

Celebrating the Breakdown of the Cartesian Ego

Every funeral needs a jazz band to parade the streets with joyful noise, as is the custom in New Orleans. The breakdown of the Cartesian ego erodes the solitary power of meditation but at the same time we would be remiss not to celebrate the lively dissipation of contemporary life. From the confines of the Cogito, Descartes could launch his *Meditations* about the impregnable substrate of certainty, the *fundamentum absolutum et inconcussum* of the solitary self. That Ego has, centuries later, melted under the revelations of Freud's Unconscious, Jung's Collective Unconscious, the revolutions of Marx's social subject, and the temporal ecstasies of Heidegger's *In-der-Welt-sein*. Today we rejoice in rich varieties of dissolution while at the same time we acknowledge the need for a self-centering practice that balances the swing toward boogie-woogie dissipation. The pulsation of life as practical self-gathering and disintegration is worth considering apart from the abstract skeleton of purely rational "dialectic."

A post-Cartesian meditation might well begin where we already are – immersed in digital culture. Contemporary life transpires in a computer culture where Cartesian solitude was first installed as an interface and then became networked in such a way as to undermine absolute ego isolation. Other contemporary phenomena erode the ego substance but do not undermine solitary meditation as we see in contemporary trends like Yoga

and Tai Chi bodywork, both of which seek body-mind harmony. Furthermore, a glance at the aesthetics of jazz improvisation can illuminate the way in which the contemporary self maintains its independence while at the same time it submits to group vibrations in the moment. All three contemporary phenomena – the digital avatar, Tai Chi bodywork, and jazz improvisation – bear witness to a dynamic process that pulsates with self-integration and dissipation, meditative gathering and self-dispersal. Such pulsation should not be burdened with the heavy baggage of Hegelian “dialectic.” Rather, as we shall see in the case of Tai Chi bodywork, the oscillatory process in which we are involved is more an immediate, practical yin-yang movement than a metaphysical absolute. The references to pulsation and dialectic simply point to the heartbeat of life, its systole and diastole, its yin and yang, not to the all-encompassing self (capitalized) that Hegel inherited from Descartes. To invoke the complex and powerful lens of Absolute Spirit is too strong a description of our primal pulsation, which in fact rejects the privileged position of the Cartesian ego as a starting point or axiomatic principle.

The Digital Occasion

The first prompt for this essay arose from the virtual realm where avatars extend our telepresence. Avatars are representations of our identities insofar as we are perceived in and through the virtual world. An editor of *Rue Descartes*, Paul Mathias, contacted me by email where an exchange of links began. One of the links we shared was “L’Internet entre la subjectivité et son monde,” which already implies a network that penetrates the solitude of multiple Cartesian subjects. An MP3 audio file on the website (pmat.ciph.free.fr) gives a full lecture by Professor

Mathias about “l’écriture assistée par ordinateur” (aka “WP”) in which he discusses the text of my book *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing* (Yale University Press, 1987 & 1999). Our meetings began as a virtual encounter – “in avatar,” as it were. Our digital selves exchanged audio, print, and electronic texts. These avatar selves (digital self-presentations) associated across oceans and cultures in a virtual landscape which exists quite apart from our geographically grounded selves. This phenomenon *Electric Language* describes as “linkage.” Linkage belongs essentially to digital text and to whatever becomes present – not permanently but more than ephemerally – in the realm of virtual reality. Our avatars enjoy more durable telepresence than any phone connection. The traces of avatars remain indelibly caught in the Net, abiding witnesses to living exchanges.

