Book reviews

Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet, by Sherry Turkle

Web 2.0, *Second Life*, virtual communities, avatars, social software, instant messenger, are often topics of conversation and discussion, whether enthusiastically or with a certain apprehension and disapproval, above all when the question is raised about the socio-effective development of the generations who already have a good command of these tools. In the discussion, opinions are divided between those who view this configuration as a breakdown of physical and cultural barriers and those who consider that we are treating human relations and the relationship with the world too lightly. So that we can place ourselves in a critical position in the light of these practices, Sherry Turkle's work is a useful and enlightening tool, as the research she has been developing is in the field of the subjective relationship and intimacy we establish with technology.

In this work, Sherry Turkle, professor of Social Studies in MIT, traces a temporal chart of the last decades of how we have come to relate to computers and technology and how we have been thinking of ourselves and of the apparatus in this relationship, whether in the realm of philosophy, scientific investigation or even literature and cinema.

Broaching themes like computer interface, artificial intelligence and MUDs (*Multi-User Domains* – simulations of real life in which the users participate, creating characters and interacting with them), Sherry Turkle bases her study on interviews with users who have different experiences with computers, to refer to an "erosion of frontiers between the real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unified self and the multiple self" (p. 12). Thus, what happens in the virtual worlds also touches life offline even because, it should be reminded, the idea of virtual reality precedes communication networks and the idea of cyberspace, despite arguments about the dangers of the Internet and the possible discrepancy between real and virtual life. The participation in these virtual worlds is presented in this work as a simulation of something, a simulation that has invaded our lives for a long time, as Baudrillard (1991) foresaw.

Once this false real/virtual opposition has been overcome, the writer states that experiences with computers and the establishment of technology in our daily lives enable "people to reach a certain understanding of post-modernism and recognise its usefulness in portraying certain aspects of their experiences both online and offline" (p. 25).

To summarise, I present some key ideas that make *Life on the Screen* relevant to our understanding of our relationship with technology:

• *From humans to cyborgs.* The writer shows how, during recent decades, the reflection on the human/machine "opposition", which was due to rapid technological development, created an inverse effect: we think of our humanity *via* the computer, we define it *through* the computer, an idea which is not strange to Donna Haraway (2006) for whom, rather than *being* humans, *we become* humans. *We become human with* others, whether in relation with animals or technology. The computer is, therefore, for these writers, a *cipher-object* which condenses the nucleus of human "nature" that has been "settling". There are many examples given by Sherry Turkle, which illustrate this relationship. Thus, the writer refers to the use of the personal computer in the development and diffusion of psychotherapies, which led to adapt these theories to the machine and, as such, to invest in some psychological theories and not in others. In the same way, we began to think about our "programability", like the machine, with the

development of studies on ADN and the proliferation of antidepressants. Also studies on artificial intelligence are based more and more on the idea that the machine has a measure of unpredictability, just like the human mind which today we consider to be emergent, decentralized and with multiple subjectivities. *Human* and *machine* exist side by side and the difference we see between them becomes more and more subjective.

• *We establish intimate relationships with the computer.* The intimate relationships we form with the computer are varied, from the successful use of psychotherapeutic software for treating depression (which, surprisingly, made the users feel the need to make confidences to the machine), to the "personalization" we make of its surfaces. We want to be alone with our personal computer, building up its "content" and adorning our virtual space. We do not want to dominate the workings of the computer and try to know it as we know a person: we discover short cuts, tricks and peculiarities. Thus, "the physical object has been relegated to the background. The psychological object has become the centre of attention and the object of additional elaboration" (p. 115), says Turkle. In this way, we follow the magical mind of the child for whom toys may have their own personality. The writer places the blossoming of the self-help and "do-it-yourself" world in a context in which the computer becomes the ideal partner for organizing our daily life. The computer, according to Turkle, is therefore a mirror of our *self*.

• *The Internet brings people together and at the same time pushes them away*. Through interaction with other online users, "we project onto our computer screens our personal fantasies in which we are the producers, directors and stars" (p. 37). We can be physically isolated, disconnected from the outside world and at the same time, form significant relationships with other users who are geographically a long way away and whose profile would unlikely be found among our "real life" friends. For other authors, as Sherry Turkle herself says, this is a symptom of the decline in the depth and authenticity with which we experiment with our emotions. Besides, and as Bauman (2005) states, we need the computer and other technologies to be connected to others. We use the mobile phone and text messages so that we can feel that someone is available at any time and is concerned about us. In the same way, one of the charms of the virtual worlds is that there is always someone interested in interacting with us.

• *A performing relationship.* In virtual worlds, we can create characters we can play and whom we can more or less identify with in our life offline. We can keep up a performance to fit the character. As the writer points out, this culture enables us to think about our own identity as being fluid, multiple and complex. She uses as an example the possibility of adopting a different or ambiguous gender online, and the need that many users feel to do this, whether by widening the possibilities of performance or by being able to carry out fantasies which we can accept and fulfil only in a virtual world, understood as a suspension of reality. Thus, the writer returns to the idea of gender performance, the last category of organization of docile bodies, just as suggested by Judith Butler (2003). So we can say that via the identity(ies) we use online, we can think of our identity(ies) offline.

• *The computer as a metaphor.* The writer shows us how, throughout the last decades, computers have ceased to be considered "giant calculators" whose "innards" could be analysed and known, as its behaviour was linear and its program code obeyed rigid, universal criteria. They are now seen as opaque objects, too complicated to be understood and without the need to understand the inner workings to use them. In parallel, the way of thinking about society and our philosophy of our daily life, according to Turkle, changed in the same direction, in a way that it is no longer viable "to analyse complicated things by fragmenting them into simpler parts to enable us to know their contours" (p. 63). When we thought would be able to know the "innards" of the computer, (p. 63), we thought we would know and act about society. In this way, the writer describes the use of Macintosh and browsing via windows as a certain magical sensation, as our clicks and our "navigation" over the surface presented, based on various simulations, allows the realization of actions for which we don't have to even glimpse the internal structures and method of working. But it is for the same reason that many users feel that this object was emblematic of its loss of power as, and in the sense denounced by Ivan Illich, only a few specialists know how the machine works.

