

## FACEBOOK, CYBERSPACE, AND IDENTITY

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### Abstract.

*In this article the use of the social networking site, Facebook, is scrutinized in the light of Turkle's work on identity in relation to the internet, as well as of commentaries regarding the growing popularity of the social networking site. The related issue of panopticism regarding sites such as Facebook is examined in the light of the work of Foucault on disciplinary mechanisms in modern society. Virilio gives greater insight on the question of the social consequences of cyberspace as the new "frontier", and focuses on the decline of language in favour of the growing dominance of images in cyber-domains like Facebook. These findings are finally interpreted with regard to "identity" in terms of Lacan's conception of the subject.*

### INTRODUCTION: COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY AND IDENTITY

In **Life on the Screen: Identity in the age of the internet** (1995) Sherry Turkle – Professor of the Sociology of Science at MIT (at the time) and cyber-psychoanalytical theorist – explores the social and psychological effects of the Internet on its users. One of her startling findings is that many denizens of cyberspace appear to value their cyber-identities more than their "normal", embodied selves. The use of the plural – "cyber-identities" – is appropriate here, because invariably the inhabitants of cyberspace construct several identities (or "avatars") for themselves in the course of frequenting MUDS (Multi-user domains), "chatrooms" and the like.

A decade earlier, in **The Second Self: Computers and the human spirit** (1984), Turkle first examined such identity-transforming relations, but at the time it was still largely a matter of one-on-one, person and machine. The rapidly expanding system of networks, collectively known as the internet, has changed all that, in such a manner that its capacity, via computers, to connect millions of people in new kinds of spaces, has altered the way in which people think, the form of communities, the character of their sexuality and the relative complexity of their very identities (Turkle, 1995: cf 49).

One of the most interesting topics she discusses is the connection between specific kinds of cultural environments and certain kinds of psychological disorders. The advent of the internet and its concomitant opening-up of hitherto unheard-of spaces of encounter have gone hand in hand with many other manifestations of multiplicity and diversity in contemporary, postmodern culture. With this in mind it is striking that, simultaneously, the

number of people who display symptoms of what is known as MPD (multi-personality disorder) has burgeoned. She stresses that she is not positing a causal relation between internet-usage and MPD; instead, she is arguing that all the different signs of difference and multiplicity, today, are contributing to modifications of prevailing conceptions of identity (Turkle, 1995: 260-261; Olivier, 2007b).

In clinical cases of MPD, she points out, there are usually various degrees of isolation among the various “alters” and the “host”-personality – an indication that the barriers between these “personalities” block access to “secrets” that have been repressed – while, in contrast, MUD-participants “play” with the various identities constructed by them in virtual spaces.<sup>1</sup> This presupposes a fundamentally “healthy” subject capable of constructing and dismantling alter egos as she or he deems fit, without being assimilated into any of them in such a way that it undermines their ability to function ‘normally’, that is, in a more or less coherent manner. However, it seems likely that a culture that is more tolerant of multiplicity than earlier ones, is also more likely to promote the emergence of multiple identities, in both the healthy sense of developing a more fluid, flexible sense of selfhood, and the sense of creating the cultural environment where pathological symptoms of MPD may manifest themselves more readily. But – and here’s the rub – Turkle’s (1995: 185, 193) findings indicate an accompanying experience, on the part of many who create online personalities, of their “constructed” selves as somehow “real”, more “themselves” even than the person’s “basic”, everyday, “natural” host-self.

What Turkle has brought to light in her work should not surprise anyone. Didn’t Karl Marx already, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, warn against the dehumanising, reifying effects of factory labour, which robbed workers of their humanity through their use of industrial machines? In other words, technology – including computers and the internet – is never innocuous when it comes to the human beings that use it: invariably it leaves its imprint on people.

But, like computer technology, the internet is not a static thing in its various possibilities either. Among the recent comments (on the part of Turkle) on current technology (such as the iPhone), as well as the appearance of virtual space phenomena such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and the like, about its progressively diversifying implications regarding the issue of human identity, is her remark, during an interview (Colbert, 2011), that we “have to put technology in its place”, and that her research on Facebook indicates that adolescent users reach a certain “performance exhaustion”. Not many Facebook users may think of setting up and updating a Facebook profile as a “performance”, but as she indicates in the interview with Colbert, it certainly is one.

It is instructive that someone like Turkle, who confesses to loving technology, insists that human beings have somehow overstepped the mark where technology is concerned, and that we have to rediscover the importance of giving other people our full attention when we are together, instead of busying ourselves with our iPhones (Colbert, 2011). How must we understand this caveat being issued by the person who saw in the internet a space of exploration, where we can discover new, better possibilities about ourselves (Turkle 1995: 262-263)? Perhaps one should take a long, hard look at Facebook and its ilk regarding their “effect” on human identity.

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that Renata Salecl (2010: 68-72) also draws attention to this phenomenon in the context of late capitalism, and comes to a similar conclusion to that of Turkle in terms of “(p)laying around with identifications”.

If e-mail provided a welcome alternative to those, like myself, who find ordinary postal mail just too cumbersome and slow to engage earnestly in the kind of correspondence sustained by Freud and his contemporaries, Facebook, MySpace and their cyberspace relations have taken the possibilities created by e-mail to new proportions for everyone using these cyber-domains, including users in South Africa. E-mail (or the frenetic use of cell-phones) has its own identity- and psyche-transforming capacities, of course, as the recently deceased French thinker Jacques Derrida shows so convincingly in his **Archive fever** (1996: 15-18). Derrida argues that Freud already indicated an awareness that, when a new “archiving” technology (including different tools for writing and storing data, such as computers, e-mail and mobile phones) appears on the scene, it is a concrete embodiment of something that has already changed in the human psyche (at least of the inventors of this technology). This will, in its turn, contribute to reconfiguring the psyche of the people who use it. Referring to a kind of cash register made for illiterate people, and to science fiction stories in which robots are depicted as doing everything menial for humans, Rosanne Stone (1996: 168) puts this insight as follows: “... at the inception of the virtual age, when everything solid melts into air, we have other, far more subtle devices that don’t do for us but think for us. Not computers, really – they think, in their machinic fashion, and then tell us the answers. Ubiquitous technology, which is definitive of the virtual age, is far more subtle. It doesn’t tell us anything. It rearranges our thinking apparatus so that different thinking just *is*.”

