

## CULTURE OF DIALOGUE VS. AESTHETICS OF INTERACTIVITY

Divna VUKSANOVIĆ<sup>1</sup>

1. Assoc. Prof., PhD, Faculty of Drama Arts, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia  
Corresponding author: divnavuk@Eunet.rs

Regarding the comment of the film director Leni Riefenstahl, stated in the context of thorough preparations for shooting the film *Triumph des Willens* in 1934, and published in the text that describes events that had taken place in the „backstage“ during preparation of the grandiose party gathering of the Third Reich, in which the author claims that everything was “in the function of camera”, and that at the shooting of the National-Socialist Party congress, with participation of a million “extra”, that the whole event was organized with the purpose of realizing one spectacular film, or creating special propaganda material from the Hitler’s era<sup>1</sup>, it could be said that the outcome of this unique cinematographic-ideological venture, in the symbolic sense of the word, represented return to the idea of Plato’s cave myth, in which gigantic cinematographic illusion, by projecting moving images on the cave wall, outlines our reality. This is how the cave myth becomes again actualized as a basic of modern conception of “what it is”, but the nature of its narrative, in our opinion, is not predominantly discursive, it is rather imaginal (visual), focused on the camera eye that significantly substitutes former world of *logos* and its immanent dialectic of movement.

Thus the reality, from its part, instead of a mark of “*meaning*”, assumes qualities of instability and permanent “moving” of illusory imaginal surfaces and shadows, on which alternatively take place spectacles of congresses, wars, sport competitions, military parades, terrorist attacks, fashion happenings, open heart surgeries etc, if it is at the moment fixed by the eye of film, TV or web camera, or “lit up” by giant reflectors, directed, instead on the enemy’s air force, on the night sky, as Paul Virilio points out, in its own imaginal power (which, according to paraphrase of his statement printed in *Informatics bomb* suggests the end of image),

thought as endless power of image copying. Reconciliation with such, (auto)multiplied reality, that identifies itself with some sort of mythically constructed totalitarianism, shaped to the history on omnipotent cinematographic, and later on a Omni media present will, which forms the world according to multi illusionism of modern film, TV, Internet and multimedia technology, represents, as it seems, dominant volition and expression of today’s epoch.

In the act of (media) mediated reality, viewed from the systemic point, primacy over the work of term, in this case, is taken over by the picture, or phenomenal world, generated through cinematographic and/or electronic images, that produce illusion which is at the same time reality itself. The author of the text titled “Renaissance Now! Media Ecology and the New Global Narrative” interprets this turn as a new kind of understanding literal reality that now becomes “picture of reality”.<sup>2</sup> Here, therefore, the concern is not mere technological progress and evolution or radical revolution of reality, accomplished through mass usage of new informatics strategies of mind acting, it is rather, in the author’s view, reactualization of usage of interactive and other media, seen in the literal sense of the word- as is DNA, for example, in the context of promoting a new, renaissance concept of culture, which was allegedly inaugurated by so-called „cyberpunk culture“.<sup>3</sup>

Generally speaking, the issue of truth and, associated with that, dialog, as a method of searching for truth and meaning since the ancient, antique Greek times, remains open in the “renaissance” or “revolutionary” period of ruling of (moving) pictures, „freed“ in the space of so-called „information society“ or seducing shadows which continuously pop up before our eyes. But, in what kind of relation are so-called “culture of dialogue”, “visual”, “popular” or

“cyberpunk” culture, and so-called “advertising” or, on the opposite, “culture of resistance” that questions all the previously listed paradigms of the world of culture – and is it possible, hypothetically speaking, to have all these forms of cultural acting in one cultural map?<sup>4</sup>

This intention is, we would say, characteristic for principles of postmodern pluralism, that combine old rhetorical patterns with specific derivatives of so-called „electronic culture“, which results in crisis of cultural, social, communicational and all other values, ending in total “relativism” which, to tell the truth, annuls value based power hierarchies, but, at the same time, also denies all those important “differences” that form dialogue, reducing it to “tolerant”, horizontal informatics connections in one implosive “picture” of meaning and existence. In that way dialogue becomes only one of numerous possible communication worlds which, apparently, gradually gives in to exchange activity that stands beyond scope of dialectizing, and that, furthermore, as its condition, and the result of the conversation process itself, possesses the game of identity and difference, actualized in a dynamic space of *conceptual vanishing*.

