in 1995, is a good example of the asynchronous quality characteristic of contemporary cyborg existence, short-lived selves that exist only in certain contexts.

Researching the subjective effects of the discourses and practices enabled through technological applications, particularly behavior in multi-user domains (MUDs), Turkle has noted that certain experiences on-line, such as chats, role-games, etc., allow the development of virtual identities, so that identity becomes more flexible and interactions result in the experience of multiple subjectivities. Net technologies would, thus, contribute to liberate the individual from the social constraints of embodied identity and from the restrictions of geographically embodied space, providing new forms of experiencing *otherness*. Furthermore, the interactivity inherent to the Internet is felt as a process of interchange, of cooperation, a dialogue which can promote a sense of connectedness or fraternity.

These technologies offer the possibility of access to huge amounts of information, producing an exhilarating sense of freedom described by some as liberating. As a paradox of connectivity, access to unlimited information may also mean more control and it can also disconnect the individual from embodied interactions surrounding her/him. This tendency towards a withdrawal from the active political sphere of real space, or the withdrawal from attempts to realize an embodied form of community, is mirrored in the works of some contemporary community theorists. Michele Willson, for instance, explains that liberatory claims about virtual communities are precisely based on the promotion of an anonymity which enables flexible, multiple and anonymous identity construction, and the alteration of spatial and time experiences. She suggests that the dissolution or fragmentation of the subject and the instantaneous, transient nature of all communication disconnect or abstract the individual from physical action and a sense of social and personal responsibility to others (Willson 2000: 650).

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Asunción López-Varela** comes from Madrid, Spain, where she teaches English and US-American literature at Universidad Complutense. Her interests include the interdisciplinary perspective of the teaching of literature and of research, particularly in their possibilities as a vehicle of interculturality. In her work, López-Varela Azcárate explores the notions of time and space in twentieth-century English and US-American literature and in science. She is a member of the Complutense research group Literaturas Españolas y Europeas del Texto al Hipertexto, LEETHI <<http://www.ucm.es/info/leethi/>>. since 2002 and she is one of the organizers of the multi-university research project *The Politics of Culture: Nationhood, Interculturalism, and Citizenship in the New Europe*, see at <http://www.ucm.es/info/comparativeculturalstudies.org>. Detailed information about López-Varela Azcárate's publications, research, and professional activities can be found at <http://www.ucm.es/info/leethi/index.php>