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Media Temporalities in the Internet: Philosophy of Time and Media with Derrida and Rorty

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Abstract

The essay comprises four sections. The first section provides a survey of some significant developments which today determine philosophical discussion on the subject of 'time'. The second section considers the question of how time and the issue of media are linked with one another in the views of two influential contemporary philosophers - Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty. Finally, in the third section, the temporal implications of cultural practices developing in the new medium of the Internet are analyzed and, in the fourth section, related to the named philosophers' theses.

Introduction

Traditionally time was thought of as being a transcendent dimension of human experience and, hence, as something which would remain quite unaffected by the mere advent of new communications technologies such as the Internet. Modern philosophical thinking about time, however, has questioned traditional presuppositions in such a way that cultural determinants of its conception have become more manifest. In the following account an attempt is made to illustrate the way in which the Internet proves particularly apt in demonstrating the characteristics of two influential contemporary philosophical views of time and media: namely, those of Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty. To do this current philosophical debate on time is first briefly surveyed. I will then outline the way in which Derrida and Rorty link the issues of time and media, and proceed to use these links as a basis for examining the forms of temporality prevalent in the semiotic environment of Internet-based computer-mediated communication (CMC). Having argued that temporality is in fact embedded in pragmatic semiotic action I will, finally, attempt to bring out and fuse complementary aspects of Derrida's and Rorty's viewpoints and to establish the importance of the close interrelationship between philosophical and political reflexion on time and media.

Basic Tendencies in Contemporary Philosophy of Time

The current situation is characterized by a plurality of heterogenous time concepts. For this reason philosophical discussion about the problem of time assumes particular importance (see Baert, 1999; Baumgartner, 1993; Gimmler, Sandbothe & Zimmerli, 1997; Le Poidevin & McBeath, 1993; Sandbothe, 1998a). Central to contemporary philosophy of time is the attempt to relate the varying time concepts developing in different scientific disciplines to one another, as well as to everyday experience and the technological time simulacra which are today increasingly shaping this experience. Different approaches which attempt to solve this task can be distinguished. They are embedded in two basic tendencies, to be described below, which determine contemporary philosophy of time.

The first basic tendency in contemporary philosophy of time may be described as the **tendency to unify and universalize** our understanding of time. The protagonists of this tendency are convinced that the aspect of time should be considered a new Archimedean point, unifying our everyday experience of self and the world with our academic theories about humans and nature. This point of unity, they contend further, has been emphasized in philosophy (for instance by von Baader, Schelling, Bergson, Whitehead or Heidegger), but has been ignored for far too long by science and technology. It wasn't until the second half of this century that a universal time concept was developed and mathematically operationalized at the interface between physics, chemistry and biology - within the framework of the so-called theories of "self-organization" (see Griffin, 1986; Krohn, Küppers & Nowotny, 1990) - which enabled the old duality of natural and historical time to be overcome (Prigogine 1983, 1987, 1997; Prigogine/Stengers 1988). With this, some believe, the resolution of the conflict between physical and philosophical thinking on time which had characterized the start of the twentieth century is on the way (Zimmerli & Sandbothe, 1993). The German philosopher of time and history, Hermann Lübbe, for instance, highlighted in his book *Im Zug der Zeit*, "that even the temporal structure of historicity, which according to Heidegger and the

hermeneutic theory that followed him results exclusively from the subject's relationship to itself and its constituting of meaning, is in reality a structure indifferent to subject matter, belonging to all open and dynamic systems" (Lübbe, 1992, p. 30).

Lübbe's convergence thesis can claim support from the deliberations of the Nobel prize-winning physicist, chemist and one of the founders of self-organization theories of time, Ilya Prigogine. Already in 1973 Prigogine noted (referring to his thermodynamic theory of irreversibility): "Whatever the future of these ideas, it seems to me that the dialogue between physics and natural philosophy can begin on a new basis. I don't think that I can exaggerate by stating that the problem of time marks specifically the divorce between physics on one side, psychology and epistemology on the other (...). We see that physics is starting to overcome these barriers." (Prigogine, 1973, p. 590 f.). And in the closing chapter of his book *From Being to Becoming*, written in 1984, he adds: "It is remarkable to note the extent to which recent results [in natural science, M.S.] had been anticipated by philosophers like Bergson, Whitehead and Heidegger, whereby the main difference consists in that they could only make such inferences in contrast to science, whereas we are now observing that these insights emerge, so to speak, from scientific research itself" (Prigogine, 1988, p. 262; See Sandbothe, 1998a).

