'CYBERSPACE, SOUTH': Internet and Cultural Studies in Brazil

Beatriz Resende

The control of language was always private in the Book Age, but for the electronic media the control of language has become public and verbal. With the advent of Internet, we have the first medium that is verbal and written, private and public, individual and collective at the same time. The link between the public and the private minds is made through open and connected nets on the Planet (Derrick de Kerckhove in *The skin of culture* 1997).

... on se trompe aujourd'hui sur la signification profonde du Web. On y voit une dimension de communication libre, sans contrainte, un espace de liberté par rapport à toutes les contraintes qui jugulent les médias classiques, alors que l'essentiel de son innovation n'est pas là, mais dans la mise en place de systèmes d'information marchands de toute sorte (Dominique Wolton in *Internet et après?* 1999).

The quotations above provide a glimpse into the nature and degree of debate about the Internet still current in academic environments. Kerckhove, who migrated from linguistic and literary theories to the Culture and Technology Program at the University of Toronto, is optimistic. Wolton, a researcher at the 'Communication and Politics' laboratory at CNRS, is in fact a TV fan, although he distrusts the 'new technologies'. For him, television is above all a

conversation topic: it is good to talk about it. The spectator and the citizen are simultaneously the same individual, distinct, and different from that which is virtual. That peculiarity leads him to state that there is a radical difference between the reception of television messages and the messages that circulate in virtual space: the former are images of reality, and the latter are only virtual reality. The former direct you towards reality, the latter, to simulation.

That way of regarding the phenomenon differs from Kerckhove, who sees a continuity between the TV and the computer. In the connection between the half-personalised computer (PC = personal computer), lonely and private, and the television, which offers a kind of collective spirit available to everyone, there emerges a new situation: the tele-computers, materialised in the use of Internet as the tele-computerised images that circulate on the net. For Kerckhove, the new situation also generates new powers, with obvious social, political and economic repercussions that

> accelerate changes and adaptations in the geopolitical scene and in everyone's private sensitiveness. It will bring new forms of consciousness and will put pressure on the educational systems in order to make them deal with the changes (Kerckhove 1997:90).

One surprise here is the confirmation of the fact that the conflict involving media and their supporters did not take place between printed paper and the computer screen, but rather between the TV and the PC. The existing antagonism is easy to explain in terms of the financial interests at stake at least as long as they don't make agreements and new pacts. The absorption of virtual resources by the paper-related arts is part of the experience we are living with and manifested by the electronic publications we produce. But what really surprises us is the paradoxical relationship we are experiencing with the geopolitical reality, full of negative aspects, but also providing us with strongly positive conditions. This is why I named this paper, *CYBERSPACE, SOUTH.*

The title is obviously and deliberately provocative, since there is neither North nor South in the virtual universe. The Euro-centered visual map of the world places Europe in the centre and the New World in the lower part of the globe, so this map *does* have a south and a north. But that is a worldview established in 1494, with the imaginary line drawn by the Tordesillas Treaty, which divided the new lands in South America between the two Iberian discoverers, and which have ever since arbitrarily determined

the conventions that have defined the economic world order and the organisation of culture. This is why we speak Portuguese in Brazil, and not Spanish, as the people in our neighbouring countries do.

When I restate here the notion of 'The South' to debate the cultural information exchange in the age of globalisation, I intend rid us of the conventions that still affect us to this day, and at the same time, to reject the inferiority internalised by our own statements and by *colonizers* of all ages. But we also know that, even in the information globalization age, to be in The South still means to be speaking from a peripheral site.

In order to localise and give a social and economic dimension to the 'real reality' which underpins the report of our experience with 'virtual reality', I offer some data that can contribute to a better understanding of our situation in the universe of cultural exchanges.

According to the latest official census in 1996, the Brazilian population is 157,070,163 inhabitants. In spite of the continental dimensions of its countryside, approximately 75% of the population live in towns. The average monthly income is 290 US$. In Brazil, 87% of the people have television sets, but only 32% have telephones.