Seen in this way, Facebook and its virtual era ilk have paved the way to novel possibilities in the realm of especially the experience of one’s *own* identity. How does one experience one’s own identity on Facebook? It seems to me relevant that, on the one hand, these “friend-based” websites are less about socially “connecting and reconnecting”. They are, to a far greater extent, I believe, a stage for developing one’s own “brand”, as it were, and one might add, doing so in a fairly exhibitionistic way. That this is informed by the (ironically) person-diminishing values of capitalism, should be obvious: to “brand” oneself is to offer yourself as a commodity to others for their use, which cannot leave one’s intrinsic sense of self-worth unaffected, either negatively or affirmatively, depending on whether one buys into the ideology of capitalism and the market.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, because “privacy” has been such an issue (Fletcher, 2010) regarding Facebook, one might legitimately wonder at the practice of placing so much information about oneself, one’s preferences, likes and dislikes (in textual as well as photographic and video-format), on such a site. It is hardly a manifestation of the desire for privacy. What individuals post there is not what they regard as *private* (although it may seem like it to others); it is exactly what they *want* to show, and show off, to others. In the process they do not leave their own sense of identity unaffected.

After all, the question arises, whether the best, digitally “retouched” photos of oneself, or one’s list of favourite films, books, musical numbers, and so on (or alternatively, pictures selected to show off just how well you can hold your liquor, or how hard you can party) really represent “you”. I would argue that, on the contrary, this composite, mostly carefully constructed “identity” is located at the level of the largely self-deluding, alienating register of what psycho-analytical theorist Jacques Lacan calls the “imaginary”

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<sup>2</sup> Precisely what it means to “buy into” this ideology and its consequences today, is made horrifyingly apparent by Naomi Klein (2007) in her book, **The shock doctrine** (see especially pp 246-259).

(which is the subject-register of fantasy and alienation, so clearly shown in his analysis of the “mirror phase”; Lacan, 1977: cf 1-7; Olivier, 2009). If this is indeed the case, the upshot is that it is not one’s everyday, multi-faceted “self” displayed on Facebook, but something entirely fictional, of the order of the “ego” in Lacanian terms, which is a far cry from the “self that speaks”. Unlike the “ego” of the imaginary register, the “self that speaks” (at the level of the symbolic register of language) cannot be objectified in this manner, because it always accompanies speech-acts at an unconscious level (Lacan, 1977a: cf 49, 55).

While it is true that the ego-component of one’s subjectivity is an indispensable constituent of the human subject, the more one identifies with its embodiments in the guise of carefully chosen photographs (on Facebook), and so on, the more it becomes a straitjacket for one’s “identity”, and the less one is able to “choose one’s own narrative” (Lacan, 1977a: cf 46-47). In addition to the imaginary “ego”, every human subject needs the registers of the symbolic (as well as of the “real”) to be capable of such choice. Given their commitment to imaginary representation, Facebook *aficionados* are bound to find the third Lacanian register of the self disconcerting – that of the unsymbolizable “real”, which surpasses language as well as iconicity (Lacan 1981: cf 55; Lacan, 1997: cf 20). It constitutes the always latent, but inexpressible domain which announces itself negatively when we come up against the limits of language, as in cases of trauma. (Lacan’s theory is discussed in more detail below.) Facebook users may delude themselves into believing that what they see in its “pages” are “real” people, but in truth these images amount to only one aspect of their complex selves, namely its fantasy (imaginary) component, and by identifying with them, they introduce a significant element of fictionalizing alienation into their lives (Lacan, 1977; Olivier, 2007a).

### **SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES, THE PRIVATE AND THE PUBLIC.**

I’m not pointing out these implications because I want to be a spoilsport. It is also true that, on the other hand, Facebook and MySpace have, like all novel inventions, an *up-and* a downside. The upside includes the possibilities they create for genuinely interpersonal, “communicative” cyber-communities of friends, colleagues, scientists, academics and other (shared) interest groups, to engage in debates, exchange valuable information relevant to research in various disciplines, share photographs of hiking trips, and so on. But people should not fool themselves into believing that Facebook will leave the face of humanity unchanged. If Turkle’s work on the internet’s social effects is anything to go by, one may anticipate that the very artificiality of the personal profiles on Facebook may well aggravate the kind of socially “artificial” behaviour encountered among economically competitive yuppie types, in whose interest it is to promote themselves as a “brand”.<sup>3</sup>

At the time when Turkle published **Life on the screen** (1995), the social networking-site, Facebook, did not yet exist, and for some time now it has seemed important to reflect on the relevance of her work for such virtual social spaces (Olivier 2007). One could legitimately surmise that, as in the case of older MUDS, frequenting spaces such as Facebook or MySpace would not leave the social identities of the individuals who do so untouched, either. Recent reports and articles on Facebook seem to confirm this,

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<sup>3</sup> A state of affairs so well described in Bret Easton Ellis’s **American psycho** (1991).

but more importantly, they enable one to see an unexpected side of the social networking site. (I shall return to Turkle's more recent work later.)

