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Cyberculture and Spiritual Experience

Contemporary culture is mostly technologically mediated. It could be called cyberculture. This growing impact of technology is important for all spheres of human experience. Mostly what is researched is a general attitude towards this sphere, so mainly sheer mediation is considered a problem. Among all other types of experiences that fall for this category there should be also appointed the sphere of spiritual experience. It is elusive and ubiquitous at the same time, elusive because it could be commonly confused with all other types of experience especially with aesthetic and affective, ubiquitous because when people are immersed in cyberculture they tend to identify the whole sphere of technological mediation with something uncanny. That is a reason why this essay address this issue from the phenomenological stance. My aim is not to show how currently empirical research on experiencing spiritual dimension of cyberculture are conducted or what did representatives of humanities have said about it in their theories. It is not of reason of ignorance. When considering spiritual experience in cyberculture researchers mostly start from acknowledging some specific type of spiritual experience. In most cases it is religious one. It cuts the possibility of recognize its more general aspect and tends to narrowing the perspective. The second type of attitude is to create a speculative metaphysics of spiritual experience in cyberculture. So there are two different reasons for conducting this kind of research. Empirical serve as hermeneutic for religious institutions and dogmatic interpretations of religions and speculative are in most cases. There are also free thinkers that occasionally pose this problem. But most of them are not focused on spiritual experience but rather general philosophical attitude that enable or even enforces this kind of being. Phenomenological perspective presented here is a form of thinking how spiritual experience could be researched without reducing it to religious experience, general philosophical ideas or superficial remarks. This agenda is motivated by creating an understanding of intersection of the technologically mediated culture and the spiritual experience. Many distinctions have been made without

answering the question what is spiritual experience. It is what a human considers as such. If we want to trace new kind of spiritual experiences then the easiest way to close this possibility is to create a strict definition based on spiritual experience in non-mediated culture. It does not mean that spiritual experience in cyberculture is so new that it can't be compared to previous experiences. But through that operation there is a growing risk of not identifying what is new and distinct. There is no reason for what research on spiritual experience could not start in cyberculture. So we are asking being immersed in cyberculture what would be not only conditions but how actual spiritual experience could take place. It does not mean that researchers could bracket their own assumptions concerning the ideas of culture and how it conditions all human experience. But phenomenological here means beginning from the start in cyberculture and asking within this sphere and some from distant theoretical perspective outside it. So questions posed here are also ontological because phenomenological attitude manages to form a perspective in which cyberculture would be primary sphere of human life and not additional one. This is a tendency that could be commonly observed across the world. People in their everyday activities are more and more immersed in cyberculture at the expense of spending time at non-mediated activities. But mostly people do not have problem when their work using computers, communicated through different technical media, entertain themselves. But when it comes to spiritual experience there is a problem. Cyberculture becomes a hostile environment and people are not so willing to participate in it in spiritual way. This could be observed by reading information on different websites and social media – rarely the spiritual is described in the form of spiritual. Rather it is spiritual experience. This leads to identifying cyberculture as an non-spiritual sphere. One of meaningful consequence is that when people exclude the possibility of spiritual experience their being would be different. But in the case when people do acknowledge themselves religious or spiritual it generates a type of arbitrary division – the material sphere is a sphere of experiencing spirituality and the cyberculture is a sphere which all other type of activities could take place. If we want to understand what is spiritual experience in cyberculture then 1) we should assume at least theoretically that it possible to have spiritual experiences in cyberculture/experience cyberculture spiritually 2) starting point theoretical consideration and even empirical research is not material culture but cyberculture 3) that leads to treating cyberculture as a new land that has been not explored before – phenomenological attitude serves this purpose.

Instead of referring to well-known theories my research methodology is to propose point of tension between cyberculture and spiritual experience. That approach is motivated by the ontological status of cyberculture. I think that we should also, among many other research agendas, try to think cyberculture as a new phenomenon which it is. This ontological status calls for an more general consideration because contemporary culture through obviousness of mediated experience forget about the notion of cyberculture and the newness that it creates. So this is not an

