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The Foggy Mirror: Private Public Identity in Hypermedia

Once upon the time there was girl, a 13-year-old princess who lived in a castle of problems, daily life, parents, high school, friends, computer, and access. One day she met her prince and fell in love. Her life got better. She never met her prince in person; there was no need as they would meet in nowhere field. In this field they were able to run freely, wildly; holding hands together. A field made out of zeros and ones. The field was flat and glimmering, even soothing. But in one any-given-afternoon her prince turned into a dragon and threw flames at her burning heart. "This world would be better without you here" the dragon boy said. He might have been referring to the world where they fell in love but it doesn't matter anymore; we will never now. The princess overwhelmed by her super ego ran upstairs into her dungeon and chose to escape through the closet using a belt... around her neck. Megan Meier committed suicide.

The story continued as expected -grieving, pain, desolation- but after a few moons it turned into something else: Bewilderment followed by rage. Her prince, the one who apparently pushed her into her dead was not a physical person but an *avatar* created in

MySpace® to befriend Megan to obtain information about another girl.

All matters complicated ever more when many months later a news would be revealed to Public Media: An adult couple, the parents of a former Megan's classmates were defined as the creators of "Josh" the prince-dragon. The Police, the Media, the Law; nobody would know what to do, or how to do it. There are no regulations that condemn such practice in the legal system. Nobody thought of it before.

According to Derrida the human identity is always multidimensional and embedded in a set of relationships. There is no single *self* that can be identified as a fully coherent entity standing alone. We construct our identities from the very moment we are born. Every single detail feed us with information about what we are and how we are supposed to be. From the very beginning of our lives we are compared and classified; tagged and labeled as parts of some pre-defined category (*Everthing is Miscellaneous*, David Weinberger 2007.) The baby looks like the mother; no, he is the likeness of the father. It takes a human being many years to finally arrive to the state of development where she may claim: "I am!" with certain degree of reassurance. On the other hand, the construction of the reality where we can implement said claim and exercise it had been in constant transformation as a byproduct of technology. McLuhan wrote on his 1962 book: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, how we –humans- switched from an oral culture (the ear) to a written culture (the eye) because of the invention of writing and the universal acceptance of it as means of communication.

The written word was first an incised glyph that provoked a drastic mental shift as McLuhan states: "*we changed an ear for an eye.*" Humans went from a spatial three-

dimensional perception of reality --perhaps even a four-dimensional one-- to a superficial, bidimensional one. The glyph gave birth to the image and metaphor was born. Having images in addition to sound constituted the first multimedia experience for the human being. Humans then began to identify not only objects, places, and states of mind; but also feelings, tastes, emotions, actions, and all sorts of details with glyphs. The drawing became more complex and the images more realistic as pre-historic designers gained more control over their psychomotor skills. As better explained by Derrida: We were trapped forever in the image and the meanings we assigned to them. We “brainchilded” the mother metaphor of the panopticon: The Written Language. Incision in hard surfaces --and later on organic inks of several textures-- allowed a timeless observation of each glyph, of each icon, of each graphic from a comfortable and safe stage. We learned how to interpret them as metaphors of meaning. The space between signifier and signified (Barthes) opened the possibility of human self-reflection through the written language. Subsequently, if not in sync humans developed a system to read these signs and significations to *make sense* -connect to the sensorium- of their new creations and the *CODE* became to exist (Elements of Semiology, Barthes, 1964.)

The only reason why we are able to understand any system of signs is because of convention, as Democritus (460-370BCE) would argue three thousand years ago. However, convention doesn't happen naturally, it must be enforced through education, training, encouragement, retribution; and more effectively through law enforcement and punishment. (Control Theory) A conventional system of signs was slowly but firmly

imposed throughout civilization. It would then take destruction to construct as we can see how wars, conquest, and cultural expansion helped to achieve an effective dissemination of the written language with its codified convention. A major change in society resulted from the implementation of this system of written language: Humans were able to step back from their purely functional state of existence to their early years as babies; humans were able to play. They were able to imagine worlds outside the fixed rules of the physical world. They were allowed to draw their imagination and to create magic spears to hunt one hundred elephants at the same time; mythmaking was born.