Some of those theories of time which attempt to analyze the problem of time from the perspective of media studies and technology theory are also to be ranked within the tendency toward unification and universalization of time described by Lübbe and Prigogine. Advocates of these theories, most of which argue post-historically, stress that the time concept of self-organization theories, supposedly discovered as a basic structure of nature and history, is in truth nothing but the scientific ennoblement of forms of temporality arising in the simulacry technologies of complex computational models. Hence, unlike Lübbe, the French dromologist Paul Virilio describes the establishment of the new unitary technological time not as the universalization of historical temporal structures, but far more as being their radical destruction. Virilio's basic media-philosophical diagnosis states that the "cinématique" (Virilio, 1990, p. 53) technologies which have spread in the twentieth century aim at a radical dissolution of those temporal structures which have been considered as ineluctable basic constituents of human existence from Augustine through to Heidegger (Virilio, 1991, p. 336).

For Virilio this strong destructive thesis is at the same time linked with the idea of a transhuman time regime of pure speed (Virilio, 1984, 1994), inscribing itself in the human soul worldwide via television and computer networks. The transition from the old opposition between natural and historical time to the new uniform simulacry time of technology comprises, according to Virilio, the essentially apocalyptic logic of the occidental history of technology. Against this background the unification and universalization of time marked by science and technology is described by him not (as by Lübbe or Prigogine) as the originary discovery of an inner convergence point between nature and history, but as the technological victory of inauthentic, natural time structures over the authentic temporality of history. Of course, from Virilio's perspective, one shaped by Christianity, this can only amount to a Pyrrhic victory: for the history of this suppression,

which began with the technological Fall of Man, continues, for Virilio, to testify *ex negativo* the hidden unity of an eschatological temporality, and it is only this latter temporality which, according to him, can lay claim to true universality.

The second basic tendency in contemporary philosophy of time is best understood when one first reminds oneself of the basic presupposition common to the advocates of the unification and universalization tendency. Time is apprehended by them as being a uniform and universal basic structure, exempt from historical contingency and cultural change. Thus Lübbe and Prigogine consider self-evident the "ontological universality of the aspect of temporality" (Lübbe, 1992, p. 31) in the "participatory universe" (Prigogine & Stengers, 1981, pp. 267ff., 287ff. This concept goes back to Wheeler, 1979, pp. 407ff.) of self-organization that envelops man and nature. And Virilio's programme of critical exposure is underlain by the religiously motivated idea of the story of decline of a divinely preordained temporality, one occurring under the banner of technological evolution and branded as 'devilish'.

Supporters of the second tendency, the **tendency to historize and relativize time**, assume in contrast that the role time plays for human understanding of self and the world is a system of practical and technical habits which are culturally divergent and, within individual cultures, subject to change in contingent conditions over time. The American pragmatist Richard Rorty supports this approach with particular refinement. According to Rorty, radical thinking about time must do away with the theologically founded conception that time and eternity come together in the human (Rorty, 1995b). Instead Rorty demands, "that we [should] try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity, where we treat *everything* - our language, our conscience, our community - as a product of time and chance" (Rorty, 1989, p. 22). According to Rorty, we will only achieve this when we no longer mystify time, but understand it in a radically reflexive way as being a product of chance. ¹

The interrelations between the conceptions of time currently discussed in academia, as well as the question of the relationship between scientific time concepts, technological time simulacra, and our everyday understanding of time, are to be dealt with pragmatically on the basis of the historization tendency advocated by Rorty. The convergence of different vocabularies of time emphasized by supporters of the unification and universalization tendency is, from Rorty's perspective, by no means proof of an intrinsic coincidence between natural and historical time or some inner tendency of modern technology to destroy time. The mathematical and technological operationalization and successful functionalization of the vocabulary which, until now, has served the purposes of human self-description illustrate only the historical ability to adapt, inner flexibility and contextual boundness of even so highly attuned vocabularies as those found in physics, mathematics, or logic. The different vocabularies we make use of for differing purposes and in varying contexts are accordingly to be understood neither as convergent in an intrinsic sense, nor as founding or destroying one another in an eschatological sense. Rather, they are themselves subject to change over time, in the course of which they become related and disjoined in various and contingent ways according to the various historical situations

which arise.