way of cutting off special phenomena and saying that they belong to cyberculture, but rather even if contemporary culture is cyberculture then researchers have omitted its impact on human ways of being. But this perspective is not of a material scholar present in a material world that looks at something miraculous but rather a cultural studies thinker that is present in cyberculture which is at the same time something common and ontologically extraordinary. This creates a tension because spiritual experience is not something ordinary (at least not in the western culture). This is not due a lack of proper theories but rather to show why and how spiritual experience was not really an important agenda. Ideas presented here originate in my currently developing work on the subject of cyberculture which does not consist mainly with the problem of spiritual experience but is focused on ontology of cyberculture. They could be viewed as its offspring. That does not mean that they are not being undeveloped. Rather I do see a necessity to highlight different issues from different perspectives all over again. Such repetitive practice is purposefully excessive because it could uncover hidden assumptions concerning cyberculture. Need for this kind of repetitive asking is also originates in the contingent essence of cyberculture – which is paradoxical because at the same time it has an essence (that enables for example a spiritual experience) and does not have one (it changes so quick that it can't be properly researched). But when we consider cyberculture as just a culture then the problem of spirituality is no longer a real issue due the purposeful forgetting about the ontological status of cyberculture.

The research on cyberculture is currently mostly abandoned. There was many things written about it in late 80. and early 90. but contemporary humanities are rarely focused on cyberculture. I think that it is due that cyberculture has become obvious – not in theoretical sphere but rather practical experience. Everything worked out – as I could say colloquially. But this sense would be not far from the truth. Theories of cyberculture as quick as they emerged so quick they disappeared. In contemporary humanities the concept cyberculture is used rather evasively and is being interchanged easily with other concepts such as media, information technologies, cyberspace. What is missing is the aspect in which technology has changed culture to such a degree that it became cyberculture. What I'm interested in is the aspect of cyberculture as culture. For humanities from the XIX century the concept of culture was one of the most important ones. Such factor such as emergence of national cultures, industrial revolution, geopolitical changes made it possible. From hermeneutics through philosophy of culture to cultural studies the concept of culture was essential for analysis of human beings. But cyberculture has been never given so much attention as idea of material and symbolic culture. By that I mean same seriousness of treating cyberculture as sphere of authentic phenomena and some additional sphere to existing ways of organizing human life through intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

Cyberculture as culture

View proposed here opposed the idea that cyberculture is at basic level a technological form of culture. Even when technology dominates over culture then this dominating technology becomes culture. Cyberculture essentially is a culture. Most of researchers tend to forget that. They are either trying to show how it is a purely technological sphere or a terrain in which emerge completely new phenomena. Those attitudes reside on the concept that cyberculture is an supplement to some preexisting type of symbolic culture. That it is an extension and not something fundamental. From the historical perspective that view is true. Cyberculture was created when technical media were invented. Of course one could trace archeology of ideas that led to cyberculture or look back at the history and search for phenomena that could resemble contemporary functions of cyberculture. But this kind of thinking creates an misunderstanding that casts a shadow on all research done in the area of cyberculture because human experience in technological realm is reduced to effects. It is always something secondary. It does not have an essence. We should look at the cyberculture as culture and not supplementary culture. If we are going to research spiritual phenomena then their mediated experience will always be secondary.

Cyberculture is a culture based on virtual objects. They are at the same time technological, psychological and cultural. That is the reason why it is so hard to grasp their distinct qualities. But at the level of human experience this is not a problem. People tend to automatically accustom to cyberculture. If anything new emerges it will be included in general technologically mediated experience. The goal is to now, at least temporarily, to excise spiritual experience from it. Important task includes not only to distinguish various experiences and select spiritual one but also to show how do they relate and if this new kind of configuration is compatible with previous symbolic culture that was not technologically mediated.

Shift from religious way of experiencing spirituality to the immediacy of spirituality itself is needed when addressing what is important for investigation. Although religious experience would be a point of reference, it needs to be stretched that even religious experience could become spiritualized by mediation of cyberculture.

For the first sight technology does not look like something that could be considered spiritual. Rather oppositional value could be attributed to it as to all material artifacts. Although in culture many objects played important functions in religion and in spiritual practice, their usage within cyberculture is not so common. This state of affairs could be attributed to the fear connected with ontological status of cyberculture and virtual objects. It is also an interesting subject for researching because something immaterial is harder to attach spiritual dimension of human experience than material objects. In platonic ontology which is generally a hierarchy of being from the most consistent material ones (world access by the senses) to the most spiritual ones (everlasting ideas) this reluctance toward cyberculture is quite

incomprehensible. Plato considered mathematical plane as intermediary layer between the world of matter and the world of ideas. Virtual objects could be considered as spiritual ones because they have special type of being. They are not purely mathematical objects, neither they are purely disembodied. But still they are something that could not be grasped by other means that those of mediation through interfaces. This aspect should be further developed in order to understand why spiritual experience in cyberculture is problematic. Religions are based on material objects to which higher power and people introduce spirituality. When in cyberculture a virtual object is attributed with spirituality then there are no cultural norms that could explain how to relate to such an object. Such a confusion is not a subject for researchers which mostly tend to legitimize spiritual aspect to virtual objects.