Images were expressions of identity and self awareness, we may continually see this discovery as children -throughout the world- draw their first impressions of *Self* by mastering portraiture using stick figures as a primordial iconizing of the embodied spirit. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) made this observation in structuralist terms: The pre-drawing child makes no clear distinction between himself and the external world. The mother is the link that permits such connection and the baby lives symbiotically through her. Jacques Lacan refers to this state as: *The Imaginary State*. Every experience is apprehended through her senses as controlled by her mother. Her mother in this case becomes the panopticon guard where the imprisonment is a much-needed one to survive. A welcoming warm cage. Later on as the child gains control of her body, she will enter Lacan's Mirror Stage. The baby begins to draw rudimentary distinctions between herself and her mother. This is the period when the child's sense of self and the first steps in the acquisition of language emerge. According to Freud every person-in-the-making finds pleasure in the process of "mirroring" –the act of discovering

self in the mirror-. However, it is precisely in this stage when the baby is alienated by its own image. He doesn't recognize himself there since he finds "self" through her mother. This unrecognized image of *self* demands the creation of metaphors, these are found in objects of self-identification. As the child grows up, she will continue to make such imaginary identifications with objects, and this is how her ego will be built up.

The development of this sensual image-bank of the conscious in contemporary society is conventionally covered by the toy industry, which later on as the baby becomes an adult would turn into *the electronic gimmicks store*. Finally, in "Lacanian" terms the next stage is defined as "The Phallus" also known as: The Entry to the Symbolic Order. The baby then, discovers the Father to complement the development of his Self, to become "full". The baby discovers the sexual differences, hence the "Phallus" and he initiates the construction of the unconscious that will define his identity. The child can be defined as a signifier; and the image he sees in the mirror as the signified -the meaning that the child gives to itself-.

However, an indestructible link grows between the mirror and the person to developing her identity. By eliminating the mirror there is always a risk of eliminating the person's identity and self-awareness. The next stage, according to Lacan is the distinction among image, symbol and reality. It is precisely here -during the construction of his identity- when the human conscious is its most malleable state. Education and convention take control from here; unavoidably and effectively. The incorporation of the system of signs and symbols secure the survival of the person in both realities: Symbolic and physical. It could be argued now that education is defined as the *engraving* of language,

convention, and myth right on our individual and collective mirrors --subconscious, conscious, and unconscious at the same time-- creating an individual, a thinking being. And while doing so, without being aware of it they create a collective mirror called “Cultural Identity.”

This new co-developed identity shall remain “dormant” for the following ten years, in the mean time it is watered by schools, books, TVs, friends, family. Yet the most significant input to the identity development would come from society by means of image construction. While the child is going through this inner battle of discovery we - parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, friends- make sure that the child image is captured endlessly using photography and video as external memory devices. According to Derrida, the development of identity requires supplements or some kind of otherness to establish its meanings. A relationship complemented in opposition -in tension-- between the image and the object. I.D. cards then become the person. The image is the person; or at least it was so until New Media came along.

The eternal contemplative question of “who am I?” becomes an issue, specially during hormonal change that happens with puberty. To get into the United States of America --the country with no name therefore no existence as Barthes would argue-- I had to go through a thousand doors. Some of them were symbolic, some of them were

very real; with guards, real guards. And guns, yes, they were real guns. It was a symbolic approach to the central tower of the panopticon where a demigod resides. I brought all my I.D.s with me just so I can prove that “I AM” who I am, and not somebody else. While going from door through door the guards question your identity so many times that one begins to question it too. Maybe I am not myself anymore. Maybe I am an obscure reflection of my own mirror. As a “fleshfatandbone” person who is breathing, thinking, laughing, making love, eating, crying, sleeping, and sometimes dreaming, I am defined by analogical means made of plastic cards and porous surfaces filled with color coded inks that allow the perceptual “wholeness” of my Self to emerge and exist. This way of confirming my identity was a given in the past. New Media is shoving a redefinition of reality as it challenges the senses and fixed conventions and rules. According to Baudrillard Image construction had been redefined completely. Images had been violated symbolically --and physically-- to the extreme of generating virulence. We no longer perceive the world through images or conventions anymore. Technology, as argued by McLuhan, had become the message. Baudrillard also claims that violence to the image had become not only the medium and the message but also the messenger. As a result, identity had been violated.