The radical temporalization of time expressed in these deliberations had already been outlined in literature by the Austrian novelist Robert Musil. In his novel *The Man without Qualities* he writes, "The train of events is a train unrolling its rails ahead of itself. The river of time is a river sweeping its banks along with it. The traveller moves about on a solid floor between solid walls; but the floor and the walls are being moved along too, imperceptibly, and yet in very lively fashion, by the movements that his fellow-travellers make" (Musil, 1954, p. 174). The inner reflexivity in the modern apprehension of time, articulated here by Musil, was founded within modern philosophy by the differing approaches of Kant and Heidegger respectively (see Sandbothe, 1998a, 1999). Whereas, however, Kant and Heidegger tried secretly throughout their relativizations simultaneously to universalize time anew, the media-philosophical analyses of the problem of time proposed by Jacques Derrida can be registered in the horizon of a radical relativization and historization of time opened up with recourse to Rorty.

Time and Media

In his collection of essays *The Transparent Society* Gianni Vattimo, the Italian pioneer of postmodernity ², advocates the "hypothesis" that "the intensification of communicative phenomena and the increasingly prominent circulation of information, with news flashed around the world (or McLuhan's 'global village') as it happens, are not merely aspects of modernization amongst others, but in some way the centre and the very sense of this process" (Vattimo, 1992, p. 14f.). Vattimo's hypothesis is shared by Jacques Derrida. In the essay *The Other Heading - Reflections on Today's Europe* Derrida formulated his basic media-philosophical diagnosis with a view to Europe as follows: "European cultural identity cannot (...) renounce (...) the great avenues or thoroughfares of translation and communication, and thus, of mediatization. But, *on the other hand*, it cannot and must not accept the capital of a centralizing authority (...). For by constituting places of an easy consensus, places of a demagogical and 'salable' consensus, through mobile, omnipresent, and extremely rapid media networks, by thus immediately crossing every border, such normalization would establish a cultural capacity at any place and at all times. It would establish a hegemonic center, the power center or power station [*la centrale*], the media center or central switchboard [*le central*] of the new *imperium: remote control* as one says in English for the TV, a ubiquitous tele-command, quasi-immediate and absolute" (Derrida, 1992, p. 39f.). What's expressed in this diagnosis is the inner ambivalence with regard to the basic structures of our understanding of the world and ourselves which is emerging in the wake of the comprehensive mediatization of human experience of time. On the one hand an indispensable chance lies in this for the constitution of "European cultural identity"; on the other hand it harbors the danger of the establishment of "a hegemonic center", one which might soar to become the media centre of a new imperium.

The thesis, underlying these thoughts, that historical change in our forms of communication and technological media assumes significance for the philosophy of time was developed by Derrida in the sixties in his early

major philosophical work *Of Grammatology*. With the recent "development of [...] *practical methods* of information retrieval" (Derrida, 1976, p. 10) in view he there unfurled the programme of a time-philosophical analysis of modern mass media (see Sandbothe & Zimmerli, 1994; Sandbothe, 1996a) which had taken shape with Benjamin (1969) and Heidegger (1977; see Sandbothe, 1993) in the first half of the century and been taken up by Anders (1956) and McLuhan (1964) in the fifties and at the start of the sixties. Derrida's basic thesis in *Of Grammatology* is that the form of phonetic writing (i.e., one oriented towards the model of spoken language), which has until now defined the occident, favours a certain understanding of time, namely that of the "linearist" (Derrida, 1976, p. 72) concept of time centered around the temporal dimension of "presence".³