Different from the “culture of dialogue”, in which the direct conversation is the basic medium (environment) and disposition of total cultural development, in other forms of cultural praxis it seems that prevails that visual-media component of cultural development, founded on various possibilities of media mediated communication. This is, above all, applied to mass media and use of so-called new media. Even when they use the form of dialogue as its program skeleton, creating in such a way an illusion of searching for truth and meaning (alive conversations in studio, *talk show* programs, panel discussions and the like) the modern mass-media most often transfer this communication form in mere media debate which is, according to theoreticians of the Nansen school of dialogue, let’s say, totally contrary to the essence of dialogue way of communicating.<sup>5</sup>

Besides, majority of contemporary

communication theoreticians hold the thesis of convergence of media<sup>6</sup>, overtaking, to some extend, the old McLuhan’s idea of transformation of the old environments and contents into new technologically generated ones<sup>7</sup> which eventually leads to Fiddler’s more developed theory of mediamorphosis.<sup>8</sup> But, co-action of different media, their mutual technological compatibility and, connected with that, faster and faster technical advancement directed towards multimedia and intermedia acting, improves communication, as it seems, only in quantitative, but not in qualitative sense, especially taking into consideration that the main environment (i.e. medium) for dialogue is such cultural paradigm based on possibilities of direct exchange between subjects of communication, and without any technical-technological mediator. Mutual convergence of media and their interaction lead to establishing communication activities between media as such, while the former subject of dialogue gradually and systematically becomes one of many interactive environments that applies actions of future media mediations.

Contrary to this, as it appears, the basis for processes of media integration is still a myth (maybe even Plato’s myth of allegorical vision of cave), or narrative that acts in a new, interactive ambiance which, as McLuhan indicates, does not represent mere “passive layer”, but belongs to the class of today’s “active processes”.<sup>9</sup> The thesis that environment around us, thanks to advanced technologies, increasingly takes the role of initiating various communication activities, transferring the primary position of object that bears action into specific subject of communication, doesn’t mean anything else but *factum* that medium of communication becomes not only “subject of knowledge” in the former sense of the notion, but also the communication content. Regarding this, McLuhan states: „Today, a young student grows up in a electrically configured world. That is not the world of wheels, but of eclectic circles, it is not the world of fragments, but of integral patterns. Today’s student lives mythically and deeply”.<sup>10</sup> However, in regard to dialogues pattern of

tutoring that, was characteristic for the antique world spread, metaphorically speaking, from Agora, via Plato's Academia, till the sunset of the Enlightenment, the contemporary student exists in interactive environment that constantly affect him; therefore, McLuhan rightly poses the question: "In what connection is the educational scene with 'mythical' world of electronically processed data and experiences that he takes for granted".<sup>11</sup>

If is dialogue, as Djuro Susnjic claims, „a characteristics of a high culture which is open and creating“<sup>12</sup> and which implies thinking (as conversation with oneself) and critical engagement, so it could be in permanent moving, then one postmodern state that does not suit any more this way of communicating, questions meaning and value of dialogue in its traditional form, offering in exchange one interactive environment that takes over the role of the former dialogue subject/subjects, making brand new structures and models of information exchange and completely different „communication values“. Couldn't from this be inferred that today's era demonstrates fall of culture into civilization, in which the leading role, instead of dialogue which keeps within itself potential of truth, meaning and difference, play electronic and visual media, or multi- and intermedia, favoring in that way new forms of communication, conditioned by growth of civilization values, based on the idea of technical-technological progress and fetishing of the whole exchange sphere.

Regarding the new ambiance, or time in which modern generations of children and youth grow up, McLuhan continues: "This situation is connected with the problem of 'culturally retarded child'. That child lives not only in a poor city district but more and more in the suburbs where live families with higher incomes. A culturally retarded child is a TV child."<sup>13</sup> It actually grows up in an electronic environment that gradually becomes interactive (interactive TV, computer and video games and the like), but not suitable for direct exchange of experiences, emotions and thoughts, implied in the dialogue situation. Although this „TV child“,

*per definitionem*, is „culturally retarded“, it is still in touch with its time which substitutes dialectical skill of talking with various technical novelties, that come to him, like constant challenges, from immediate environment.