To us, to the individual this means that we can no longer claim to have an identifying image of self. Our mirror doesn't belong to ourselves alone but to a collective conscious through electronic means. The mirror is now the medium and I can only see myself through others, my real physical image is disappearing. Baudrillard is correct: “The real world is becoming a useless function, a collection of phantom shapes and ghost

events. We are not far from the silhouettes on the walls of the cave of Plato.”

As technology changes reality once again, from the assimilation of the glyph as the medium to support meaning in ancient caves, to today’s challenge of reconstitution of reality based on new media technology. We are pushed into redefining our own identity, through the market, the government; the playground, our wardrobe, and food. Perhaps God herself changed our mirrors. As children once again, we struggle to find our image in this new HD® mirror where high definition creates a parallel world founded on Baudrillard claims: “where everything is given to be seen, there is nothing to be seen.” Our subconsciously self-imposed panopticon is not the mirror anymore. My image, the analogous byproduct of physical reflection, the one that had helped me determine the simulated image that defines my existence is gone. There is no need for it anymore. The resulting void had been filled with an embracing warm of simulacra. The country with no name --no identity locus-- leads the rest of the world into a society of consumerism. A society of anonymity based on images not realities (Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation* 1991.) A hyper real world: A postmodern simulation of reality where we are forced into a close relationship with an electronic-collective-intangible-spirit known as the Internet.

In order for me to exist, to be, and to breath I need to be defined by identification cards with my photograph or “likeness” of my head; the cards I used to prove that I am myself. When I got them the photographer expected no smile from me, and from anybody for that matter. This official documents bears my signature, my fingerprint inked on it, the full names of my parents; the place where I was born, the number of the volume and folio

where my birth certificate resides. This typographic information is then embodied as a folded printed-paper with a holographic sticker showing the Ecuadorian coat of Arms. I then become 0102465154 for the remaining of my physical life until I –ironically- may become a glyph shaped as letters incised in stone again. Full circle! Derrida is correct: We are trapped by language!

My definition only begins there, followed by a passport, a visa, a voting certificate (I come from a country where voting is mandatory) a military identification card, and finally, an “exiting permit” that grants me permission to leave my own country. This last one works as a quick and very effective reminder of the panopticon we inhabit. Each and every one of these documents testify the embodiment of my thoughts in this reality using an image as the main “anchor” as Barthes would back me up. On the other hand, in a world where boundaries are being redefined as I type these lines, my sense of identity also transforms. The image that constructs who I am needs some serious revision, it needs to find a way to adapt effectively to this new world of hype where the rules of the game, the conventions, the system of signs have changed. The mirror, this mythical place where I seek for myself to find peace and comfort; the place where I keep the ultimate connection to the metaphorical womb has become foggy. I can’t see myself but through the eyes of others. I am consciously aware of my captivity in Derrida’s unbreakable language systems but I am also beginning to see how the mirror is becoming the panopticon guard as explained by Foucault. I now know that Knowledge is always linked to power (Foucault).

The paradox is that I don’t want to break free from this panopticon as I recognize it

as my mother, the source, and the metaphorical womb. This new *Foggy Mirror* is not a solid entity; it has no glass surface to touch. Sometimes when I try to touch it the electricity within charges back, reminding me of its invisible omniscience and power. This new reality, hyper reality, offered me this morning the possibility of flying, falling and not getting any hint of pain (Second life.) It also allowed me to “know” how many people I know -- part of my chat room list-- are working, busy and listening to. At the same time I was able to be: Guidoalvarez, pictoman, noflags, xifoforo, orangefish, orangetypo, alvarezge, and fishtankfreedom. I was able to experience what Noah Wardrip-Fruin refers to as: “Dynamism without loss. Impermanence enfolded within permanence.” I was able to feel alive and to keep my digital constructed pseudo clones to breathe pixels and grow by their own means. The first account I opened a decade and a half ago holds about eight thousands unread emails in the spam folder. For each one of those electronic databases I do exist permanently. " As explained earlier, Derrida would argue that “nothing exists outside the text,” text becomes a prison, language a cage and the only way out of it is through metaphors.