However, with the transition from the dominance of the phonetic type of writing, guided by the notion of the presence in voice of what is signified, to a "nonphonetic" (Derrida, 1976, p. 3) type of writing there results what Derrida calls a "deconstruction of presence" (Derrida, 1976, p. 70) and hence the transition to a "delinearized temporality" (Derrida, 1976, p. 87). From this Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, concludes the necessity of abandoning modern philosophy of time's classical vocabulary: "The concepts of *present*, *past*, and *future*, everything in the concepts of time and history which implies evidence of them - the metaphysical concept of time in general - cannot adequately describe the structure of the trace." (Derrida, 1976, p. 67). The metaphors of the trace and the "différance" (Derrida, 1982, pp. 3-27) are suggested by Derrida to enable deconstructive thinking about time, that is, how time might be conceived of in the wake of this deconstruction of presence. Yet the details of how a theory of time based on this might look is made clear by Derrida neither in *Of Grammatology* nor in his later works. The reason for this is that, according to Derrida, the structure of delinearized thinking about time is inchoate and can hence only be anticipated negatively as a process of ongoing deconstruction to which Derrida's writing has been committed, right through to his most recent publications (Derrida, 1993).

In contrast to Derrida, Rorty has until now only dealt with issues of media and time philosophy in passing. Nonetheless the guidelines for a pragmatic theory of time and media can be inferred from Rorty's scattered comments on this topic. In his considerations Rorty goes one step beyond Derrida. He advocates the thesis that with the end of epistemology, already diagnosed in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty, 1980), and with the switch to a pragmatic variant of hermeneutics not only has the classical vocabulary of temporality become obsolete, but so has the philosophical question about time altogether. He directs this thesis not only against the epistemological mainstream which determines the tradition of modern philosophy, but also against Derrida's grammatological deconstructivism.

Rorty criticizes Derrida and his followers for overestimating the public, political dimension of deconstructivism (see Rorty, 1996 and Rorty, 1998, esp. 98f.). Rorty is of the view that Derrida's actual strength first finds expression in his more recent works. This strength lies, according to Rorty, in giving up the transcendental project of an "ironist theory" (Rorty, 1989, p. 122), which still determined *Of Grammatology*, and replacing it with "private allusions" (Rorty, 1989, p. 122) in order to personalize philosophy by "falling back on private fantasy" (Rorty, 1989, p. 125). In texts such as

Derrida's *The Post Card* (Derrida, 1987) Rorty admires the author for "having had the courage to give up the attempt to unite the private and the public" (Rorty, 1989, p. 125) and having instead consistently construed philosophy as a private project of individual self-creation. And Rorty criticizes *Of Grammatology* insofar as its center is formed by the attempt - which in its criticism of metaphysics itself remains metaphysical - to develop a 'negative' theory of time as a phenomenon of "*trace, reserve, or différance*" (Derrida, 1976, p. 93).

Rorty's comments about media are also to be understood against this background. They are based on the lesson, gained from Proust, that "novels are a safer medium than theory" (Rorty, 1989, p. 107). More important than a profound media theory grounded on a philosophy of time is, in Rorty's view, the practical efficacy which can derive from narrative media such as "the novel, the movie, and the TV program" (Rorty, 1989, p. xvi). Rorty's concern here is primarily with content, that is, with the concrete narratives offered by the media. They are to contribute in bringing us further in the "process of coming to see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them'" (Rorty, 1989, p. xvi). The central task of the media lies, according to Rorty, in the creation of concrete solidarity between people who have grown up with different vocabularies and who could learn step by step through the media to intertwine their vocabularies with one another (cf. Welsch, 1996).

The philosophical analyses, presented by Derrida, of the deep implications which media technologies could develop for the basic structures of human temporality appear, from Rorty's viewpoint, to be a vain undertaking destined to failure. Indeed one must agree with Rorty that the in-depth media-philosophical hermeneutics outlined in Derrida's *Grammatology* are a kind of historized transcendental philosophy. Nonetheless Rorty will be unable to deny that the attentiveness to the temporal forms and perceptive structures which are establishing themselves in the tele-technological interplay between human and machine is an important factor to be considered when judging the solidarity-inducing effects that can derive from electronic media. The following two sections of these considerations will attempt to bring together both aspects - that of 'content' accentuated by Rorty and the 'formal' aspect foregrounded by Derrida - by taking a look at the Internet.

