

## Chapter 27: **Virtualities**

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### **Mark Poster: The Mode of Information and Post-modernity**

#### **Thesis**

“... the mode of information enacts a radical reconfiguration of the language, one which constitutes subjects outside the pattern of the rational, autonomous individual. The familiar modern subject is displaced by the mode of information in favor of one that is multiplied, disseminated and decentered, continuously interpellated as an unstable identity. At the level of culture, this instability poses challenges, ... may lead to a fundamental challenge to modern social institutions and structures.” (Poster, p.398)

**Mode of information:** electronically mediated communication

Electronic communication has a profound affect on the traditional ways to communicate and the way we view society and ourselves.

Internet is a good example of information that is widely spread (disseminated) out and has no central control (decentered), and its digital information can be easily copied (multiplied) and extended.

Poster links three modes of communications with three poststructuralists:

**Jean Baudrillard** (TV advertisements)

**Michel Foucault** (computerized databases)

**Jacques Derrida** (electronic writing)

“Electronic culture promotes the individual as an unstable identity, as a continuous process of multiple identity formation and raises the question of a social form beyond the modern, the possibility of a post modern society. Electronic culture promotes theories (such as post-structuralism), that focus on the role of the language in the process of the constitution of subjects and that undermine views of the reader and author as stable points of criticism and authority respectively.” (Poster, p.398)

#### **Structuralism**

A mode of 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinking that sees human phenomena as ‘structures’ rather than elements; it seeks to uncover the laws governing their relationships. Structuralism differs slightly in definition between English and French methodologies.

#### **Post-structuralism**

For the structuralist the individual is shaped by sociological, psychological and linguistic structures over which he/she has no control, but which could be uncovered by using their methods of investigation.

Originally labeled a structuralist, the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault came to be seen as the most important representative of the post-structuralist movement. He agreed that language and society were shaped by rule-governed systems, but he disagreed with the structuralists on two counts. Firstly, he did not think that there were definite underlying structures that could explain the human condition and secondly he thought that it was impossible to step outside of discourse and survey the situation objectively.

The individual online can be represented in many different ways, as an avatar or a screen name. There is no fear to present your opinion; there is no shyness of letting others know what your opinion is because of the lack of physical closeness that might prompt a discomfort or uncertainty. A wide range of views is possible, as people from all over the world can give their inputs on specific matters. Authority is questioned, as there is no central authority that has any final judgment on the matter. Because everyone has access to factual information through web based searches and online resources, corrections are easy to make and information is often questioned, corrected and severely critiqued.

“Electronic communications, like print, place a distance between the addressor and the addressee; they accentuate a feature of the language that permits a gap between the speaker and the listener... In terms of politics, oral communications, from the point of view of print culture, bind the individual in relations of political domination. ... Language no longer represents a reality, no longer is a neutral tool to enhance a subject’s instrumental rationality: language becomes or better reconfigures reality. By doing so the subject is interpellated through language and cannot easily escape recognition of the interpellation.” (Poster, p.399)

The gap between the reader and author allows the reader to exercise some thinking and assert his self-authority and autonomy. The reader cannot be manipulated as easily as during an oratory speech, which may appeal to other sensations and overrule the thinking process. The author is now defined by the language that is used, whether it is posted on forums, websites, blogs or any other electronic medium, because that is what the reader associates with the online persona.

Examples of electronically mediated communications that have transformed daily life and society: the TV ad, the database and computer writing.

### **TV advertisements**

“...TV ads are manipulative, deceptive and repugnant; they entice consumer decisions on ‘irrational’ grounds and encourage a ‘quick fix’ drug mentality as a false solution to life’s problems ... TV ads are evaluated in relation to their ability ‘to create effective demand’ for the product ... TV ads constitute a language system that leaves out the referent, the symbolic and the real, working instead with chains of signifiers (words) and signifieds (mental images).” (Poster, p.400)

“The aim of the ad is to associate a chain of signifiers in a narrative of a desirable lifestyle: Pepsi = youth = sexiness = popularity = fun, for example.” (Poster, p.401)

**Jean Baudrillard** – the status of the ad is that of a simulacrum (imitation), a copy that has no original. Social life is presented as a theme park (Disneyland), which composes a new order of reality, the ‘hyper-real’, more real than the real they are supposed to refer to.

**References:** *Consumer Society, The System of Objects* and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*

### **Computerized databases**

“Agencies of all kinds – military, police, governmental, corporate – continuously gather data and exchange it from one computer to another, while the individuals to which this data refers have little control over its flow... or knowledge of its existence. (George Orwell’s *1984*) Increasingly society becomes divided between the information rich and the information poor (Marxism). (Poster, p.401)

### **Fundamental aspect of database technology**

“... ability to constitute and multiply the identity of the individual and thereby to promote his/her control.” (Poster, p.402)

Computer databases store information about an individual, such as spending habits, phone calls, library checkouts and video rentals, which form more detailed portraits of the individual in question.