Spiritual experience as common experience

If cyberculture is culture, then we could ask if all human experience could be mediated and what would be the consequences of such actions. There is no reason to create a social ontology in which the possibility of spiritual experience would be excluded. What gains importance here is not only religious attitude towards it as part of a religion but rather as common way of being in technologically mediated environments.

It is hard to speak about religious experience in cyberculture. Religious organizations and their leaders speak with reserve about the possibility of religious experience in cyberculture. They are rather showing how technical media could serve religious purposes. Even when there are created religious movies and interactive games their purpose resides solely in evangelization. Those examples are religious media, that means that they are stretched between official material basis and cybercultural supplement. This view could be hardly accepted because people tend to spend in cyberculture more time so one could ask the question if this tendency has no effect of religious life. Does a Christian stop being a Christian in cyberculture? Answering yes would be agreeing for an absurd situation in which believers would be detached from their duties toward all other human being. By denying such a possibility there emerges a complicated perspective which needs not only adjusting existing religious ideas to a new format but also is related to different ontological plane. When most monotheisms do not address the question of religious experience in cyberculture (for example when reading sacred text, watching a mass, praying with use of virtual objects), then cyberculture as a plane that could be only exploited in the sense of evangelization and distribution of materials is being considered rather a material sphere and spiritual one. Although religions do not present such a view explicitly it could be deduced from reserve and hostility toward cyberculture. Another aspect that makes hard to research is the lack of data. When religious experiences

are related to symbols that could be easily identified then spiritual experience is problematic. Most of theories of religious experience did not acknowledge the middle plane between material and spiritual one or in any other form conceptualized cyberculture.

Another reason is that the sole possibility of spiritual experience is excluded from cyberculture. This does not matter not only for religious and spiritual practitioners but also for other people. If we assume that there is nothing sacred in cyberculture, that it could not be the space of authentic spiritual experience, then people will behave as their actions were neutral. When cyberculture is being interpreted instrumentally then really the symbolic norms do not apply and material either. It is important point of view for researching not only spirituality but mainly human being as such. What is commonly passed over is that religions are based on mediation. We could say that they are purely based on mediated experience through priests, sacred places and cult objects. Difference between a mystic and religion practitioner contains in that first searches for immediate experience of the sacred and the second agrees to a set of symbols and practices that mediate his/hers access to the sacred. The idea that religious experience is obviously immediate could be easily challenged. That is also the reason why users of cyberculture do not have any idea concerning that they could experience something not only culturally but also spiritually. Better way to grasp what spirituality is in cyberculture is to relate it to the technological dimension of human experience.

The technological and the spiritual

There are three areas of experience that reinforce spirituality in cyberculture which are accompanied by additional effects that create an cultural ground for such experiences. Although they are not exclusive, they could be considered as milieus for later research. Each technological characteristic is presented with its dominant cybercultural effect. It is not necessary to exclude the technological from the spiritual. More valuable practice is to show how do they intersect so cyberculture is equaled spiritual as any other potential sphere of human experience. But what is important that even when it is considered spiritual then arises the problem of an experiencing subject which mainly expelled from the expertise. Spirituality is then self-evident in technological sphere without human being. Many thinkers were prone for such a temptation. There is an alternative to this pantheism-in-device. It is an task of high importance to strengthen when new technologies are introduced and being described as spiritual in themselves and when there should be someone who is an mediator of spirituality in cyberculture. So there are introduced three pairs of effects consisting of technological aspect and spirituality that they trigger.

Information and dematerialization. Information is considered as something spiritual as such. The reason for this could be found in its immaterial way of

experiencing it. Mostly users do not know and rarely they care about technological specification of computers and other information machines. The processes that are being realized inside a technological device are being experienced as something hidden, mysterious and unapproachable. Generally for most of the users information machines are being considered as black boxes. But this does not stop in creating various mythos considering their power. Spiritualization of information originates from its immateriality. But this immateriality depends of ontology in which we are expressing and defining basic terms of our understanding. Is information spiritual? If we assume that all information, existing and that yet to be created, has some form of imminent spirituality then all the experience of cyberculture is susceptible for spiritual experience. Could there exists a spiritual kind of information, maybe sacred one? That's calls for a new theory in which sacred objects could be an virtual objects of cyberculture.