Technology and the market place offered a very successful panopticon cage: Windows®. The Windows operating system became the ultimate metaphor for the cage as it silently compared itself with our home, not with a prison –I wonder what would have happened had the operating system been named: “Doors”-. The system was designed in such a way that allows you to fly into it, inside through windows, not doors and using electric impulses not wings or feet. Have you noticed that there is no possibility of physically leaving a room through a window unless you leave your body behind and

do it mentally? Baudrillard is right! There is no distinction between reality and hyper reality, between fact and fiction. Both collided and the result was declared: Hypermedia.

But here is the catch: his bodiless system requires you to acknowledge an identity to be part of it. A Key to get in, a pass-word from language to language. This key is the key to understand how reality becomes blurry, how the mirror gets foggy as there is no need to keep your analogous identity. As a citizen of *Hyperland* you may clone yourself endlessly, as many times as anybody else who is surfing the web. The possibility of “being” in different times and different places is undeniable. A person can create an account using “@yahoo.mx” and that semiotic “anchor” (Barthes) will provide meaning and identity to you, as a link to the Mexican culture without the need of a plastic ID card or any previous knowledge or experience with what Mexico means in real life.

Immediately after completing one the same person may create another account; this time a “@yahoo.es” with all the meanings, the anchors that come along, attached to it this time to provide a sense of “Spain” to it.

As David Weinberger suggests what provides life to the Internet is the network, the multiplicity of identities, and the seemingly real human touch behind every link. When a 404 code appears -file not found- it means the electronic dead of a cyber identity; and a sense of grievance and frustration occurs. Sherry Turkle defines identity on her essay on Cyberspace (Contemporary Sociology Vol. 28. No. 6. 1999) as a concept “distributed and heterogeneous,” saying that we can have many identities, as many as we want. By exercising the possibility multiple identity creation the Internet becomes a new mirror, an electronic mirror that has no connection to the rules of the real world.

Reflection and the Laws of Light and perception are not “an issue” anymore but electricity is. As McLuhan made this observation and provided the world with a new sense beyond the senses presented electricity as the medium and the message. In this new medium, this electronic medium, we are children again, we come looking for the image in this new mirror, the image that will allow us to define our identity. Yet this mirror is foggy, the reflection is an endless reflection of a multiplicity of images of self. So daunting, luring, and overwhelming that my reflection alone doesn't matter anymore and the reflection of the whole becomes my identity. The private turns into public, author disappears and reappears as a conundrum of identity: A public face customized in many forms hyper melted to come back to me disguised as private. I am everybody at once and everybody else is I. We are all a big “I.”

“But faced with the challenges of cyberspace, our need for a practical philosophy of self-knowledge, one that does not shy away from issues of multiplicity, complexity, and ambivalence, that does not shy away from the power of symbolism, from the power of the word, from the power of identity play, has never been greater as we struggle to make meaning from our lives on the screen. It is fashionable to think that we have passed from a psychoanalytic culture to a computer culture-- that we no longer need to think in terms of Freudian slips but rather of information processing errors. But the reality is more complex. It is time to rethink our relationship to the computer culture and psychoanalytic culture and proudly held joint citizenship.” Sherry Turkle.

According to McLuhan we don't need our imagination any more, this new shared identity provides all the things we need to think about, the electric information connects

us all in real time in this real “noplacel” as we can be all over the world in the Internet.

This new environment is also constructed of symbols, rules, and regulations. Yet those regulations are defined by technology, not morality, not religion, and ethics is tumbling.

