
HOMO RELIGIOSUS

FROM THE RUPESTRAL PAINTINGS TO THE WEBSITE ICONS

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Abstract

The relationship between the human being and its tools, with the exponential evolution during the last centuries can be understood in different ways and perspectives: economical, technological, political, and cultural. The computer has become in our days not only an efficient instrument in almost all activities but also it contains inside the technical philosophy an effort looking to the humanization of the machines. Communicating through Internet our world is running for the growth of a new culture. This article belongs to a reflection on the challenges of homo religiosus living in the digital age.

Keywords: computer, cyberspace, digital man, *homo religiosus*, Internet, medium, tools

1. Introduction

The human creativity expressed itself from the most ancient times through inventions and improvement of tools. These tools were useful not only in the search of food, for protection against natural calamities or against enemies, but also in transmitting religious experiences. In order to immortalize on the walls of caves the trembling image of a relation with a fascinating, anguish provoking world of mysteries, the ancient human used tools. The pictograms coming from Neolithic are the beginning of a long process of search for the best communication media. The invention of writing, the stone or clay tables, parchments and papyruses, medieval manuscripts, the change brought by the Gutenberg galaxy, give place in the last years to computers, and mean at the same time distinct levels of the communication of religious experiences. The famous statement of McLuhan “the Medium is the Message” remains open to new interpretations [1].

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2. The technological man and the digital man

The invention and use on a larger scale of tools mark from pre-history the steps for 'humanization' and for the consolidation of the relation of submission of the world to the human being. The mythology of 'homo faber' shows the way of work to the knowledge of the world, the 'disenchantment of the world' and also, the possession of the world. "Assuming the responsibility to change the nature, the human being substituted the Time, what needed eons to be cooked in the bowels of the earth, the master can do in a matter of weeks, for the oven replaces the telluric matrix" [2]. The tools, at the beginning, then more and more complicated machines entertain to the human the conscience of his participation at the cosmic existence, but emphasize his illusion of becoming a Demiurg himself. Concerned on organising and submission of the environment, the human being forgets him/herself, preoccupied by the outer things, he/she neglects him/herself in the most profound interiority.

Looking to our hyper-technicised civilisation of the 21st century, is more clear the sad conclusion that the scientific and technical progresses are not completed with similar evolutions on the moral and spiritual ground. More, the technical tends to become a rival of the spirit, to change the human life in something artificial. "In the information era we live in, life became more and more technical. The machine put her seal on the spirit of the human being, on all the levels of his/her activity. The technical civilisation has no natural and spiritual basis, but a machinist, mechanical one. Now, the technical triumphs on spirit, on the organism. Even the thinking becomes technical, not to speak of behaviour, creation and art receives a technical character. In addition, the knowledge, the science becomes a medium of accomplishing the will of power and happiness, in an exclusive medium for the triumph of life's technical. Here already begins the cult of life outside its meaning. Nothing has a value in itself. Neither one moment of life or feeling has deepness or shares eternity. The machine got a magic force on man, kept in its magical nests." [3]

From tools that were physical 'prostheses' of the man in rapport to creation, we have now inventions tending to replace intellectual activities or affective relations, in this matter the computer is representative for the technical modernity. The 'robotisation' is more of mechanical repetition of a row of precise industrial operations, difficult and tiring for the human operator. The numerical system and the artificial intelligence draw closer the machines to the neuronal structures and to the rational decisions, through analysing and processing of data in a certain context. The road from the myth of *golem* the animated creature coming to the man's help, to the cyborg, the artificial anthropoid that simulates the biological life shows the evolution of the rappings man-machine [4].

The technological man in the industrial era becomes himself, more and more, a creature dependent of the thinking machines that surrounds him. He awakes in the morning in the sound of his electronic watch, on a preset radio music program, the micro-oven offers him a fast breakfast, he goes to the work in a completely robotised new car, the mobile phone put him in contact with his working partners from everywhere on the globe, he runs his work between computers and programs, he returns tired at home to change few words with the family, then he operates his digital T.V. remote control to find out the last news and will nap in the front of his computer, searching for new electronic mail. But the technologies are not neutral, they influences the social media and inter-human relations. "Every tool gives its users a new specific way to look the world and with certain ways of interacting with the others. It is important that everyone of us take into account the partialities of different technologies and search those that reflect our values and aspirations." [5]

In the industry of computers, the specialists are preoccupied by the creation of friendly interfaces, by the approach of the machine to the natural man. The humanist interface is based on the combination between the spiritual life of the subject, the method of artistic creation, and the scene of a virtual life as form of representation [6]. Bill Gates, the president of Microsoft Company, said in a discourse presented in Tsinghua at the end of year 1997 that the priority in the 21st century will be the discovery of a way to a better interaction between computers and humans.

The question that coming is this: as long as computers become more human, the humans remain themselves, or transform themselves, without knowing, into numerical organisms?

3. Communication in the virtual world, between opportunities and challenges

The Internet is connected through origin and through its intrinsic nature to communication, because succeeds to establish multiple connections between humans, in the net of inter-connected computers. The apparition of Internet is considered a crucial event into the history of communication, similar to the invention of printing machine in the 16th century [7]. But what Internet brings new in communication? We will emphasise several features of this new communication medium, from a cultural, psychological and theological perspective.

3.1. Communication Opportunities

3.1.1. Universality

Internet reduces distances and transforms the planet into a ‘global village’ (according to a metaphor of McLuhan [8]), being thus a true symbol of universality. At the same time, the economical globalisation found in Internet a powerful vehicle in the communicational universe, and the universal religions have something to earn if they connect to the net. From another perspective, the meeting of cultures in cyberspace draws opportunities and unexpected challenges, felt in the original communities.