A 1999 survey carried out in the 9 major metropolitan regions, published by *Cadê*—the main national searching tool, indicates that 9% of the population participating in the survey have their computers connected to the Internet. That is a high figure if we compare it to the number of people who have telephones. There were about one million Internet users in 1993: in 1998, 1,698 million. With the development of telephone companies' operations, a coveted investment sold to foreign capital (the minister who started the privatisation process used to say that he managed the best business in the world: selling winds), the increase of infrastructure with the installation of new telephone lines and new apparatuses, and a larger use of computers triggered a skyrocketing expansion process; so much so the Internet expanded by one million users in two months between 1999 and 2000. The arrival of free-of-charge providers was decisive, and today (in February 2000) we have four and a half million Internet users, and we rank as the largest Latin American Internet market.

In 1998, the researcher Dênis de Moraes stated in his important book *Planeta Mídia. Tendências da comunicação na era global*:

> The number of Internet users has grown 788% in Latin America between 1995 and 1997—a rate twice as high as the world rate.

> According to Nazca Saatchi & Saatchi, by 2002 there will be 34 million Latin American users, four times as many as the current 8.2 million. In Brazil, there are two million Internet users, and that number will probably increase to six million in 2001 (Moraes 1998:228)

So, it seems that estimating forecasts is as difficult as making up an *Internet directory* of its users. With the free-of-charge providers there came other surprises, such as the need to supply content to their portals as a means to attract users. But we will talk about the Internet content issues later.

Although Brazil ranks as the leading user of new technologies in Latin America, there is a cultural aspect that tends to assign us again to the periphery: namely, the use of the Portuguese language. The number of Portuguese-speaking Internet users in the world was 4,8 million in September 1999, versus 19,5 million Spanish-speaking Internet users (according to research conducted by Global Reach). In the world chart of online populations, the use of the English language represents 51.3%, Japanese, 7.2%, Spanish, 6.5% and French, 4.4%. The Portuguese language is grouped among the 'others'.

As regards this linguistic contingency within the universe of the Web, and our peripheral situation, I cannot omit the statement made by Aijaz Ahmad in his rather impolite reply to Fredric Jameson's comment on the national allegory of 'third world' countries. Expressing his opinion about the situation of the geographically peripheral intellectual in the frame of contemporary cultural exchanges, Ahmad remarks that:

> It is very uncommon to find a modern intellectual in Asia or in Africa who does not know at least one European language, although it is equally uncommon to find a valuable literary critic in Europe and in the United States who has ever been concerned about an Asian or African language (Ahmad 1988: 159).

In this use of 'infoways' where we follow the paths in national languages or in hegemonic English (maybe we could refer to it as a kind of *CyberEnglish*), the status of minority users has also led us to the peculiar habit of understanding Spanish, a language we are often in touch with. The converse is not true about our Latin American neighbours, who are not equally skilful in the use of *Portunhol (Portspanish)*.

So, why, then, have we decided to make the pioneering effort to make an on-line magazine dedicated to literature, art and culture?

Two reasons led me to the decision to create an on-line magazine within the set of research activities I am engaged with at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (the Advanced Program of Contemporary Culture [PACC], coordinated by Professor Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, and also within the activities developed in the Graduate Programme in Literature Sciences). Neither the appeal of state-of-the-art technologies nor any special taste for computer technology guided us to create the electronic magazine Z at PACC. We do not understand much about software or hardware and trust to our younger collaborators for the realisation of our cyberspace dreams. We remain lovingly attached to the printed page, and, if possible, to fountain pens. The first pressure we experienced was the shortage of economic resources for the publication of a printed magazine, plus the limited number of people involved in the hard task of editing good quality and aesthetically presentable texts.

Challenged by my desire to publish new texts about emerging issues such as Cultural Studies, a certain motivation to mix literature, art, behavioral themes, and theoretical reflections as well as the need to establish a net for the exchange of interdisciplinary knowledge—which implies contacts between scholars in geographically distant places, in different campuses, in remote spaces and cities—all that associated with the belief that we had to enter the globalised space for the exchange of information, all that led us to turn to Internet as a replacement for printed paper.