This new world of symbols, McLuhan says “consists in pulling out connections; but connections are inevitably visual relations.” This observation becomes real when observing the Facebook® socializing network where I can have my I.D. photograph as a hybrid between a person and a bug; with a hint of type of top of my photo defying all the rules of photo identification in the world outside this electric collective mirror. I may be hugged, kissed and thrown Santa Clauses, sheep, cars at, I have flown and breathed underwater while I wear this electric mask that nurtures me and makes me feel powerful.

I can “own” my fish bowl -named Bombay- with 200 fish inside. I own a raccoon named “massy” that is petted by my friends and sometimes strangers. I can post videos, ask one questions to my “134” friends at the same time and find out who is online, where in the world, and what they are thinking while I “pretend” I am “offline.”

The new media allows me to be in the central tower of the panopticon and in many of the jails at the same time. I am god and mortal, creator and creature. When we approach the foggy mirror to look for our multiple identities we can only see a collective mask, never a physical reflection alone. Is it possible then that New Media turned out to be our collective mask? Is this electric mask a collective hallucination created by our subconscious’ electric impulses? Professor Foucault may be right after all, in our constant inherited search for power and control we have created a foggy mirror that plays the role of a much needed new panopticon where we are “accomplices of the guard system” and

the guard himself.

We have testified the power of this mask with the dead --not the only one- of Megan Meier. The fogginess of the mirror allowed this sad event to happen and we, collectively, are not ready for this unstoppable train that fuses the virtual with the real, the electronic with the conscious, the body with the machine (Haraway) as Internet law expert Lawrence Lessig states: "We will see that cyberspace does not guarantee its own freedom but instead carries an extraordinary potential for control." Today, the Internet is no longer in its infancy. Although developed long ago by researchers, the Internet entered into popular usage in the mid-1990s. It is now maturing into its second decade in mainstream culture — its teenage years. The Internet indeed has proven to be a place of both rigid control and unbounded freedom.” (Code. 1999) It is our collective responsibility to educate and guide -not control- the growth of this Meta monster called Internet.

Finally, since a *Foggy Mirror* renders a foggy paper, I think there is nothing more appropriate to finish it than with a foggy quote from *Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's Alice in the Wonderland* that -hopefully- will provoke a foggy thought in your brain:

“Be what you would seem to be -- or, if you'd like it put more simply-- Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.”

by *wiido* “*random*” *álvarez*. ©MATX FALL 2007. VCU.

Evaluation:

I believe that this project is the best essay I have developed during the semester. It doesn't mean that the project is reached the expected high standards that I want to accomplish during the Ph.D. experience at all yet, but I began with a very defined non-writing non-literature background and I have been moving away from my comfort zone as a self imposed methodology of learning. My main limitation is -and will always be- to find a focus and keep it. My brain lives in hyperland mode and that “identity” is easy to observe in this paper. I think this essay have allowed me to finally get grips on how to incorporate, how to weave theory and thoughts of “others” into my own thinking as means to transmit them clearly. I would have liked to have more time to incorporate my others sources into it: I heard about ten hours of lectures by Professor Dr. Paul Root on

Control Theory, deviance and normal. I think that body of work will provide more structure to my paper since I believe that we love the Internet because it provides a space to be deviant (as defined by Dr. Root.)

I think this paper could have been better written more organized, syntactically. I need a writing tutor that refreshes my grammar and syntax set of rules that are rusty, to say the least. When I tried to get help from the Writing Center, I found some but I also found the kind people who work there to be somewhat intimidated by my “Ph.D.” status. I must find a writing tutor who teaches me to write better, clearer.

Time as always for me is an issue. I couldn’t complete the paper on time and I feel bad for it. It seems academically unprofessional and I apologize for it. Sometimes it is very hard for me to “just write” without “making” something along the lines. As you will see the video-poem-piece does not concur in content with this paper but it does reflect what I have learned this semester about authorship, appropriation, poetry, composition, theory, and technology. I hope I could get a list from you with the books you consider “must have read” ones for me to catch up with the class. I think I have found a seed to my dissertation. One that deals with the concept of identity as it is developed in New Media for branding purposes.

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