The Media Temporalities of the Internet

In 1995 the American computer sociologist Sherry Turkle published a book entitled *Life on the Screen: s Identity in the Age of the Internet* which can already be considered a classic of humanities Internet research. In this book the author advocates the interesting thesis that the concrete conditions of experience in the Internet make accessible a multitude of those relationships which had been formulated by Derrida and other postmodern philosophers in the sixties and seventies as complex theorems in esoteric language. Turkle describes the Internet's computer-mediated communication against this background as an experience through which Derrida's thinking is brought "down to earth" (Turkle, 1995, p. 17). George P. Landow and Jay David Bolter had already arrived at similar results in the eighties in their investigations into the basic hypertextual structures of electronic textuality used on stand-alone computers. Thus Landow, in his book *Hypertext*.

Convergences of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology, emphasizes that "something that Derrida and other critical theorists describe as part of a seemingly extravagant claim about language turns out precisely to describe the new economy of reading and writing with electronic virtual (...) forms" (Landow, 1992, p. 8). And Bolter makes clear in his book *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* that "the electronic medium can demonstrate easily what Derrida could only describe laboriously in print (...)" (Bolter, 1991, p. 166).

The background to the view advocated by Turkle, Landow and Bolter - the view that in the Internet basic ideas of postmodern philosophy are coming into their own as concrete communications practices - can be illuminated more closely by looking at Derrida's grammatological deconstruction of the linear concept of time. The guiding thesis in doing this is that the pragmatic line of argument, defended by Rorty against Derrida, gains particular relevance in view of the Internet (Sandbothe, 1998c). What requires complex philosophical deconstructions in the medium of the printed book, becomes a pragmatic everyday experience by means of a contingent change in the structure of media. The solidarity-inducing effect of the Internet's networked semiotic structures comes to light clearly in the factual emergence of "virtual communities" (Rheingold, 1994). But it's not only, and not primarily, content which leads to solidarity. Thus Derrida remains right to some extent against Rorty. Having the chance to determine collectively the conditions of presence brings humanity together. The actual and fascinating potential of the Internet, which I will now turn to, is that it makes possible decidedly pragmatic forms of temporality by providing the formal technical prerequisites for determining the conditions of presence.

The World Wide Web's graphical user interface stands at the heart of the Internet today. The older, classical Internet services are to be distinguished from this. Among these older applications are services ranging from e-mail and talk, Net News and mailing lists, through IRC, MUDs and MOOs. Common to all of these is that, in contrast to the hypertextual World Wide Web, they are oriented solely toward the model of linear textuality. Alterations in our practical dealings with signs which are relevant for the philosophy of time and media can already be ascertained in the use of these simple communications services. In the following the analysis will be restricted to these simple services.⁴ The alterations resulting will be demonstrated using the Internet's three most important synchronous communications - IRC, MUDs and MOOs - services as examples.

In IRC, MUDs and MOOs writing functions as a medium of direct synchronous communication between two or more conversation partners who are physically separated and who, as a rule, have never seen each other. Up to a point the anonymity peculiar to the textual medium of the book is connected in the pseudonymity of "on-line chat" with the synchronous interactivity and immediate presence of the conversational partners which characterize spoken language in face to face communication. In computer-mediated communication features which previously served as differential criteria for the distinction between language and writing are becoming entangled. The transitions between language and writing are becoming fluid. The traditional distinction of spoken language as a medium of presence is undermined by what might - to adopt a term of Husserl's - be called the 'appresent presence'⁵ of the participants in the written

conversation of on-line chat. This refers to the form of telepresence characteristic in the Internet: i.e., a mode of virtual presence in the absence of real bodily presence. Whereas, of course, appresent agents continue to have bodily presence, this is in no way directly constitutive of their presence in the chat environment. It is the *mise en scène* in writing of a conversation, in which language is interactively written instead of verbalized, that can be described as the tendency toward *scriptualization of language*.