So, for example, Steven Johnson's piece in **Time** (2010: 29), called "In praise of oversharing" contrasts Josh Harris's experimental "art project" of the 1990s, where, first, a hundred-plus people, and later, just he and his girlfriend, lived together in an underground bunker, every moment of their lives recorded on film by a network of live web cameras ("webcams"), with the kind of "oversharing" made possible by Facebook on a large and ever-growing scale (it recently registered its 500 millionth user). In the case of the former, Johnson argues, we witnessed a case of "extreme" exposure – with every quarrel and toilet visit filmed – which hardly anyone would voluntarily submit to or choose, while the latter represents a shared space of limited public exposure – one that is subject to users' own decisions about what and how much of it they wish to share, and with whom. Still – and this is the important thing, as far as I can judge – for Johnson the growth in Facebook membership, as well as its popularity, is an indication of people increasingly feeling at home in what is neither the secluded space of privacy, nor the public space of prominent or famous public figures, but something in-between.

There is more to it than this, however. In "Friends without borders", Dan Fletcher (2010: 22-28) also focuses on the phenomenon of Facebook, affording one a glimpse of another, less often discussed side of what may, to some, seem to be no more than an innocuous, socially useful internet site, where one can keep track of events on your friends' and family's lives. Moreover, it seems reassuring that privacy controls on Facebook allow you to set limits to the identities of the people you want to give access to it, in other words, to just how public you want information about yourself and your family to be. There's the rub, however, because no matter how "safe" and personally useful Facebook may appear to be, the company has on more than one occasion introduced innovations that were met with dismay on the part of users, and its privacy controls have been described as "less than intuitive", if not downright "deceptive" (in Fletcher's words).

Why would this be the case, if one may reasonably expect the company to ensure that such control settings are relatively easy to operate? It may be silly to see anything sinister in this, but consider the following. Among the innovations referred to earlier, was the 2007 introduction of Facebook Beacon, which, by means of default settings, automatically sent all users of Facebook friends' updated information about their shopping on some other sites. At the time, CEO Zuckerberg was forced into a public apology for such unwarranted invasion of users' privacy (Fletcher, 2010: cf 24).

It did not end there, however. Following his hunch, that the amount of information that people would be willing to share (and that Facebook as well as other companies could benefit from) is virtually unlimited, Zuckerberg introduced a far-reaching enterprise called Open Graph in April 2010. It allows users to comment on anything and everything that they like on the internet, from merchandise to stories on news sites – presumably on the assumption that you would be interested in your friends' preferences, and *vice versa*. The catch is that it is not only one's friends who are interested in this. As Fletcher (2010: 24) points out in his article, Facebook is able to display these predilections on the part of its users on any number of websites. Not

surprisingly, in one month's time after Open Graph's launch, in excess of 100000 other sites had integrated its technology with theirs (Fletcher 2010: 24).

It is not difficult to guess why. Small wonder that Facebook has had to look at its privacy controls once again, in order to "enhance" them, after the Electronic Privacy Information Center lodged a complaint – relating to confusion regarding Facebook's ever-changing policy, as well as its less-than-clear privacy controls design – with the Federal Trade Commission in the US (Fletcher 2010: 24). It is easy to see in all of this merely a misunderstanding of Facebook's "mission", described by Zuckerberg as aiming at making the world "more open and connected" (ibid: 24). This comes with a rider, though. It appears that the company is pushing users as far as it can to expose their likes and dislikes to other, customer-hungry companies, and benefitting financially in the process. Few people would find fault with Facebook's attempt to profit from its users' buying preferences, but there is more at stake than that, as I shall try to show.

#### **FOUCAULT, PANOPTICISM AND FACEBOOK.<sup>4</sup>**

The philosopher Michel Foucault (1995: cf 191-194) has observed that in the premodern age the individuals whose identities were fleshed out to more than life-size were royalty and nobility – the King and Queen were highly individualized because of their elevated station in society, while ordinary people, at the bottom of the social ladder, were largely left to anonymity. According to Foucault, what has distinguished modernity in this respect is the "descending" level of individualization, that is, the fleshing out, through meticulous description, of the identities of people who are furthest removed from royalty, such as criminals and individuals with a distinctive medical or psychiatric condition. And today, in postmodernity, one might add that the level of individualization has been taken a step further in various ways<sup>5</sup>, including the advent of social networking sites such as Facebook. Needless to stress, "individualization" is inseparable from what is commonly meant by "identity", namely features or attributes that distinguish individuals from one another, but that may also display marked similarities, as in the case of "cultural identity".

As the "panoptical", "maximum-visibility" age of disciplined, docile<sup>6</sup> bodies (as Foucault has described modern people whose lives are constantly subjected to procedures of "normalization" and infantilization; 1995: cf 136-138; 200-201) has unfolded, even those ordinary people who did not fall foul of the law, nor became assimilated into medical and psychiatric institutions, have had their identities progressively assigned to educational and governmental data banks and population registers in a process of "normalizing judgment". The consequence has been that virtually every citizen in contemporary democratic states has become as highly individualized in terms of personal attributes – birthplace, domicile, educational qualifications, criminal record, and so on – as royalty and the aristocracy were in earlier ages.

It may seem counter-intuitive that Facebook could contribute to "normalizing" in any sense, and yet, it is a social networking site that appears to "dictate" important social

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<sup>4</sup> Sherry Turkle (1995: cf 246-250), referring to Foucault's work, also elaborates on the link between the internet and panopticism.

<sup>5</sup> See in this regard Schmelzer (1993).

<sup>6</sup> See also Olivier, 2009a for an elaboration on such "docility" as manifestation of "conventional morality".

“decisions” or behaviour of millions of internet users. One should not overlook the unexpected ways in which it dovetails with individualizing practices of the kind described by Foucault. For one thing, Facebook is predicated, according to CEO Zuckerberg (Fletcher 2010: cf 24), on the hypothesis that the public is receptive to virtually unlimited openness regarding sharing of (personal) information. But what is the myriad of informational elements that are placed on Facebook every day, other than (voluntarily supplied) information – that one cannot definitively delete, into the bargain – and that can be used by, or against, the users involved? (Rosen, 2010).