The 1999 author’s preface to *Electric Language* describes this connectivity as “the intrinsic linkage of digital text embedded in the very operating systems of the personal computer” (page xiv). The personal computer once functioned as a standalone workstation, as a solitary personal tool, but now the personal computer has become a networked extension of ourselves. Connected to the Internet, the linked computer shatters the illusion of an isolated ego viewing the world through a solitary screen or set of overlapping windows looking onto a data world under the control of the private self. The ego may first have the illusion of being a private self using a personal tool for writing and communicating, but behind the apparently solitary interface, the ego discovers a network of parallel and serially connected desktops used by untold millions of similar egos who also peer into the asynchronously shared world. The World-Wide Web

highlights what *Electric Language* calls “linkage in the psychic framework of word processing.” Every hot spot on a Web page connects digital text to texts written by other contributors and each page links to images and photographs selected by other users. The implications for reading and writing are significant: My computer interface is no longer an isolated “desk” in the metaphor taken from physical furniture. My desktop can host international seminars conducted completely online as well as book chapters that connect to other books existing simultaneously on the Internet. Chapter 5, for instance, of *Electric Language* exists digitally on the World-Wide Web with the blessings of its publisher, along with comments and reviews by readers. Electronic text has everywhere become a hypertext with references in all directions. (“Hyper” refers to more than the traditional four dimensions of space-time.) The linkage made possible by current hardware and software precipitates a transformation that theorists have called a digital revolution.

The same linkage that spins digital text spatially like a web across cultures also brings an emphasis on interactivity. Whereas the traditional book provides a mirror for the passively contemplative mind, linkage creates synchronous and asynchronous interactivity. Every link is a point of personal decision and action. What this means for literacy is a greater sense of non-linear temporal jumps and leaps into multiple layers of sensory media. What *Electric Language* saw as the meditative and contemplative character of traditional reading has mutated into an

active sampling of multiple media.¹ The multimedia reader chooses a hyperlink to follow, clicks on video animation, graphics file, or audio clip, and then clicks again to find more text. The interactive text can flash messages or brief narratives or it can become a gateway to photo images; it can attach narrative passages to audio or video scenes. Interactive linkage means that file folders contain pieces of graphic art, photo illustrations, and videos clipped from online conferences. Articles now incorporate chunks of audio, voice, and email communication. Animation files support written words. Processes can be explained by films and by structures of text highlighted by color-coded icons. The multimedia reader discusses ideas or stories via newsgroups or mail servers. Multi-sensory participation beckons around every corner. The contemplative self-centering of the book explodes in all directions.

Dance of the Avatars

The Web provides not only a novel interplay with dynamic graphics and video, but the Web also provides a home for avatars that simulate human physical presence in 3-dimensional places. Early experiments in 3D environments (VRML, Virtual Reality Modeling Language) pushed the edge of the horizon and suggested how future generations may someday share their

¹ The wide range of telepresence through different media was explored in my two later books *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (Oxford UP, 1993) and *Virtual Realism* (Oxford UP, 1998).

information in a way that resembles computer games with their shared avatars.

One of these 3D experiments (2001) included the author's "Avatar Dance" and "Tai Chi Avatars" using the Visualization Portal at the University of California at Los Angeles. Researchers from UCLA, Art Center, and the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) gathered physically in front of a 8-meter immersion screen where international avatars were projected so that interactions could transpire between the on-screen remotely-animated avatars and the physical bodies of the researchers.

[See images online: <http://ciph.org/publications.php?idRue=55>]

The remote avatar users – some of whom were in Sweden, England, Brazil, and Denmark – viewed the physical spaces at UCLA through QuickTime video while another window allowed them to manipulate their avatars. The physical bodies engaged the avatar bodies by dancing, shaking hands, and exercising playful Tai Chi kicks. Sometimes during dances, a limb would fly off from one of the avatars and attach itself to another avatar body, making dismemberment the non-programmed sharing of cyber-arms or legs.