Corresponding to this, as a parallel phenomenon, is a tendency toward the *verbalization of writing*. The medium of writing is used in the conditions of book printing as a distributive technology which excludes the immediate interaction between sender and receiver. In contrast, the Internet opens up possibilities for usage through which writing can be deployed as a medium permitting constant switches in position between sender and receiver in a flexible manner similar to that of spoken conversation. It is this language-like, that is reciprocal, usage form of an interactively used writing in conversational mode which can be called the tendency toward verbalization of writing.

The parallel nature of the two transformation tendencies - toward scriptualization of language and verbalization of writing - indicates that neither of the two referents, neither spoken language nor writing, remains unaltered. In on-line chat the communicative mode of spoken language is disjoined from the verbal medium and adopted in that of writing. The characteristic features of the spoken word thus realize themselves as a sign of a sign; that is, as the now written sign of the spoken sign. Conversely writing is disjoined from the typical characteristics of written language. In on-line chat it becomes interactively modelable and contextually situated, a form of writing functioning in much the same way as spoken language. This means that the written word is no longer misinterpreted as being the (written) sign of an authentic sign - with the latter itself being no longer sign-like - instead the written word is understood as being the sign of a sign of a sign and so on, i.e., as part of an unending semiotic process with a pragmatically determined relative end.⁶ The result of these two tendencies is that our understanding of what is meant both by (spoken) 'language' and 'writing' is undergoing a decentralization which reveals how our previous conceptions of the two had been shaped by contingent media conditions.

Through this twofold decentralization of language and writing, taking place in the Internet, media technology is laying the grammatological foundation for a delinearized temporality. Space and time are, from Derrida's perspective (unlike, say, that of Kant), not *a priori* forms of intuition transcendently underlying the system of empirical signs. They are far more the effects of a grammatologically describable structure. To quote Derrida: "Origin of the experience of space and time, this writing of difference, this fabric of the trace, permits the difference between space and time to be articulated, to appear as such, in the unity of an experience" (Derrida, 1976, p. 65f.).

What with Derrida somewhat nebulously and quasi-transcendentally trades under the name "fabric of the trace", is met with in our experience of time in the media conditions of the Internet as the concrete practice of modified sign usage and the associated transformations. In place of a hierarchical

framework of representation - in which the proximity of signs to the transparent presence of the signified is central - comes in the Internet a mesh of pragmatic appresences and semiotic interrelations. The temporal interplay of these appresences no longer takes place here in the theoretical horizon of representation, but is bound into the pragmatic context of concrete performed actions. It is this transition from a theoretical temporality of representation to a temporal pragmatics of semiotic action which distinguishes the Internet's media signature.

What does this mean for the specific experience of time which users have in dealing with the Internet? To answer this question it is helpful to contrast the temporal conditions being practised in Internet use with those temporal schemata familiar to us from the use of television. Whereas television prescribes its recipients a fixed linear time track, the timing, that is the temporal arrangement of on-line meetings in MUDs and MOOs takes place through individual agreements between users. Here too, of course, certain regularities in practice quickly establish themselves. But these regularities are appointments you make yourself, which can be made the object of dealings and discussion within the Internet's virtual communities. In place of a prescribed presence, conveyed to passive recipients by the medium of television, come in the Internet's communication services socially constructed times of presence, within which users constitute their identities on the bedrock of writing-based interaction in a context of shared plans for the future.

Furthermore, in the virtual surroundings of text-based communications worlds users themselves have the chance to invent and to program the narrative description of the virtual space in which they, along with other participants, move. Space no longer seems to be a given entity, within which you simply move around passively and on which you can have no influence whatsoever. Rather it becomes a consciously constructed and aesthetically staged artifact. Along with the rooms around which on-line agents move, the times in which respective narratives are played out are also staged by the participants themselves. The peculiar virtual spatiality of MUDs and MOOs goes along with their specific temporality. Unlike the users of television or computer games designed for stand-alone machines, the inhabitants of the Internet's communicative, text-based worlds of MUD and MOO are not forced into prescribed simulations of space and time, but rather experience space and time as creatively shapeable constructions of their narrative and cooperative imagination. In MUDs and MOOs a theatricalization of space and time takes place. Participants who have and make use of programming rights become the architects and dramaturgists of a virtual theatre, on whose electronic stage the spatio-temporal base structure of our perceptions itself becomes the object to be staged (see also Sandbothe, 1998b).