Moreover, when one looks carefully at the three specific ways, identified by Foucault, in which modern subjects are turned into “docile bodies”, Facebook and MySpace are cast in an even less innocuous light. There are especially three distinctive modern ways of producing such docile bodies, according to Foucault. The *first* is what he calls “*hierarchical observation*”, or “a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power” (Foucault, 1995: 170-171), of which the “panopticon”-prison (ibid: cf 200-202) is an embodiment, where the prisoners are (potentially) under constant surveillance by warders.

Foucault (1995: cf 177-184) calls the *second* way of producing docile bodies “*normalizing judgment*”. It concerns the “power of the norm”. Where he elaborates (ibid: 184) there are noticeable points of connection with Facebook as a virtual space of display and comparative judgment: “In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another. It is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences.” In former ages, then, individuals may have been judged according to the intrinsic moral value (“virtue”) or the reprehensibility of their actions, but today the tendency is to place them on a differentiating scale or continuum which ranks them in relation to everyone else.

The *third* disciplinary practice of reducing bodies to docility is familiar to everyone today: the *examination* (Foucault, 1995: cf 184-194; Gutting, 2005: cf 84-86). The introduction of the examination made possible the connection of knowledge of individuals with a specific exercise of power. According to Foucault (1995: 187), the “*examination transformed the economy of visibility into the exercise of power*”. He points to the ironic reversal, namely that traditional (premodern) power was visible, while the subjects of power were largely invisible, whereas modern, disciplinary power operates through its invisibility, while simultaneously enforcing an obligatory visibility on disciplined subjects, in the course of which they are drawn into a “mechanism of objectification” (ibid: 187). The examination “*also introduces individuality into the field of documentation*” (ibid: 189). This entails archiving, through which individuals are placed within “a network of writing”, and one cannot ignore the discursive violence reflected in Foucault’s choice of words, where he alludes to the “mass of documents that capture and fix them” (ibid: 189). Moreover, examination as a mechanism of disciplinary power, “*surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a ‘case’*” (Foucault 1995: 191). In this way the examination has contributed significantly to lifting

ordinary individuality, which once was in the shadows of imperceptibility, into the kind of conspicuousness that goes hand in hand with disciplinary control, which turns the individual into an “effect and object of power” (ibid: 192), a “docile body”.<sup>7</sup>

Examination is probably the most invidious and effective form of disciplinary domestication, because it combines the previous two, hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment, and is a privileged locus of the modern nexus of power and knowledge. At the same time, the examination generates “truth” about individuals, and lays the basis for their control through the norms that are established in this way.

I have elaborated on Foucault’s account of disciplinary mechanisms which have played a crucial role in the constitution of the subject of modern power, not because I believe that Facebook, MySpace and similar internet sites are identical to the disciplinary mechanisms concerned, but because I believe one can learn much about contemporary identity-formation from considering these cyberspaces of social interaction in light of Foucault’s observations.

Had Foucault still been alive today, he would probably have looked upon virtual spaces for social interaction and information-distribution, including Facebook and YouTube, as a phenomenon that has taken the process of individualization in a panoptical context (in the service of optimal control) a few steps further. Not content with the amount of personal information that one is already obliged, by law, to furnish to governmental, educational and commercial institutions, people have more than lived up to the CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg’s bet, that they have an expandable appetite as far as sharing information goes (Fletcher, 2010: cf 24) – information that is hugely valuable for companies searching for potential customers.

The difference with Facebook is that, by contrast with obligatory information given to the state, the information shared with friends and family is voluntary, and that it is selectively posted with a view to promoting something – either optimal informedness among family members, or one’s personal standing among your friends regarding your “cool” looks and fashion tastes, or perhaps one’s professional interests, by using the space for sharing important information (such as lecturers disseminating reading matter among students). But Facebook has not made sure that information about users’ lives is restricted to this; in fact, quite the opposite. The very fact that the default settings on users’ privacy controls is automatically on maximum exposure (Fletcher, 2010: cf 24), so that the responsibility for adjusting them rests on every user’s shoulders, is already quite telling in this regard.

It may be that, at this stage, the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which Facebook has succeeded in exposing users to more (potential) attention from other companies than they probably anticipated, have no more than financial or economic objectives, but the potential for extensive social or psychological manipulation, if not “control”, is considerable. Moreover, just as, in the panoptical prison, where inmates monitor their own behaviour (on the assumption of their constant surveillance by warders with full

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<sup>7</sup> There are ways in which one can resist the heteronomy that is generated by the mechanisms of transforming subjects into docile bodies, of course. Foucault has elaborated on these in his study of ancient sexuality, especially in **The care of the self** (Foucault, 1988; see also Olivier, 2010a).

visual access to them), indications are that individuals are increasingly engaging in a form of self-monitoring of behaviour via voluntary self-exposure on internet sites such as Facebook.

It is not difficult to grasp such self-monitoring in terms of the three mechanisms of disciplinary power distinguished by Foucault (discussed earlier). Posting information about oneself on Facebook in the form of selected photographs and textual descriptions of likes and dislikes regarding movies, clothes, cosmetics, food, books and more, is subject to "*hierarchical observation*" in so far as it conforms to notions of what is "cool" (or, ironically, "hot"), that is, acceptable to one's peers. In the light of what Susan Faludi (1999) has called "ornamental culture", where the "cool look" is valorized at the cost of meaningful social and political action, the implication is that Facebook probably reinforces this state of affairs. Even the odd instance of cocking a snoot at criteria of "coolness" confirms the behavioural power (the power to affect behaviour) of the hierarchical norm in a paradoxical fashion, albeit the kind of behaviour – if Faludi is right (and I believe she is) – which is marked by political passivity in post-industrial, "developed" societies like the United States.<sup>8</sup>

The same is true, in a related manner, of "*normalizing judgement*" and the "*examination*". While Facebook is also a means for family members and friends to keep in contact, and share photographs of trips, places visited, and so on, "*normalizing judgement*" (which probably even functions among family and friends in a "keeping up with the Joneses"-fashion), operates through evaluating-judging comparisons, which have the result of setting up certain norms (of appearance and choice of merchandise, for instance). It may seem counter-intuitive that "*examination*" should play a role here, but if one recalls the phenomenon of the (often televised) "makeover" – that is, revamping one's home, or one's personal appearance, for the approval of one's peers – then it is clear that Facebook participates in this process of "making visible" of individuals, and therefore also of "individualizing" in terms of standards that allow comparison (which, paradoxically, is closer to "standardization" than to individualization!).