[See images online: <http://ciph.org/publications.php?idRue=55>]

The physical body interacts with virtual bodies not only by using language and symbols but also by using body proxies. The extension of the self into the network becomes more than a mental act of identification. The deliberate creation of a world, its *poématiser*, can be fresh, innocent, and playful. The avatars play in a wire-like web that invites gestures from the physical bodies. Such physicality has led to the notion of "avatecture," which is the embedding of avatar projections into physical

structures like the “avatar alcove,” a space in which a group of physical humans interact with screen projections of real-time avatars on the Internet.²

Note that the multiple shapes of avatars, including non-human shapes, are constructs chosen by the self and in many cases designed by the self, not merely projections of inner self-doubt. The avatar projection is not self-alienation but it embraces both given elements and customizable, fungible, self-designed elements. This is not the *Selbstentfremdung* resulting from subconscious self-doubt (*Entzweiung* or *Verzweiflung*) of an absolute ego, as described by the Hegelian dialectic. Instead, the avatar feeds a chosen self-projection into a feedback loop which becomes a sequence of recorded moments which can become a process of increased self-reflection and self-understanding, especially as avatars connect through social constructs. The avatar identity is built to be perceived by others while the primary ego also perceives the avatar as a customizable object that already moves among other avatars.³ The virtual world is more fundamental than any of the selves that move within it, much as

² Another avatecture project was created in collaboration with architect Christophe Cornubert of PUSH (Los Angeles, California). The project became a finalist in the *Hotel Pro Forma* architectural competition (2001) for a 40,000 square-meter performance center and international hotel planned for the Ørestad suburb of central Copenhagen, Denmark. The design was exhibited at the Gammel Dok Danish Center for Architecture in 2002.

³ See the excellent *Virtual Worlds and Social Interaction Design* by Mikael Jakobsson published by the Department of Informatics at Umea University, Sweden.

Heidegger's *being-in-the-world* precedes any single ego identity that becomes present in the world.

The Tai Chi Body

The accompanying photos from experiments with avatars demonstrate the use of Tai Chi body movements. The precise stances, leg lifts (kicks), and balanced postures of Tai Chi complement the use of avatars in a more than superficial way. Digital culture often seems to devalue the body (novelist William Gibson's "the meat") because Turing's "universal machine" can simulate any and every physical process. As a result, humans feel less "grounded" in a computerized culture where most operations – from automobile carburetors to wrist watches – remain opaque to direct observation and where micro-circuitry replaces traditional locomotion. Computer "digits" emulate and assimilate human handiwork. By contrast, the human body as described by Tai Chi (pinyin: *taijiquan*, "the martial art of yin & yang polarities") provides a counter-image of a felt internal energy field that resides "underneath" the external body as typically visualized by Cartesian mechanics and Western scientific medicine.

Tai Chi theory maps the human energy field as a pulsating system that can be accessed and modified through self-awareness, postural alignments, and internal processes like breathing. The flows (*feng shui*) of the energy body move on a deeper level of awareness than the conscious ego. Hence Tai Chi values meditation because breathing and awareness can provide access to the energy flows (warm currents) that constitute the internal energy system. Some external manipulations, such as acupuncture and acupressure, can affect changes in the internal

system of pathways (meridians), but internal attention can influence the flows more effectively. The postures of Tai Chi movement are, in effect, positions of meditation or awareness that directly affect internal flows of the body. For this reason, the classic styles of Tai Chi are often called “meditation in motion.” The mind that meditates in Tai Chi is not the Cartesian ego. Rather, “mind” here refers to awareness or attention directed to the warm currents that are self-perceived (proprioception) but not observable from the standpoint of a separate substance. In Cartesian terms, we might speak of the “interplay” between the mind and body, but these terms presuppose the primacy of separate substances. It is the very fixed presence or substantiality of the ego that Tai Chi undermines. The energy body can be mapped more accurately by field theory than by the Greek metaphysics of presence and substantial entities.⁴ The partner games of Tai Chi, such as Pushing-Hands (“sensing hands” or Chinese *tuishou*) revolve around the mutual perception and interference of two interlocking energy fields. A similar observation could be made about Japanese Aikido where the practitioners see not the clash of two separate egos but the interplay of intersecting energy fields (*ki* in Japanese or *chi* in Chinese).