The text-based constitution of these communications landscapes is of central importance for the peculiar narrative spatiality and temporality of MUD and MOO worlds. Through the anaesthetic reduction of communication to the medium of an interactively functioning script the visual, acoustic and tactile cues which we subconsciously presuppose in face to face communication become the object of conscious construction in the medium of writing. The appresent presence of participants in on-line chat means that, so as to be present as a chat participant at all, we must

describe to the other participants what we look like, how our voice sounds and our skin feels, in what time and space we move, and, all in all, what kind of beings we are in what kind of a world. Our actions and the interactions with our communications partners and virtual objects also take place in the medium of digital writing, that is, in the process of interactive writing and in the mode of the sign itself.

The interpretive nature of our everyday understanding of ourselves and the world as well as the constructed nature of our "ways of worldmaking" (Goodman, 1978) are in this way becoming explicit and experienceable for everybody. Therein lies an important enlightening dimension of the interactive, writing-based forms of Net communication. In the interactive writing of MUDs and MOOs our dealings with signs prove themselves to be a practice which is concerned not with the representation of an extra-semiotic reality, but with constructive action in and through signs. To this extent it can be said in a quite pragmatic and concrete sense that within the Internet reality becomes the interplay of signifiers, a textual web of mutually referential signs, whose meaning no longer refers to a sign-neutral externality, but constitutes itself intersubjectively in the dimension of concrete interactions.

Media Philosophy

Against this background let us finally come back to Rorty. Rorty suggests apprehending media as literary forms of narrative which through their "sad and sentimental stories" (Rorty, 1993c, p. 118f.) can effect solidarity. His hope is that with the help of media we might succeed in bringing together groups of people who have grown up in different social, political and geographical cultures and with varying views by "linking through a thousand small stitches and (...) conjuring up a thousand small similarities" (Rorty, 1994a, p. 87). This utopia, one which understands "moral progress in the sense of increasing *sensitivity* and growing receptiveness for the needs of an ever increasing multitude of people and things" (Rorty, 1994a, p. 79), can be directly related to the transcultural communications practices which are characteristic of virtual communities in the Internet.

In his book *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* the French hypermedia philosopher Pierre Lévy describes the Internet as "the creation of a new medium of communication, thought, and work" (Lévy, 1997, XX) which will "enable us to think as a group (...) and negotiate practical real-time solutions to the complex problems we must inevitably confront" (Lévy, 1997, XXVII). Lévy bases this view on a social vision of the Internet which had already been formulated in 1968 by the heads of the American Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). With a view to "on-line interactive communities" of the future, the two ARPA chiefs Licklider and Taylor wrote: "In most fields they will consist of geographically separated members (...). They will be communities not of common location, but of *common interest*. (...) life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity" (Licklider & Taylor, 1968, p. 30f). This quote makes it clear that even in the military context of the ARPANET, which was developed by the US Defense Ministry at the end of the sixties and

from which the Internet was later to follow, the social dimension of the network played a central role.

The horizon appearing in the considerations by Lévy, Licklider and Taylor of a dimension of the Internet leading to the formation of transgeographic communities and transcultural solidarities is based not primarily, and not solely, in content, but already results from the fact that interactive networks engender forms of communication which ease the emergence of transversal interest-based communities. In IRC, MUDs and MOOs it becomes possible for people separated in space and time, and to this extent living in different worlds, to live virtually in a common world whose basic spatio-temporal coordinates they construct together in a cooperative process of negotiation. The enlightening dimension of interactive Net communication mentioned above - which can bring about an awareness of the interpreted and constructed nature of our day-to-day understanding of ourselves and the world - plays an important role in this. For recognition of the contingent character of even our deepest beliefs represents an important basis for transcultural dialogue that is concerned precisely with interweaving contingent beliefs of varying origin with one another.