In the media space of the planetary village, consisted of big TV systems like CNN and other global TVs, this problem becomes more conspicuous, if we take into consideration a phenomenon of media convergence, which seems to align more to TV and its specific "model of communication". In the discussion about the so-called "CNN-effect", Fraiser Cameron says that TV affects public opinion on the level that is far more mass comparing to the event "coverage" in the print media, which in return affects significant changes in the style of news reporting<sup>14</sup>, which, in our opinion, increasingly transforms the "media convergence" into TV ways of global opinion forming and, in line with this, crucial external political decision making in the US (Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, Ruanda, Kosovo, etc.), which is, at the same time, reflected on international community acting and so-called "world order", and its actual historical movement.

Projects such as information superhighway, for example, that came from the period of Clinton's administration, support the fact of attempting to inaugurate "politics" of so-called "the Information Society" by the American government, not only in the domain of transfer of national, but also international communications<sup>15</sup>, potentially "revolutionizing" the way of life, work, education, research and exchange of information in the context of using new media and communication technologies<sup>16</sup>, both in the American context of acting and on the level of global communications. In line with this, the question of possibility of citizens' participation in the dialogue with the government and big information systems, using its on-line services in a "common", interactive space has been arisen.

In direct relation with this is the subject of our research which dialogue implicitly treats as an outdated communication form compared with interactive possibilities of simultaneous

polyphonic communications that „annul distance“<sup>17</sup> and communication exclusivity among selected communicators, “democratizing” and potentially spreading space for different communication praxes of certain information systems users. This common allusion to „out datedness“ of dialogue communication forms is caused, in the first place, by growing technical and technological changes in the ambiance that increasingly becomes “interactive”, media mediated and “intelligible”, and thus losing the aura that in the past provided an opportunity for unique and direct contact among interlocutors, which is one of the basic qualities of any dialogue situation.

The change, according to our intuitions, occurred on the ontological, not on the technical level of perception, and “construction” of reality itself. Namely, the subject of the dialogue has moved from an individual to the environment (medium) of communication, which caused this ontological turnabout, where the individual became the object and the medium subject of communication. This are about, as we stated earlier, McLuhan’s assumptions presented in the study on the media, and in relation with the idea of “active surroundings”, that serve as direct theoretical introduction in the practice of interactive TV, video, telecommunication and computers’ technologies. Therefore, the logical consequence of this reversal - in which electronic surroundings become an active participant in communication while the observer happens to be more and more passive - is obvious moving of the sphere of subjectivity from a person to machines that take over the role of the subject of communication in, we would say, a totally „mechanical“ and industrialized way, to what point out terms such as “interaction” (instead of dialogue) or “creative industries” - modern surrogates of so-called “cultural industry”, radically disputed as a means for systemic (destructive) influencing the sphere of mind, consciousness and subjectivity.

It is undeniable that the concept of interactive TV presents a paradigm of theoretical speculation and practical use of TV as a medium which successfully combines TV picture and

computer communication systems. In this way it is demonstrated an attempt to, by using TV interventions, overcome shortcoming of “classical” TV as a “passive” information medium that is, due to usage of analogue infrastructure, “dumb” and one-way, differing from two-way digital, interactive and “smart” TV that is, at the same time, according to some authors such as John Kelly, also “cultural” or “creative” medium of expression.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Kelly thinks that the interactive TV will become in the future “central cultural medium”, if successfully overcomes the basic technical defect of its “essential” passivity.<sup>19</sup>

However, interactivity, as a desirable characteristics of modern TV - implying, at the same time, an active but fragmented audience, i.e. the audience which is no longer a general consumer of a totalized society of spectacle, but is constitutive moment of that same deconstruction process that turns dialogue into a “chat room”, teleshop-exchange, voting mechanism activated via SMS messages, or participating in quiz, reality show programs or some big price game - brings changes in culture of media communication itself, in the sense of knowing of medium and its structure that implies mediation instead of directness and, as replacement of passivity, active participation in programs profiled to provide “communication” only with certain target groups of information consumers, primarily with those that are, at least on the basic level, media literate.