In the context of Facebook it may appear that all of these mechanisms attain an undeniable level of psychological importance if we consider that – while this is not necessarily true of the "disciplinary" cases considered by Foucault – they comprise what Rabinow (1984: cf 10-11) considers to be Foucault's most original contribution regarding the "modes of objectification" by which human beings are made into subjects, namely "subjectification". (The other two are "dividing practices" and "scientific classification"). This entails the "way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject"

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<sup>8</sup> This specification is necessary, given the recent (February 2011) social and political uprisings in the Arab world, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, in which social networking via the use of Twitter and Facebook, especially, contributed to the "organizational" success of this apparently "leaderless revolution" (Walt, 2011: 14; Ghosh, 2011: 17). This emphasizes the extent to which something like Facebook potentially has a very different social and political function in societies where "ornamental culture" is not pervasive. However, I believe that in this instance, too, it contributes to self- or identity-formation, but of a very different kind, because the communicational interactions in question occurred at the linguistic level of the Lacanian register of the symbolic, which is the social register of subjectivity, in contrast with the imaginary, which is the register of the ego, but also of alienation.

(Foucault, quoted in Rabinow, 1984: 11). Rabinow further characterizes this as “those processes of self-formation in which the person is active”, such as what Foucault (1988; Olivier 2010a) terms “the care of the self” practiced by individuals during the Hellenistic era – a difficult process of *active* self-examination and living according to a strict regime of self-formation and self-discipline. However, further reflection indicates that this is not the case. Although Facebook arguably does contribute to “self-formation”, it does not seem to exhibit the strenuous, active character of Hellenistic practices of self-formation.

### **FACEBOOK AND “THE INFORMATION BOMB”.**

The most radical assessment of Facebook is made possible by the work of Paul Virilio, in a book that was first published before Facebook existed – which itself confirms the extent to which it is another development along a continuum of technical-social transformations. Virilio extends Foucault’s interpretation of the panoptical, disciplinary society with far-reaching consequences in **The information bomb** (2005) – it seems that he virtually anticipated the Wikileaks affair of 2010 (Olivier, 2011), as is clearly evident from the following (Virilio, 2005: 63): “After the first bomb, the *atom bomb*, which was capable of using the energy of radioactivity to smash matter, the spectre of a second bomb is looming at the end of this millennium. This is the information bomb, capable of using the interactivity of information to wreck the peace between nations.” I would argue that social networking sites like Facebook are part and parcel of this “information bomb”.

What led Virilio to this insight? When June Houston installed 14 “live-cams” in her house in 1997 to transmit visual access to all its strategic sites to a website, in the process enabling others to provide her with “surveillance reports” on the appearance of anything suspicious, Virilio (2005: 59; bold in original) believes that one saw: “... the emergence of a new kind of **tele-vision**, a television which no longer has the task of informing or entertaining the mass of viewers, but of exposing and invading individuals’ domestic space ... the fear of exposing one’s private life gives way to the desire to over-expose it to everyone ...”

This description seems to me to apply to Facebook and MySpace. That it is an extension of the panoptical spaces of Foucault’s disciplinary society should be evident, although it is less clear whether such over-exposure goes hand in hand with “discipline”. Virilio makes its panoptical character explicit (2005: 61) where he intimates that the extension of June Houston’s self-created panopticism demands “a new **global optics**, capable of helping a **panoptical** vision to appear”. Significantly, he also points out that such a vision is indispensable for a “market of the visible” to emerge. According to Virilio (2005: 60), Houston’s actions – which have since been replicated with different purposes in mind – were revolutionary, transforming the transparency of living spaces to which informational television programmes have accustomed us, towards what he calls “... a purely mediatic *trans-appearance* ...”, and he attributes the growth of this practice to the requirement, on the part of the globalization of the market, that all activities and behaviour be “over-exposed” (2005: 60): “... it requires the simultaneous creation of competition between companies, societies and even consumers themselves, which now means individuals, not simply certain categories of ‘target populations’. Hence the sudden, untimely emergence of a universal, *comparative advertising*, which has relatively little to do with publicizing a brand or consumer

product of some kind, since the aim is now, through the *commerce of the visible*, to inaugurate a genuine **visual market**, which goes far beyond the promoting of a particular company.” It is especially the “competition between individuals” that is germane to the present theme. Facebook is part and parcel of this phenomenon, in so far as it enables one to display one’s wares, as it were, and appear to attract as many “friends” as one would like, but simultaneously deferring the moment of entering into real friendships, and all that accompanies them, such as trust, risk, mutual emotional support and fulfilment, but also the possibility of betrayal.<sup>9</sup>

This is seamlessly connected to what Virilio (2005: cf 61) further sees as being part and parcel of globalization, namely, that individuals continually observe one another comparatively in terms of (“ornamental”) appearance. It is further related to the marketing value of (among other things) Facebook usage that was referred to earlier, because of the access that companies have to the comparatively displayed preferences on individuals’ Facebook pages. It is mainly for this reason that Facebook was recently (January 2011) valued at \$500 billion, given the unprecedented access that companies have to the more than 500 million Facebook users’ likes and dislikes. Companies don’t even have to advertise comparatively any more; potential customers and clients do the advertising of their own preferences in merchandise on an individual basis, with ever more refined targeting of such individuals’ tastes by sellers of just about anything that may be bought, from personal services to all the consumer products available on the globalized market today.