And as we were effectively engaged in the task, we thought we had better do it thoroughly. So, Z undertook the radical proposal to carry on virtual exchanges. The magazine only 'publishes' material that is already on the Web, in any site, in any language: essays from virtual magazines or from temporary displays on conference sites, seminars etc. In this case we were committed to the proposal that the Internet is a democratic space. Without any hesitation, we supplied the magazine with our own material that had not yet been published. Since the invention of photocopying the act of the making of a text as public as possible can be seen as a way of guaranteeing its authorship. But we also did some fishing in the Web without feeling the least ashamed for doing so. The result has been a healthy dissemination of information from all parts of the world. Except for a negative experience we had with the American magazine *Wired*, the prospect of having a text that had already been on the Web before—sometimes only on temporary sites, like the ones from

conferences, or texts that had come out on obscure virtual addresses and personal home pages, all made their authors very happy, and they authorised their publications right away. To be able to 'catch' such texts we always counted on the collaboration of first line intellectuals, night-loving Web-surfers who send us URLs with a simple forward touch without much talking or long academic discussions.

But the second reason for the choice of the new medium involving theoretical issues within our academic universe lies in the need to find out how to organize so-called Cultural Studies within the University. The very decision to develop research in a 'Program' rather than in a Department or similar had a lot to do with the search for a format appropriate to the area chosen for investigation.

In his interesting reflection O *que é, afinal, Estudos Culturais?* (1999), Richard Johnson states that Cultural Studies today is a 'movement or a net' with its own courses in several Universities, its own periodicals and academic debate. But, in an argument already pursued by Fredric Jameson in a review he wrote about the pioneer collection *Cultural Studies*, by Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, Richard Johnson asks himself whether it should seek a position as an academic discipline in its own right. Just after that he affirms that

> the codification of methods or knowledge ... goes against some of the main characteristics of Cultural Studies: its opening and theoretical versatility, its reflexive spirit and chiefly the relevance of its critique—critique in its widest sense, which makes Cultural Studies a process liable to stagnation if an attempt to codify and order it was made' (Johnson 1999).

Fredric Jameson, speaks of a '*desire* called Cultural Studies', which must be aborted

> politically and socially as a project for the construction of a 'historical bloc', and not theoretically as an architectural blueprint for a new discipline (Jameson 1994:11).

Within the reality of our investigation and research in Cultural Studies, we must conform to some kind of 'official' research because we are financed by university institutions and governmental agencies, all of which

impose classification in the form of knowledge area codes into which we never really fit. So I am interested in an initial separation from bureaucratic university investigation organized in disciplines, an imitation of life in monasteries, closed to the world and divided in cells. Even the research proposed as interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary remains subservient to the disciplines, divisions of sacralized knowledge to which professors become mere caretakers. Those are the borderlines, kept out of an effort to preserve a separation that not even nations are interested in guaranteeing at a moment of transnational grouping: frontiers that prove to be increasingly insufficient to encompass cultural manifestations.

Both that 'desire called Cultural Studies', and its resistance to disciplinarity continue to be problematic to us. Feminist and ethnic studies are also problematic, as well as the term 'post-modern' and the virtual reality of the (democratic) 'infoways' that lead through cyberspace.

Curiously enough, when reflections around Cultural Studies are published in our electronic magazine, the reception is quite distinctive. The magazine's acceptance in the academic environment has been surprising and its approval can be evaluated by the number of e-mail messages, indication of material for circulation through *Z*, and mainly by the high number of registered visitors we have recorded. Created in March 1999, in May the same year, *Z* had registered 4017 visitors. How many of those would have been our readers if the circulation had been in printed form? Among the registered users there are addresses in the USA, Italy, Sweden and Holland. Almost one third of the registered visitors are Portuguese, most of whom registered after *Jornal Público* dedicated a whole article to the magazine in its Saturday cultural issue.