It is obvious that this and similar technical innovations lead to overcoming limitations of modern TV as one of the leading media today, however there is a question whether technical-technological advancing of mainly visual media and merging of technologies of two or more media, result in true development in the communications domain, at least when it comes to dialogue and cultural paradigm that it confirms. Moreover, it should be taken into consideration that culture of dialogue, besides competitors in the mass media sphere and multimedia attempts of advancing communication flow of modern society, experiences threats from the environment that



increasingly becomes an active factor of various modules of communication, and from that common medium which, like other environments, has become goods on the market.

Critique of interactivity and multimedia that nowadays increasingly gains advantage over usage of so-called "classical dialogue" is concerned, according to our knowledge, not as much with different techno-politics and their more or less successful implementations in the practice of contemporary societies, but more with disappearance of basic dialogue values which, as David Halberstam claims, have been substituted with "culture of announcements and claims" to the account of older "culture of proving".<sup>20</sup> What suffers here is, strategically speaking, dialogue argumentation which almost completely vanishes from the context of interactive technologies use, because media information exchange is reduced to the rational mediation that is product of one, generally speaking, technical reproducibility of the communication sphere and speed of its convergence, not of the original and unique communication acting, similar to former conversational form of subjectivity.

In this regard, the most important influence on the culture and dialogue space of exchange, as it seems, comes from the sphere of money which is the most general goods and at the same time, the dominant communication "medium". The latest processes of market globalization only reinforce the assumption that money as means of communication among various cultures increasingly becomes, besides TV and other electronic media, the integrative "interactive" environment that considerably subjectivize our reality. Since "profit" is in close relation with processes of commercialization of images and growing world of advertising which, in the US, for example, has become part of common life style<sup>21</sup>, that confirms McLuhan's idea of different kinds of media that function by "accelerating exchange" - from money, through wheel, to alphabet and so on<sup>22</sup> - and the hypothesis that "none of the media means nothing and does not exist by itself, but only in constant interaction with other media."<sup>23</sup>

Therefore it is not surprising that there is very strong co-acting among media, big advertisers and corporation capital that, as it seems, basically make a global interactive environment or a dominant means and medium of exchange of humankind communication and goods values. Indeed, this is about systemic interaction of different media not only towards ex subject of communication, but also in reciprocity, which ultimately results in interaction processes becoming bearers of total sphere of subjectivity, and media convergence becoming a way of its "integration" and real foundation. Consequently, any attempt of resisting globally integrated communication regimes is inadequate if it is directed only to a certain particle, and not to whole dominant paradigm and its interactive cultural syntheses. A good example of importance that each culture of resistance review these processes, especially when it articulates its strategy of art engagement or direct political acting, is so-called "the Molotov Organization" which for its motto chose the "slogan": "Whatever (it) is... we are against it".<sup>24</sup>

If traditional culture of oral and written dialogue, while keeping in mind use of media, is compared with emerging modern cyber-culture, it can be concluded that dialogue as both a communication means and a "message", nowadays gradually has been replaced by a general interactive capacity of media, or virtual audience, founded by a specific modal communication praxis (economy, ethics and politics), based on technologically determined users' behavior about which is written in a number of Manovich's texts and a lot of other very influential articles of authors who follow McLuhan's, reflections and belong to so-called "technological determinists". On one hand, technological or media determinists have right when they support the thesis that new communication technologies necessarily cause crucial psychological, economical, social and other changes in global surroundings, but, on the other hand, their enthusiasm inevitably calls for critique, because they take these changes for granted, finding in them sole "initiators" of today's, at least problematic idea of progress.