• *Browsing by surfaces.* From Sherry Tuckle's analysis of the development of our relationship with our computer, we concluded that we have been choosing to browse by ready-prepared surfaces, which we adapt according to what is allowed, this idea of adaptation being more and more attractive. Surfaces which we assume to be too complex to be analysed and on which we browse with our *avatars* – unfolding disposable identities – entering network games, participating in forums, beginning simulations of real life. In this aspect, the writer follows the view of Baudrillard (1991) about the simulations we produce from other simulations. I'd venture this attraction, this "non-enrolment", is the same that led to

the expansion of the fantastic universes (Tolkien, Harry Potter, New Age). In exchange, we receive the pleasure of browsing. We browse to amplify our *self*: to "stop being me and become another", testing our limits, or so as to know ourselves, seeking a condenser unit for our identity and magnifying its mirror. We are fascinated by this world of creation even within the limits of what we are permitted to create. With the tips of our fingers on our computer keyboard, in the view of Donna Haraway, we approach the image of God and His creative finger. We can become experts and "manoeuvre" a surface (a computer game, an operative system) without knowing its workings in depth. Thus we build ourselves starting with the machine and not vice versa. The development of our relationship with the computer is then presented by the writer as a metaphor of the preference of the surface over the depth, of the simulation over the real, of the trivial over the serious.

• *The virtual as moratorium. Life on the Screen* shows us, from the experiences of the users, how a virtual world can be used as a laboratory of experiences of one's own identity ("On the Internet nobody knows you are a dog", p. 16), where we invent ourselves as we make progress. This then is an element of attraction to the virtual worlds: the possibility of experimenting, playing, testing identities like a prolonged adolescence. Now it is this possibility of unfolding the personality which leads the writer to say that for many users the participation in virtual worlds is a therapy of nature similar to the psychodrama and a period of moratorium.

Following a decade since the Portuguese edition of *Life on the Screen,* the theme of "identity in the era of the Internet" has gained new twists, which naturally have not been dealt with by the writer, as for example:

• *The Observed and the Observers.* The available technologies and the amplification of our existence to a virtual dimension enable us to observe more and to be more observed (note, as an example, the interest in webcams) which, according to Zizek (2004), does not represent a novelty in as much as we need "witnesses" to our acts. Introducing oneself in a virtual public space can be then a good way of having this anonymous audience. In private, there are questions of security regarding the relationships the users establish between themselves via the Internet as well as the tracks we create online and for which we are responsible. Our "virtual acts" are attributed to us via the mechanisms of vigilance.

• *Public diaries.* The explosion of personal weblogs transmits a new relationship of the individual with the reflectivity and the autobiography, as well as the responsibility for the contents. We need to exist online to be recognized.

• *New ways of exclusion.* The institutionalization of "virtual existence" creates new ways of exclusion based, for example, on digital literacy.

• *New spaces for performing.* The use of social software (Orkut, Hi5, Myspace and Facebook being the most popular) has caused a great impact on the structure of the socio-affective life of youngsters. This type of software leads to a "presentation of oneself" (via the selection of images, creation of networks of friends, descriptions of oneself), apart from the *avatars*, and establishes itself more and more as a "performance" space for the subject. In this case, the creation of virtual characters is not dealt with, but rather the construction of one's own identity online, selecting what to show and what to omit, according to common practice.

In our daily life, we are encouraged to have a virtual public life and it is more and more difficult to escape this enticement. In this context, through direct consultation with the users' more subjective experience, *Life on the Screen* has the merit of giving us the trajectory for building relationships with technology, of interpreting this phenomenon according to several theoretical approaches and of showing how the emerging culture of simulation affects the ideas of body, mind and machine, which poses the questions: "What is real? What are we willing to consider real? Up to what extent are we willing to take simulations for reality? How do we maintain the perception that there is a reality which is distinct from simulation?"(p. 108). Such questions touch on our everyday lives and are not specific to the use of the Internet or computers for learning. Thus, only by accepting this prerogative that humanity and technology are closely connected can we, as suggested by Zizek (2004), question ourselves about the " reality of the virtual" and the "virtuality of the real", seeking an answer not for what the subject produces, but for the way the subject is produced in these practices and discussions.

Bibliographic References:

Baudrillard, J. (1991). *Simulacros e simulação*. Lisboa: Relógio D'Água Editores.

Bauman, Z. (2005). *Identidade*. Rio de Janeiro: JZE.

Butler, J. (2003). *Problemas de gênero: Feminismo e subversão da identidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira.

Haraway, D. (2006). *When species meet: feminism after cyborgs*. Conferência proferida no MACBA, Barcelona, a 22 de Maio. Consultado em Julho de 2007, em http://www.macba.es/media/haraway/

Zizek, S. (2004). *The reality of the Virtual. A film by Ben Wright*. Saint Charles, IL: Olive Films.

Mónica Raleiras

Translated by Robert G. Carter

Raleiras, Mónica (2007). Book review of "A vida no écrã. A identidade na era da internet", by Sherry Turkle [1997]. Lisboa: Relógio d' Água.
Sísifo. Educational Sciences Journal, 03, pp. 109-112.
Retrieved [month, year] from http://sisifo.fpce.ul.pt