It is debatable whether this state of affairs displays an increased potential, if not actuality, of the “disciplining” or the manipulation of individuals by various agencies, from corporations to the state. In the first place it should be clear that the voluntary display of personal preferences on the internet invites marketers of all stripes to focus their efforts on individuals. Needless to say, being targeted (online) by multiple companies on the basis of one’s displayed preferences in the virtual realm, contributes to a sense of identity that is bound up with “cyber-selves”. Secondly, the attempt by many Facebook users, to put their best foot forward as far as their appearance is concerned, signals something closely related to the kind of self-monitoring that occurs in panoptical prisons on the part of prisoners who know they are potentially being monitored. In posted photographs Facebook aficionados tend to appear as they believe their “friends” would like to see them, whether that be in perfectly “photoshopped” guise or in any other way they would like to be seen. This is part of Virilio’s “comparative observation” and Faludi’s “ornamental culture”. It is the “pseudo” version of what Foucault (in Rabinow, 1984: 11) calls (self-) “subjectivization”, which (unlike its active counterpart) is consonant with panoptical surveillance.

Virilio provides one with a broader horizon for understanding phenomena such as Facebook, one that allows you to see surveillance as a truly global project. He shows that the internet has allowed the transformation of “tele-vision” into what he calls “planetary grand-scale optics” (Virilio, 2005: 12): “... domestic television has given way to **tele-surveillance**”. The mono-directionality of television is replaced with dual-directionality of visualization through the use of live web cameras (“webcams”), which

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<sup>9</sup> David Fincher’s recent film, **The social network** (2010), which is a fictionalizing account of the origins of Facebook at Harvard University at the time when Mark Zuckerberg studied there, offers interesting insights in this regard.

enable one to see “what is happening at the other end of the world” (Virilio, 2005: 17). If it is kept in mind that “virtualization” (the representation of the world, or aspects of it, in computer- and internet-generated “cyberspace”) cannot be separated from “visualization” (ibid: 14) in this context, Facebook, MySpace and YouTube can all be seen as constituting visual perspectives on the virtualization of the world, more specifically, the virtualization of subjects or personalities. In Virilio’s words (2005: 16): “The aim is to make the computer screen the ultimate window, but a window which would not so much allow you to receive data as to view the horizon of globalization, the space of its accelerated virtualization ...”

Such developments are not innocuous as far as individuals’ experience of themselves – that is, individual psychology – is concerned. At the beginning of this paper I referred to Sherry Turkle’s misgivings about what she sees as the detrimental effect of technology (such as cell phone use) on individuals’ social skills. Virilio (2005: cf 19-27) allows one to take this further. In a nutshell, he interprets the development of the internet and everything that it has made possible – e-mail, global-reach “live webcams”, Facebook, YouTube, and so on – as the contemporary manifestation of a tendency that is (and, for historical reasons, has for a long time been) part and parcel of the American collective psyche, namely the projection of a “frontier” to be crossed or conquered. Only, there are no more geophysical frontiers to be conquered on the planet (something graphically captured in the subtitle of Gene Roddenberry’s *fictional* television series, **Star trek**, namely, **The final frontier**), and hence the turn, progressively, to so-called “virtual or cyber-reality”: “Cyber is a new continent, cyber is an additional reality, cyber must reflect the society of individuals, cyber is universal, it has no authorities, no head, etc.” (Barlow et al, quoted in Virilio, 2005: 27).

Virilio leaves one in no doubt about his understanding of, and expectations concerning the social consequences of this virtualization of the world. He quotes from a speech by President Bill Clinton, where the latter eulogized the “promise of America” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also spoke of America’s “fractured, broken-down democracy” that could lead to a “major political catastrophe” (Virilio, 2005: 19). Then, implicitly tying this to the belief that cyberspace is widely seen as the new territory to be conquered, American-style, Virilio observes (2005: 25): [Hollywood] “... industrial cinema, by upping its *false frontier effects* to the point of overdose, must inevitably generate social collapse and the generalized political debacle we find at this ‘American century’-end”.

Like Lyotard (1992: cf 9) before him, Virilio (2005: cf 25) sees the development of capitalist “industrial” and “post-industrial” cinema as stages in the “catastrophe of the de-realization of the world”, the more recent stages of which involve the development of computer-technology, the internet and its attendant technologies. Judging by strong words like “social collapse” it is quite apparent that, for him, these developments are not inconsequential or innocuous. He (ibid: 67; italics and bold in original) sees the intermittent collapse of financial markets – which display an undeniable “virtual” side – as symptomatic of the possibility of such a social collapse: “The smaller the world becomes as a result of the relativistic effect of telecommunications, the more violently situations are concertinaed, with the risk of an economic and social **crash** that would merely be the extension of the **visual crash** of this ‘market of the visible’, in which the *virtual bubble* of the (interconnected) financial markets is never any other than the

inevitable consequence of that *visual bubble* of a politics which has become both **panoptical** and **cybernetic**".

### **FACEBOOK, IDENTITY AND LACAN.**

The question, then, is how one should understand my initial claim, that the use of social networking internet sites like Facebook has an impact on identity- or self-formation. And what is the connection between such identity-formation and the bleak picture, painted by Virilio, of the globalization of panopticism in a new guise, namely the visualization of what used to be social and political space, and its "virtual" consequences? Here I have to turn, once more, to Sherry Turkle, before framing my conclusion in Lacanian terms of the real, imaginary and the symbolic. In **Simulation and its discontents** (2009) (with its Freudian overtones), Turkle elaborates on the extent to which spaces of simulation – including cyberspace – have of late exercised an irresistible attraction for individuals like architects, with the result that the spatio-temporal world of concrete objects like buildings seems to be progressively devalued at the cost of the simulated realm.