Thus, the desired projection outside academic or geographical frontiers has proven to be possible.

Having found advantages in the condition of the 'unrooted' intellectual in his discussion on the dangerous consequences of nationalism, Todorov remarks the fact that

> cultural identities are not only national, there are other identities related to age, gender, profession, social environment; so, in our days, all of us have already lived those cultural encounters within ourselves, at different extents: all of us are hybrid (Todorov 1999: 26).

The challenge we feared the most was the superficiality and speed of

the Internet 'visits'. Contrary to our first suppositions that the Internet would only be an instrument of domination of the hegemonic powers of the global economy, the 'infoways' have revealed they have exceptional potential for the mobilisation of civil society. Movements of international solidarity have taken place on occasions such as the government conflicts with the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) or the dismissal of the Public Security Coordinator in Rio de Janeiro, who had denounced the 'rotten apples' in the *carioca* police force. On those occasions, there was a quick and effective circulation of messages in the Web.

That concern was due to the perspective from which we used to look at Cultural Studies, very much related to an English interpretation stemming from Birmingham Centre, from works by Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and Charles Taylor. Stuart Hall, in a recent account of Cultural Studies and its theoretical legacy, makes a simple and necessary statement, alerting us to the fact that, although Cultural Studies refuses to be a master discourse or a meta-speech of any kind, it has to be connected to some desire: there must be some interest determined in the choice it makes. 'It does matter whether cultural studies is this or that' (Hall 1996).

Finally, I would like to make a quick report about the practice that we have had in our close relationship with paper arts, such as poetry, photography and also plastic arts in general. To start with, we confirm the hypothesis that not only is there an 'Internet aesthetic', but we can also say that nowadays, this aesthetic impinges on other media. That fact is easy to detect only by observing book covers, and TV channels designed for young audiences, such as MTV and its well-elaborated *'calls'*.

There is more. Just as there is a peculiar visual art produced by video-makers—different from the art produced by movie-makers and plastic artists who employ material support for their pieces—the Internet is also producing its own distinctive artistic style. And even if we are not facing concrete pieces of art, the aesthetic issue is decisive. No one visits a home page one doesn't like. That is what Kerckhove wisely calls 'the culture skin':

> It seems that design does public relations for technology, embellishing its products and improving its image on the market .... In the externally visible, audible or texture-like form of culture artifacts, design emerges as that which we could name 'the culture skin' (Kerckhove 1997:212).

Another fact which has already become obvious, is poets' attachment to Internet, mainly young poets, but not only them. Maybe, the choice of a virtual medium is still an economic imperative for them, but the truth is that the wide circulation of poetry on the net has started moulding its own relationships, re-making the interaction that is so dear to poets. That intercommunication has also emerged in the poetry 'recitals', sometimes as a performance by authors voicing their poems to the audience. Searching *Cadê* again, I have found 561 entries for 'poetry', a very meaningful figure if compared to the number of entries for 'sex', 1568, or for 'finance', 263. Soccer brings 1838 entries, but, in this case, we need to remember that this is Brazil.

Coming back to the issue of content published on the Internet and to our position South of Cyberspace, from my experience with Z, I would like to remind you that the creation of The Virtual Library of Cultural Studies has already been multiplied into other Virtual Libraries. I would like to call your attention to the fact that the Internet has decisively contributed to overcoming the walls and doors that still keep departments and research groups apart, even at this time of world transnational organisation. But, if we want the globalised exchange of information to be a round-trip infoway, we in Cyberspace South have to occupy the space on those nets. The challenge ahead of us is no longer access to the information nets, at least not for those of us who can afford to have computers connect to the Web. The challenge is to use the net for our messages, our texts, our work, our opinions, our protest, our provocation.

As all of you must have observed in the presentation of our electronic magazine, the essays that circulate on Z are prepared in such a way that they can be printed, and, thus, salvaged in the form of small books or magazines. That should be so because, in spite of it all, we must recognise that we often navigate on computer screens, but never really dive into those waters.

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro

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