### **Privacy**

“Urban life now consists of face-to-face interactions with strangers coupled with electronically mediated interactions with machines ‘familiar’ with us (ATM, computerized register). The lines dividing individual from individual and individual from institution are consistently crossed by computer databases, cancelling privacy as a model of action or even as an issue.” (Poster, p.402)

### **Multiple Identities**

“... databases constitute additional identities for individuals, identities which – in the interactions between computers and between institutions which rely upon them, and individuals on the other – take the place of those individuals. When a computer search is done for John Smith, the output from the machine is, from the point of view of the receiving computer or institution, John Smith himself. Just as actions in daily life are doubled by information traces, so identities are multiplied in the interactions of computer databases.” (Poster, p.403)

**Michel Foucault** – social impact of databases.

**Panopticon:** guard, stationed in a central tower, could observe the inmates of a prison, without himself being seen by them. In the panopticon, Foucault locates a system of power at the level of everyday, as opposed to state level. ('technology of power' or 'microphysics of power') (Poster, p. 403)

### **Identity**

"With the dissemination (spread) of databases, a communications technology pervades the social space and multiplies the identity of individuals, regardless of their will, intention, feeling or cognition." (Poster, p.404)

### **Marxist view on databases**

"... organizations use databases to enhance their control and power over subordinate classes ... The vast information at the state's disposal constitutes another link in the chain of oppression." (Poster, p.404)

The super-panopticon becomes a part of the individual's identity and databases operate in such manner.

"Like the prison, databases work continuously, systematically and surreptitiously (secretly), accumulating information about individuals and composing it into profiles. Unlike a panopticon, the 'inmates' need not be housed in any architecture; they need only proceed with their regular daily life." (Poster, p.404)

"A major impact of the super-panopticon is that the distinction between public and private loses its force since it depended on an individual's space of invisibility, of opaqueness to the state and the corporations. Yet these characteristics are cancelled by databases because wherever one is and whatever one is doing, traces are left behind, traces that are transformed into information for the grist of computers." (Poster, p.405)

**Electronic writing** - word processing, hypertext, electronic mail and message services and computer conferencing.

"... it enables the removal of the author from the text, increases the distance, both spatial and temporal, of the author from the reader and augments the problem of the interpretation of texts. Compared with speech, writing is a way of storing language, fixing it so that it can be read by those not directly intended by the author. Wiring this promotes the transmission of culture from generation to generation, the transformation of cultural works into monuments and the elevation of authors into authorities. Writing also fosters the development of critical thinking on the part of the reader: by stabilizing words on a page, the reader can reflect upon them, go back to

earlier passages and re-examine links of argument, and accomplish all of this in isolation without the presence of the author or the community shaping the autonomous rational individual, a condition of modern democracy." (Poster, p.405)

### **Electronic writing**

"... is a new text which brings terms together that were not so associated by the author. The reader has substituted their own hierarchy of terms for that of the author. With electronic writing the distinction between author and reader collapses and a new form of text emerges that may challenge the canonicity of works, even the boundaries of disciplines." (Poster, p. 405)

Authenticity of works is diminished as multiple people can work on it and the author loses control over his work, as it can be translated or easily edited by readers to create a new version of his original vision.

Bulletin boards, electronic cafes (internet cafes) – individuals do not use their real names but have online personas that disguise their attributes.

Computer conferencing – eliminates the needs for people to gather at once place and one time and new qualities of community relations develop in this cyberspace.

**Jacques Derrida** – Deconstruction is not an analysis, critique or a method, although it does not mean that it has nothing in common with those terms. Derrida wants to separate deconstruction from traditional methods, but wants to rely on their meanings until better terms have been formulated. Emphasis is placed on the fundamental ambiguity of the language, rather than its logical structure.

**Logocentrism** – (Greek for *word, reason or spirit*) a constant search for the truth. The first term is deemed to be superior (binaries: speech over writing, life over death) and the second one is submissive to it or absent from the text. ('all men are created equal'). In order to overcome this logocentric thinking, we should consider ourselves to be in "rapport with the Other."

**The Other** - Women, children, non-Europeans (Poster, p.399)

"Western thought relies upon printed writing to support the author's stable meaning, to insist that the book signifies only what the author intended... Deconstruction attempts to destabilize the march of univocal meaning in written texts by unlocking the logic of difference that it hides (in response to American Declaration of Independence)." (Poster, p.406)

### **Electronic writing and deconstructionism**

"Both deconstruction and electronic writing understand the volatility of written language, its instability and uncertain authorship. Both see the language as effecting a destabilization of the subject, a dispersal of the

individual, a fracturing of the illusion of unity and fixity of the self.” (Poster, pp.406-407)

### **Post-structuralist theory**

“... invalidates modernist political positions, those that rely upon a view of humanity as in need of emancipation from forms of external oppression. These views presuppose man as centered in rational autonomy but as prevented from attaining this center by institutions that block its realization: arbitrary government, religious intolerance, private appropriation of the means of production.” (Poster, p.408)

### **Contemporary society**

“... contains modernist institutions and discourses which privilege certain configurations of the subject, those that support autonomous rationality, and subordinate others (women, ethnic minorities, etc.). But contemporary society also contains ‘postmodernist’ institutions and discourses, such as electronically mediated communications, which support new configurations of the subject.” (Poster, p.409)

Modernist ideology is put into question by social movements (feminist and ethnic groups, gay and lesbian, ecological, anti-nuclear groups).

**Electronically mediated communication** clears the way to seeing the self as

“... multiple, changeable, fragmented, in short of making a project in its own constitution ... challenges all those discourses and practices that would restrict this process ... whether these be fascist ones which rely on essentialist theories of race, liberal ones which rely on reason, or socialist ones which rely on labor.” (Poster, p.409)

### **Finale**

“A poststructuralist understanding of new communications technologies raises the possibility of a post-modern culture amid society that threatens authority as the definition of reality by the author.” (Poster, pp.408-409)