Given their attachment to a less obviously mediated contact with the materials and objects of their fields of inquiry in architecture and physics, Turkle contrasts an older generation's skepticism about simulation and its promises with the younger generation's infatuation with simulation in all its guises. Many of the older generation viewed the computer as a tool which, despite some useful computing functions, would lead students and scientists alike away from reality, to their detriment. Today, by contrast, architecture students find it hard to imagine how skyscrapers could have been designed in the 1950s without the use of a computer and the appropriate design software. Her research has led her to the point where she issues a warning, however (Turkle, 2009: 7): "Immersed in simulation, we feel exhilarated by possibility. We speak of Bilbao [probably a reference to Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim, sometimes called the most complex building ever designed, with the help of computer-simulation], of emerging cancer therapies, of the simulations that may help us address global climate change. But immersed in simulation, we are also vulnerable. Sometimes it can be hard to remember all that lies beyond it, or even acknowledge that everything is not captured in it. An older generation fears that younger scientists, engineers, and designers are 'drunk with code'. A younger generation scrambles to capture their mentors' tacit knowledge of buildings, bodies, and bombs. From both sides of a generational divide, there is anxiety that in simulation, something important slips away."

Turkle rephrases the architect, Louis Kahn's famous question, "What does a brick want?" to read: "What does simulation want?" and answers that, at one level, it wants immersion, which is a prerequisite for actualising its full potential. The negative side of this is, as one can easily gather from the enthusiasm of students and practitioners of various stripes, that it is easy to be seduced by it, and difficult to take critical distance from it. As Turkle (2009: 7-8) observes: "Simulation makes itself easy to love and difficult to doubt. It translates the concrete materials of science, engineering, and design into compelling virtual objects that engage the body as well as the mind ... Over time, it has become clear that this 'remediation', the move from physical to virtual manipulation, opens new possibilities for research, learning, and design creativity. It has also become clear that it can tempt its users into a lack of fealty to the real ... The more powerful our tools become, the harder it is to imagine the world without them."

These reflections on the part of someone intimately familiar with the internet technology-mediated virtuality and visuality thematized by Virilio, seem to me to confirm that there is something irresistibly seductive about this mediated realm, of which Facebook is a part. One may wonder whether the massive participation in cyber-activities like those discussed above can really be of such consequence that Foucault's and Virilio's insights may gain a critical purchase on them in terms of a kind of self-formation which could conceivably have a disastrous impact on society (especially if you are a willing participant in the cyber-activities involving Facebook and/or various other MUDs like *WoW*). Jacques Lacan's work enables one to give a tentative answer to this question.

I referred earlier briefly to Lacan's theory of the human subject in terms of three interlocking registers or orders, namely the "real", the imaginary and the symbolic (Lee, 1990: cf 82; Olivier, 2004). To elaborate: still lacking a sense of self or ego, as well as language, the individual is at birth caught in the real, which she or he leaves behind, like a chrysalis, when they enter, first, the imaginary through the so-called "mirror stage", and subsequently the symbolic order through the acquisition of language. The imaginary order is one of alienation through "misrecognition" of the self in what amounts to a fiction, but also of particularistic ego-identification with one's own mirror-image, which forms the basis of subsequent identifications with others and with the images of others. A person's "identity" is not synonymous with his or her subjectivity – in fact, "identity" does not sit well with Lacan's complex conception of the subject – but pertains largely to the imaginary register of the ego. The symbolic register, by contrast, is universalistic, in so far as it bestows upon the individual ego, through "universals" such as "human being", her or his character as a "subject" – that is, subject to the moral law conceptually embedded in language. (Without language, no ethics.) The symbolic is also the index of the social, in so far as it is the register of the "other", which is why Lacan (1977a) refers to the unconscious, which is said to be structured "like a language", as the "discourse of the Other". Although the "real" surpasses language and iconicity, and is surpassed through the subject's entry into language, it remains one of the registers along which the subject's subjectivity is articulated, and can, in various ways, affect the imaginary and the symbolic which, together, comprise what we call "reality". It does so through what Lacan (1981: 55) calls the "missed encounter" of trauma, for instance.

In light of this brief account of Lacan's conception of the subject, individuals who dwell in cyber-realms such as Facebook, MySpace or World of Warcraft, may be said to engage in the elaboration, largely, of their imaginary selves, which exacerbates alienation from their "true" selves – the subject of the unconscious (Lacan, 1977b: cf 166; 1981: cf 34) – depending on the degree of linguistic interaction, the symbolic aspect of their subjectivity. The latter may counteract such alienation, provided it is not anchored in the imaginary in such a way that its "talking cure" qualities are hamstrung from the outset. Because the symbolic is the register of social being (or being social), and because it is ineluctably "interrupted" by symptoms of unconscious desire, it

always harbours the axiological potential to free oneself from the suffocating grip of the imaginary.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, there are more ways than one of using language, or rather, of “being in language”, not all of them conducive to promoting the kind of subject that is capable of self-questioning and relative autonomy, both of which are functions of discourse, or the symbolic. Virilio (2005: 69-76) points in this direction where he argues that, concomitant with the expansion of the increasingly pervasive cyber-realm (as the new territory to be conquered), one witnesses the contraction of language. That we are increasingly inhabiting what I would label “the era of compliance” – a phenomenon that coincides with the retreat of (un-expurgated) language – is evident from Virilio’s (2005: 69-70) observation, that current affairs reporters are being subjected to the distinction between what he calls “‘soft’ (politically correct) language” and “‘hard’ (visually incorrect) images”: language can give offence to any number of listener-groups, but (un-interpreted) images of violence keep viewers glued to television screens. He (Virilio 2005: 70-71) also remarks on the prominence of international “supermodels” in the popular press, in the place of movie stars, ascribed by some to the fact that “they don’t speak”, and adds: “There is nothing enticing about our supermodels any more once they have been reduced to silence. Their bodies are not just denuded, but *silently* exposed ... to laboratory sufferings – from plastic surgery to testosterone ... if they are starting a fashion, it is not a fashion in clothing. The supermodels are already mutants ushering in an unprecedented event: *the premature death of any living language* ... The new electronic Babel might be said to be dying not from the plethora of languages, but from their disappearance”.