3.1.2. De-centralisation of power

Internet is a world that involuntarily defalcates itself from a central control, neither governments, parliaments, nor big companies have a unique key for the informational flux. The symbol a total de-centralisation of power, Internet promotes the complete freedom of expression. It circulates also what is good and admirable, but also the most noxious ideas and images can be hardly restricted. The ethical code applied on the Internet ‘netiquette’, has as goal to encourage the users to respect at least a minimum of moral principles.

3.1.3. Internet is a democratic medium

From simple citizens to state leaders, the net offers an effective horizontal communication and that is why it is a very powerful work tool for the de-centralised organisations. Umberto Eco stated that the future generations will split into two classes of citizens: those who look at the T.V., receiving pre-fabricated information, and those who will know to use the computer, and will be capable to select and elaborate the information [9].

The participation to the electronic dialogue is volitional and active: the receptor becomes at his turn transmitter of opinions and ideas. In addition, the communication is done at an individual level. It lacks the mediation of an institution (television or newspapers with their own agenda) that – the most often – dictates not only the rules of interaction, but also the content of message. It is thus eliminated the deformation of discourse. Finally, the quasi-anonymity of the interlocutors can be an advantage as long as the barriers of sex, race or age will less influence the nature of discussion [10].

3.1.4. A new world

A new culture is born, and the work of today Internet users is similar to those navigators that discovered America. For instance, the discourse developed in an influent virtual community (*The Well*), it is used a metaphor from the time of the conquest of Wild American West, the 'new frontier'. "The metaphor suggests a new world to study, to draw, to civilise, even of *horribile dictu*, colonize." [11]

In all this informational adventure, for a Christian is important to pass through the axiological filter of his tradition everything he receives. There are attractive sites, made with professional skill and with a good knowledge of advertising principles, but is difficult to know who is hiding behind those facades. There are also cyber-churches, communities built by members knowing each other only through the Internet.

3.1.5. A new way of offering and receiving

The Internet can be the place for economical transactions in the broad sense and for commerce. It constitutes a good place for the free change of mutual enrichment. There are numerous information products offered for free to all that are connected at the net: software, games, music, and images. Unfortunately when the knowledge of some people is submitted to the service of others through the Internet, the virtual agora can become a space of the cyber-pirates' aggressions.

3.2. Challenges

3.2.1. Virtual reality

The notion of virtual reality has as the most innocent image the games on the computer that creates different artificial objects, very similar to those of the immediate reality. The users of Internet are not physically there, but the technology that connects them creates the sense of proximity, as it did the phone ones. Mc Luhan speaks of the 'warm' communication media (television, radio, all of them not asking for direct participation), and the 'cold' media (calling the user to involve actively as the computer) [1, p. 22]. Sending an e-mail, participation in a discussion forum, and mostly when the computer itself is programmed to automatically answer, introduces us in a fully virtual place. There are companies receiving a lot of messages, and that is why through adequate software, the computer is programmed to decipher the messages and to compose a 'personalised' answer.

3.2.2. *Escapism*

The long lasting navigation in the net provokes a detachment from the real world; the users feel themselves at home in the parallel universe. This escape from the immediate reality can have many explanations. Firstly, the use of a computer can be a pleasure in itself. For the passionate one, discovering new possibilities offers a large place of try and affirmation.

Secondly, for those with inhibitions and communication difficulties, or for those with problems in the daily life, is comforting to sink into the intimacy of a faithful friend, the computer. Through its logical structure, the computer does not lie, and does not creates problems of relation, and the difficulties that appear does not create it anguish, but they are only new equations, easily solved.

The world of Internet is a convivial one, an anonymous space governed by pretty simple relational rules. It is a world that fascinates imaginary but also human, tenting you to chose it as refuge. But the Internet can create dependence, as place of escape from the real world.

3.2.3. *An intuitive culture*

Mass media talk to the intuitive part of our mind. Many times, our sensation of pleasure does not pass through the filters of reason. If we like something, we do not ask ourselves why, but we accept it or we refuse it. This is the mechanism used by the advertising companies using a seductive message, in order to create an instantaneous, instinctive and non-rational emotive affiliation. Internet is a experienced guide in this intuitive world. Websites are quickly visited, Internet users spend usually a short time on a page, and the information has to be accessible only through few clicks of mouse. E-mails are usually simple, easy to read messages. Only after their listing, they become official documents, treated as the texts of the traditional secretaries.

From a Christian point of view, we observe that a usually intuitive culture can de-establish the understanding of principles and traditions and that is why a complementarity between rational and intuitive is necessary.

4. **A difficult conclusion**

The universe of the Internet touches all the spheres of human activity (work, family, entertainment research, consume etc.) and so, the issue of its influence in the life of persons and societies is analysed from different points of view. In the evaluation of Internet phenomenon the points of view are grouped in two major categories: on one hand the enthusiasts and utopics, worshipping the new communication medium, on the other hand the critics, and those sustaining that the Internet is but a work tool, a technological product, developed by commercial interests.

The attitude towards this new communication medium cannot be different from the way that *homo religiosus* looked to other levels in the evolution of communication technologies. „Television is like any other force; it can be used for liberation or for domination. With people everywhere today living under the domination of imperial powers, the situation for Christians is not fundamentally different from that of first-century Christians. Only the culture has changed. The challenge to all people of faith is to apprehend God’s presence in their own lives, and then to relate in to men and women in terms of the culture they understand today.” [12]

Surrounded by his new tools, the human being has to resist today to the temptation to proclaim himself as god. Standing firm and remaining faithful, he discovers again in the deepness of his heart where he can choose freely, that the key of the labyrinth he has built is above everything, in the transcendence that gives meaning to all creation.

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