Nevertheless, it seems that everything which emerges as a result of the old media deconstruction, including a dialogue form of communication as a special form of either daily, art (drama literature, dialogue form of novels, epistolary and chat production and the like) or philosophical communication and, at the same time, thinking processes itself, directs its moving towards new media development which the only hope is: money, while so-called “exit strategy”, at least for now, – is considered as unknown.<sup>25</sup> However, there is no doubt that many critically oriented thinkers and contemporary artists try to outline an alternative perspective of historical movement without denying developmental scopes of new communication and media technologies, and that as individuals they still act interactively in the spirit of a characteristic, subversive criticism, initiating specific “cultural wars” whose main tool or means is, metaphorically speaking, “banana criticism”. The example of such a subversive art venture, by using own irony (attacks with fruit) and, parodically, the method of *reductio ad absurdum*, suggests that banana “incorporation” and “installation” be the interactive aid or the “critical tool”, that will establish some future value choice, made in the spirit of total acting of the Molotov’s Organization, which was mentioned previously in the text.<sup>26</sup> The questions whether this kind of interactive terrorism, and to what degree – demonstrating itself, in this case, as a sort of art-critic act that questions the whole interactive surrounding, and in absence of dialogue as a communication act substituted by immediate action – is today applicable and efficient and didn’t communication, and together with it the field of art, win the battle on the visual and interactive plan to the cost of dialogue communication values, remain, at least for now, open.

It is clear, however, that dialogue culture, due to systems changes emerging in the global surroundings (economical, technological, media), and gradually taking over the role of subject of interactivity, loses its function and significance that it had in previous times, giving

in, unwillingly, its “scope” of realization to a totally different communication practice around which new intelligible potentials of perception, thought, emotions and acting are integrated, while the subject of communication becomes medium (environment) of active exchange, and the medium of those transactions becomes the subject, or the bearer of all potential interactions. Regardless of the (subjective) dialogue origin of this actual interactive exchange, the possible conclusion imposed to modern researchers of basic civilization communication flows, develops in the direction of questioning the thesis of withering or “surpassing” dialogue cultural paradigm which nowadays starts to act through negative moments of its ahistorical movement and interactively modeled media (aesthetic) mediation. Consequences of such substitution are, besides reversible moving towards the beginning, i.e. Plato’s definition of the cave ambiance, developmental tendencies that take us into “dialogue” with smart surroundings and its interactive dynamics of subjectivity, that more and more extensively and intensively mediates us.

### Endnotes

1. “In *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichs-Parteitag-Films*, Leni Riefenstahl writes: ‘Preparations for the congress were taking place together with preparation work for the film, which means that the event was organized in the spectacular manner, not only as people’s gathering but also to provide material for a propaganda film... everything was in the function of the camera...’” Paul Virilio, *Rat i film I: Logistika percepcije, (War and Film I: Logistics of Perception)*, Institut za film, Belgrade, 2003.
2. See Douglas Rushkoff, „Renaissance Now! Media Ecology and the New Global Narrative“, in: *Living in the Information Age, A New Media Reader*, Second Edition (Ed. by Erik P. Bucy), Wadsworth, Thomson Learning, CA – USA, 2005, p. 22.
3. Comp. *Ibid*, p. 25.
4. Conception of creating a unique “cultural map” that would, with its content, integrate different cultural phenomena such as, for example, Shakespeare’s references to popular culture of Elisabeth’s era or cartoon TV serial about the Simpson’s, which alludes to the Beatles, Kafka, Tenessi Williams etc., is in direct opposition to the idea of hierahizing of