Even if one allows for what might seem like an overstatement of the current state of affairs by Virilio, it must be granted, I believe, that the phenomenon in question is not a figment of his imagination. It is confirmed by Faludi’s (1999) perspicacious insight into the “ornamental” culture of today, which leaves men and women politically impotent (and suits the economic and political status quo; hence also the culture of “compliance” reinforced through audits, compliance legislation and the like). What I want to argue here, is that there is a link between political correctness, compliance, the devaluation of language, on the one hand, and the progressive valorization of images, especially in cyberspace, including Facebook. To be sure, there is “text” on Facebook, too, but this takes a back seat to images.<sup>11</sup> Consider Virilio’s (2005: 72) observation, that: “Technological acceleration initially brought about a transference from writing to speech – from the letter and the book to the telephone and the radio. Today it is the spoken word which is logically withering away before the instantaneity of the real-time image. With the spread of illiteracy,<sup>12</sup> the era of silent microphones and the mute telephone opens before us. The instruments will not remain unused on account of any technical failings, but for lack of sociability, because we shall shortly have nothing to say to each

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<sup>10</sup> For an elaboration on the role of the symbolic and the real as far as ethical action is concerned, see Olivier (2005).

<sup>11</sup> It is significant, I believe, that the current generation of university students, while certainly not illiterate – many of them highly literate, in fact – has shown a distinct preference for media that involve images, compared to printed language or writing (essays, for example). The 2010 group of final-year architecture students that I taught, informed me explicitly that I should not expect them to hand in *written* assignments, because they belong to the “DVD generation”.

<sup>12</sup> Recall that Rosanne Stone (1996: cf 168) also draws attention to this phenomenon.

other, or really the time to say it – and, above all, we shall no longer know how to go about listening to or saying something, just as we already no longer know how to write ...”

The question therefore arises, if the visual image is becoming hegemonic, at the cost of spoken (and written) language, does it signify the unilateral dominance of Lacan’s imaginary - the register of alienation – over the symbolic? Both Turkle (Colbert, 2011), who alludes to the detrimental effect of mobile phone use on our social skills, and Virilio (above), who talks about “lack of sociability” that accompanies the rise of the image, draw attention to this possibility.

In terms of Lacan’s conception of the subject, this would mean that the imaginary register of the ego (and alter ego), which is also that of “identity” and alienation, would be in the process of subverting the inalienable social, communicational function of the symbolic. If this process were to become pervasive, it might well trigger the “social and political catastrophe” that Virilio (above) has warned about. There is hope in the fact that the third Lacanian register, that of the “real”, is always there, however ineffable it may be. What I mean, is simply that, to the degree that something unexpected may, and sometimes does, happen to human beings, be it an unwelcome visitor, or a motor car accident, or some gigantic, collective trauma, like 9/11,<sup>13</sup> or the recent tsunami in Japan, the “real” represents the originary source of “something”, an “I know not what”, which has the power to reconfigure our world completely. And this means reconfiguring our imaginary and symbolic horizons. If the present trajectory of virtual image-preponderance in cyberspace were to develop to the point where inter-subjective communication were to be threatened to the point of breaking down, that would probably be of the magnitude of a collective trauma that would impact on our imaginary and symbolic horizon with such force that the symbolic would re-claim its place in human subjectivity. The way that “identity” is currently being configured in cyberspace, of which Facebook is a major part, may just be an indication that – given what has been uncovered in dialogue with Foucault, Turkle, Virilio and Lacan – such an event is not an impossibility.

## CONCLUSION

I end this article with a quotation from Sherry Turkle, which serves as a reminder of the ambivalent status of the cyber-realm’s capacity to enchant, seduce and simultaneously enslave its adherents. Alluding to Wim Wenders’s film, **Until the end of the world**, where a scientist invents a device that transforms brain-activity into such alluring digital images that people are able to see their innermost dreams and fantasies in vivid iconic form,<sup>14</sup> she says (Turkle, 1995: 268): “However, the story soon turns dark. The images seduce. They are richer and more compelling than the real life around them. Wenders’s characters fall in love with their dreams, become addicted to them. People wander about with blankets over their heads the better to see the monitors from which they cannot bear to be parted. They are imprisoned by the screens, imprisoned by the keys to their past that the screens seem to hold ... We, too, are vulnerable to using our

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<sup>13</sup> See in this regard Olivier (2007), for an extended investigation of the trauma of 9/11.

<sup>14</sup> Like Wenders’s film, Kathryn Bigelow’s neo-noir, **Strange days** (1995), thematizes the ambivalent kind of virtual reality technology that enables people to experience sensations as if they are more real than the “original” body-sensations, with the predictable result that people get addicted to it.

screens in these ways. People can get lost in virtual worlds ... Our experiences there are serious play.”

What she observes here goes for social networking cyber-sites such as Facebook as well. They should be kept at arms' length. Lest we become imprisoned, or muted, by them, we should remind ourselves that, although the experiences they enable are not insignificant, they cannot be human social reality, with its indispensable symbolic sphere, in its entirety, and we allow ourselves to be assimilated by them at our peril.

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