An appropriately post-Cartesian meditation follows the model of Tai Chi where stopping to meditate is not seeking isolation in

⁴ George Katchmer contrasts East and West in his *The Tao of Bioenergetics* (published by YMAA Publication Center, 1993). Support this thesis also appears in many other books, including those by Moshe Feldenkrais, Alexander Lowen, and Thomas Hannah.

abstraction from the body. Instead, the awareness is brought to the body internally as a needed adjustment to the body amnesia which has been induced by increased computer usage and by the extension of presence (telepresence) through digital culture. Tai Chi postures are not attempts to release the mind from physical embodiment; similarly, contemporary meditation does not attempt to establish a foundational anchor apart from the flow of experience. As Tai Chi resides in the yin and yang of pulsating flow, in the opening and closing of the physical joints, so too does contemporary self-integration seek balance rather than the extinction of the polarities of stillness and action, quietude and engagement. While today there may be no total escape from dissipation, there is a balancing that can be more or less achieved. There is no absolute balance; there is only balancing. The “absolute” value is a precise harmony rather than a conquest of otherness, whether the other is a physically embodied condition or an outside incoming force.

Harmony and Improvisation

The open quality of the balancing process appears in jazz improvisation. A jazz group will typically establish among themselves a “groove” or subdivision of rhythm. No single player controls the groove but all share it. Players may assign more responsibility for the groove to a drummer, percussionist, or keyboardist; the groove floats in time through the shared music and must be felt by the body even when a soloist plays slightly behind or ahead of the groove. The group mind may have an awareness of the groove, but the groove exists in the nervous system’s reactions to a missing (syncopated) beat or absent subdivision that the body supplies by a jerk of the hip, a nod of

the head, or a tap of the toe. The ego mind is submerged in the physical groove of the group. Only then can individual players create improvisations over the steady groove.

The typical form of a jazz standard illustrates the relation of individual solo improvisation to the group vibration. After playing the “head” or main melody together in unison, the players typically “trade eights” or “trade sixteens” where eight or sixteen measures of the solo improvisation is performed by each of the soloists in turn while the others accompany the solos in the background. A soloist might be cheered on to do another eight or sixteen measures, depending on the circumstances, until all have taken their turns. The group then concludes by playing the head in unison and by adding an ending. This typical jazz format fosters the interplay of the soloists with one another as each improvisation provides a call or response to the other soloists. The group music is the reciprocal creation of a shared context.

The submersion of the individual ego in a shared groove and the harmony implied by the call-and-response of improvisation does not eliminate freedom. Improvisation as a solo activity elicits the uniqueness of each person’s response to the group harmony. The greatest improvisers are those whose sound is unmistakably their own.⁵ While much of the language of improvisation draws on a specific history learned through recorded sound, the value

⁵ Two major resources on this topic are: *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* by Stephen Nachmanovitch (Tarcher/Putnam, 1990), and *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* by Paul F. Berliner (University of Chicago, 1994).

sought in performance is the uniqueness of personal response to the harmonic situation in real time. The improvisation “works” when deliberate plans give way to reliance on spontaneous responses, much as impromptu speakers rely on a learned spoken language rather than on the readings of scripts although reading what previous speakers have said may provide phrases and ideas for the impromptu speaker.

Conclusion

All three phenomena – avatars, Tai Chi, and jazz improvisation – are treasures now embedded in global culture. They each point to a contemporary relationship between the self and others, between the self and the world(s), between the mind (awareness) and its grounding in the body. These are pulsating relationships, full of lively oscillation, requiring not an absolute fixed foundation but an ongoing process of deliberate balance. Each of these three forms of praxis shows the self as a rhythmic flow, a periodic wave, an open permeable field of gathering-and-dispersal, rather than an atomic, isolated concretion where refuge may reside. Aesthetically, today’s self-integration resembles more the makeshift, jerry-rigged “Combines” of Robert Rauschenberg than the geometric symmetry of classic art. What this paper suggests is that the breakdown of the Cartesian ego is not simply a cause for *superbia vitae*, for celebrating the distance gaping between those who are alive and those who are dead. Rather, the breakdown of the Cartesian self frees us to appreciate given cultural assets for what they are and to see how we can understand, support, and cultivate them.

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