The philosophical backgrounds which codetermine the social, political and enlightening aspects of new media are, admittedly, not considered by Rorty, whose considerations have until now been restricted to classical mass media such as "the novel, the movie, and the TV program" (Rorty, 1989, p. xvi). The reason for this lies not least in that Rorty so sharply delimits the public-political sphere of media from the esoteric vocabularies of philosophy. Philosophical vocabularies are, in his view, to be understood as their authors' private projects of self-creation, allowing little to be said about their relevance for common sense. And if philosophical vocabularies do find their way to the common man, which according to Rorty is also quite possible in exceptional cases, then this occurs "in the long run" (Rorty, 1993b, p. 445), that is, in the spectrum of historical developments which are to be measured on the scale of centuries (see also Rorty, 1991, p. 72f.).

This conservative estimation of the significance of philosophy ought to be revised in the age of new media technologies. The parallels described between Derrida's *Grammatology* and the transformations occurring in the Internet should have made it clear, up to a point, that the "process of European linguistic practices changing at a faster and faster rate" (Rorty, 1989, p. 7), described by Rorty himself in the first chapter of his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, simultaneously leads to more rapid and more radical changes in the philosophical bedrock of common sense than Rorty is prepared to admit. For this reason Rorty's comments in which he calls "the esoteric matters with which Derrida [is] obsessed (e.g. the presupposed primacy of speech over writing)" (Rorty, 1995a, p. 440) "a vagary on his [i.e., Derrida's] part" (Rorty, 1991, p. 96, footnote 17) which is "irrelevant (at least so far as we can presently see) to the public life"⁷ also seem in need of revision. Statements of this kind ignore the media-philosophical significance due to Derrida's considerations in the context of new communications and information technology (see already Ulmer, 1985). A media-pragmatic reading of the *Grammatology* can help in gaining an insight into the interplay between the development of philosophical vocabularies, the establishment of new media technologies, and changes in the common man's everyday understanding of self and the world.

If one interprets the technical media of modernity as machines, with whose help whole societies can acquire new vocabularies, new forms of temporality and new ways of worldmaking in a relatively short time, then it becomes clear that issues of media politics have genuine philosophical dimensions and that philosophical theories of media have eminently political aspects. These relationships are in need of a differentiated analysis, one in league with neither the cultural critique of a post-historical media eschatology nor with the retreat of philosophy to a supposedly private domain of individual self-creation. What is needed is, in contrast to this, an active interplay between media philosophy and media politics in the Internet age, one which critically codetermines new technologies. An interplay such as this would be of particular importance in the conditions of increasing commercialization of new technologies. For through the unreflected commercialization of interactive networks there exists the danger that the opportunities contained by the Internet might turn into risks (Sandbothe, 1998d).

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Footnotes

¹ On the pragmatic temporalization of time see the contributions by Richard Rorty, Barry Allen, Mike Sandbothe and Dieter Sturma in: Gimmler, Sandbothe and Zimmerli, 1997, 1-78.

² The concept of postmodernity is used here and in the following in the sense of a "postmodern modernity" developed by Wolfgang Welsch (see Welsch, 1987, 1988; Welsch & Sandbothe, 1997).

³ See here Derrida's grammatological definition of presence as the "formal essence of the signified" (Derrida, 1976, 18.)

⁴ For a media philosophical analysis which also incorporates hypertextual World Wide Web see Sandbothe 1996b and 1997.

⁵ The concept of appresence is formed as a free analogy to the concept of appresentation coined by Edmund Husserl. What I call 'appresent presence' is the form of telepresence characteristic in the Internet, that is, a mode of virtual presence based on the absence of real bodily presence. Appresent presence is distinguished by its permanent postponement of bodily presence, that is, by its being only ever co-present in the mode of appresence, but never present in the sense of a pure presence.

⁶ Thus in the medium of Internet a far-reaching, internal development in philosophy becomes explicit and manifest, namely that which Josef Simon, following on from Derrida, systematically developed in his *Philosophy of the Sign* (Simon, 1995) and situated historically within the framework of a "process of inversion" (Simon, 1995) of the semiotic thinking of occidental philosophy.

⁷ Rorty, 1995a, p. 448. See also Rorty, 1991, p. 88, footnote 7, where Rorty emphasizes, that "it is a mistake to think that Derrida, or anybody else, 'recognized' problems about the nature of textuality or writing which had been ignored by the tradition."

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