- culture, or its split between “high” and “low” culture. Developing further this hypothesis, we could conclude *ad hoc* that it is possible to articulate a horizontally structured cultural map, where dialog is parallel to visual communications, interactivity or commercial projects of modern times. Comp. Richard Campbell, „ Culture as a Map“, in: *Media & Culture, An Introduction to Mass Communication*, Third Edition, Bedford/St. Martin’s, Boston – New York, 2002, p.20.
5. Understanding dialogue, according to theoreticians and practitioners of communication skills gathered around Nansen’s Humanistic Academy in Lillehammer (Norway), is in contraposition with debating, because, instead of values of tolerance and cultivated opinion exchange based on the concept of recognition and respect of differences, debate introduces in communication criteria of competition, inequality in regard to position of power that is external to true argumentation, and attempts for dialogue to grow into such conflict of opinions that becomes means for fight against those who think differently and final victory over interlocutors.
  6. The term convergence, used in the media context, implies different meanings starting from seventies and eighties: firstly it was a label for intersecting elements of certain media such as computers and telecommunication, then it served for qualifying development of digital technology that within itself integrates texts, number, picture and sound, and at the end it is used as a term that holds hybrid characteristics of merging media industry and telecommunication. Later on, the meaning of the term was expanded to the domain of culture and so-called “studies of convergence”, but also to transportation, which resulted in associative connection to terms and concepts phrases such as, for example, “superhighway”. In close relation with this term are terms “creativity” (industrial, media) and ‘interactivity”, until the nineties and phenomenon of so-called “interactive TV” as one of the most important applications of convergence in whole media space. See more in “Convergence”, in: *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Second Edition by Asa Briggs and Peter Burke), Polity Press, Cambridge – Malden, UK – USA, 2005, pp. 216-254.
  7. In the “Foreword to the third edition” of McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*, regarding the additional interpretation of his famous philosopheme, the author says: “The expression ‘the medium is the message’ means, from the aspect of the electronic era, that a completely new environment is created. ‘Content’ of that new environment is the old mechanical environment of the industrial period. The new environment reprocesses the old one as thoroughly as TV processes film. For ‘content’ of TV is film.” Marshal McLuhan, *Poznavanje opština, éovekovih produžetaka (Understanding Media)*, Prosveta, Belgrade, 1971, p. 30.
  8. On media convergence, principles and processes of mediamorphosis see Fiddler’s text “Principles of Mediamorphosis”, or the first part of the book *Mediamorphosis* of the same author. Roger Fiddler, “Principles of Mediamorphosis”, in: *Living in the Information Age, op. cit.*, pp. 33-42., or: Roger Fiddler, *Mediamorphosis, Razumevanje novih medija (Understanding the New Media)*, Clio, Belgrade, 2004, pp. 15-49.
  9. See. Marshal McLuhan, *op.cit.*, p. 28, 29.
  10. *Ibid*, p. 29.
  11. *Ibid*, p. 30.
  12. Djuro Susnjiaë, *Dijalog i tolerancija, Iskustvo razlike (Dialogue and tolerance, Experience of difference)*, Čigoja štampa, Belgrade, 1997, p. 51.
  13. Marshal McLuhan, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
  14. See Fraser Cameron, “The CNN effect“, in: *US Foreign Policy after the Cold War, Global Hegemon or Reluctant Sheriff?*, Routledge, London and New York, Reprinted 2003, p. 108.
  15. This is about the discussion initiated and conducted within Clinton’s administration, and with key decision makers in the political sphere and the American public in 1993, with the intention to promote the idea of a transportation system as an on-line communication system, available to everyone in the informatics sense, but also controlled by the Administration. Later on this idea was expanded to the concept of education, and to other forms of social development. See “The Information Society: Will the Information Superhighway Be Accessible to Everyone”, in: *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Mass Media and Society* (Third edition), Ed. by Alison Alexander and Jarice Hanson, The Dushkin Publishing Group, Guilford, Connecticut, 1995, pp. 319-321.
  16. See *Ibid*, p. 319.
  17. About “the death of distance”, in the function of future forming, see the text that deals with trends that shape so-called “new communications”. Frances Cairncross, “The Trendspotter’s Guide to New Communications”, in: *Living in the Information Age, op. cit.*, pp. 7-10.
  18. Comp. John Kelly, „Interactive Television: Is it Coming or Not?“, *Mass Media, Annual Editions* (Ed. Joan Gorham), 03/04, McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, Guilford, Connecticut, 2003, pp. 205-207.
  19. Comp. *Ibid*, p. 206.
  20. Comp. *A Social History of the Media, op. cit.*, p. 248.
  21. “Advertising is indeed the life-stream of the media

in America", it is claimed in the chapter on culture and advertising of a book about intercultural communication, or "dialogue" among various cultures. See Carolyn Calloway-Thomas, Pamela J. Cooper, Cecil Blake, "Advertising and Culture", in: *Intercultural Communication: Roots and Routes*, Allyn and Bacon, USA, 1999. pp. 222-224.

22. Marshal McLuhan, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

23. *Ibid*, p. 62.

24. "Whatever it is... we're against it". In: *Cultures of Resistance*, The Book Factory, London, copies available from: rachred57@hotmail.com.

25. Comp. *Living in the Information Age*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

26. See *Culture of Resistance*, *op. cit.*