Immersion and decorporalization. Immersion in cyberspace is always immersion in cyberculture. There are cyberspaces that are existing without human presence and mediation. That applies for example to servers where data is processed. Respectively there are existing terrains which are unknown for human being. Important question emerges: do you when are immersed in cyberculture and experiencing phenomena spiritually, do they switch to another plane of experience? Here we are witnessing the problem mentioned earlier which considered the problematic ontological status of cyberculture. And through its further examination a little bit more could be understood from the standpoint of critique of cyberculture by religions. If we are immersed in something that is technologically created then where do our device for experiencing spiritual phenomena (may it be soul, mind or different faculty)? If it goes to the source of all spiritual phenomena (God, absolute, transcendence, nothingness), then cyberculture is just a mediation? But immersion into mediated spiritual experience is not being less problematic because the role of technology. When people are exploring cyberculture then what is the role of technology in experience. In religious rituals material object becomes something fully sacred. That is the reason why it is separated from other mundane and secular things.

Connectivity and tribalization. Modern tribalization has generated concomitant spiritual aspect especially with regard to cyberculture. There exists a collective spiritual aura that is created by communities of shared emotions. They have substituted sub-cultures. There is no longer necessarily general identification with many symbols. Contemporary communities in cyberculture are mostly gathered around virtual objects. Those characteristics could be seen in cyberculture. Spirituality in software advertisements, computer games (immersion). Spirituality in its mature form. Could there be any maturity? Does spiritual experiences need some form of ideology, theory? Do they need to be added to existing religions or we should expect that new religious movements in cyberculture will appear due to growing range of spiritual phenomena in technologically mediated culture? That are questions that are problematic for current understanding of religious movements.

Conclusion

In cyberculture people may ask if what they are experiencing is real. That seem to be especially a problem for distinguishing previous effects from the spiritual experience. First of all they could be still present. That is precisely the problem: how can spiritual experience be present within cyberculture and not in some form of extracted phenomena and experienced outside. There should be assumption that what is important concerns experience. Why spiritual experience in cyberculture should be excluded from research? There are none such reason. But there are many problematic aspects which especially engage researchers – what is empirical data that could prove the rightness of phenomenological examination? Those are vital questions important not only for academics. Deliberations presented here should be continued because the more people lives are being transferred into cyberculture, the more problematic becomes not what is mundane, because it is obvious, but higher faculties of experience. Spiritual experience ranks to them and rests on many overlapping realities. It's multiple and hybrid, so it can't be purified by theory and cultural practice, at least not before it will widely accepted culturally to have spiritual experiences in cyberculture. If that doesn't happen then this discourse would be only theoretical and metaphysical. It also poses the aspect of involvement of researcher into questioned issue. But here again an phenomenological practice justifies partially subjective approach which is necessary due to lack of recognition for spiritual experiencing of technologically mediated phenomena.

Consequences of acknowledging that cyberculture is an autonomous sphere of spiritual experience consist not only for the purpose of awareness but also for serving as a way of being in cyberculture in which leading spiritual existence in cyberculture. As far as we stay conscious of entanglement between many different factors, the more we could understand. If people do not know and culture forbids them of having spiritual experiences in cyberculture, then it should be no scandal that the this issue is treated as unjustified. People do not talk often about spiritual experience in cyberculture. It is no wonder if researchers and representatives of religious institutions do not consider such an possibility. So when we lack religions and spiritual movements that could serve as a basis for research for now creating theory must be enough.

Rafał Ilnicki – CYBERCULTURE AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

The goal of this article is to show how cyberculture is described as a source of spiritual experiences. The fact that technical media and especially computers enabled new forms of sensation led to questioning their material status. Many of theoreticians said that cyberculture is by itself a basis for spiritual experiencing the world. In this article will be examined this claim referring to phenomena such as tribalization, decorporalization, information overload, to research

if in cyberculture there could exist a new type of spiritual experience. General outcome of analysis is complex and needs further investigation because of necessity of inventing new ways of describing human way of experiencing spirituality in cyberculture.