Simmel in Cyberspace: Strangeness and Distance in Postmodern Communications

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The Cyborg Stranger

If wandering is the liberation from every given point in space, and thus the conceptual opposite to fixation at such a point, the sociological form of the ‘Stranger’ represents the unity, as it were, of these characteristics. This phenomenon too, however, reveals that spatial relations are only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations. (Georg Simmel, ‘The Stranger’)

Simmel saw space as a duality: as a transcendental, in Kant’s sense, an a priori condition of experience; and as collective representation, like Durkheim, a symbol of human society and interaction. Unlike either Kant or Durkheim, however, for whom it remained abstract, Simmel related this duality to the context of mobility, specifically to a practical synthesis of a contradiction between wandering and fixation at a point. The duality of space as condition and symbol, he says, is ‘revealed’ interactionally in the sociological form of the Stranger. The Stranger is the unity of fixation and the liberation from all fixed points. It is the synthesis of this ‘territorial’ contradiction, between sedentariness and nomadism (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987), if you will, that defines the abstract duality of space as both a field of constraint and openness. No doubt, Simmel in this way also tends to universalize the Stranger beyond a specific type of actor. He implies that we are all Strangers, in the sense that space constitutes, for each of us, both a categorical limit and a symbolic realm of freedom. The human condition, which for Simmel is the social condition, is to be the perpetual Stranger, a unity of stasis and nomadic flows: a stationary wanderer.

This idea—the stationary wanderer—is reminiscent of a popular science fiction model of cyberspace that circulated back in the 1980s. Plug in and go anywhere, without moving, call up any image, produce any experience, at the push of a button. In the years since, there have been many variations on this model, but the wetware or ‘chip-in-the-brain’ fantasy is probably the most illustrative for my purposes here, for the way it updates and re-articulates Simmel’s problem of the Stranger in the context of current developments in telecommunications technology. The chip-in-the-brain, the idea of a perfect connection of nerves and electronics, works off an old dream—that the body, suitably outfitted with the right machinery, can escape its material limits (cf. Romanyszyn 1989). It is a dream about absolute deterritorialization, in which the wired brain becomes a kind of
‘bounded infinity,’ a ‘universe of reference’ from which endless wanderings may begin and return. Simply imagine a place, a time, and you’re there. Even better, you’re it, you are the territory, because ultimately this is a dream not just about calling up images of different territories, but about the pure transmutation of matter, i.e., instantaneous mutability. Here you don’t just plug in and ‘go anywhere,’ move without moving. Rather, you become anything, shift shapes, shift bodies, entire sensoriums, at will. Mutate without mutating (cf. Virilio 1995: 133ff.; 1991).

In the wetware dream, and in the cyberspace dream more generally, a new version of the Stranger is born—a hybrid, bio-mechanic version. Here the stationary wanderer, contra Simmel, is not a ‘human relation’ anymore, but a relation of nerves and silicon. The Stranger doesn’t even have a human body, but rather is a cyborg body, part human and part machine (for what is still one of the best analyses of the cyborg see Haraway 1985). Unlike Simmel’s form of Stranger, the cyborg Stranger is not a synthetic unity; its form is always partial, or rather, it has the form of partiality itself. Composed of multiple ‘nodes,’ each of which is a mixture organic and inorganic materials, there is nothing about it as a whole that could be called the individual. In the same way, a cyborg is never the subject, nor the person, not even, we’ll see later, the Stranger, which in Simmel’s meaning always implies connection to an ‘outside.’ It is, instead, just a bio-circuit in a network of bio-circuits, each node hooked to every other node in an internal matrix of connections, each mirroring the others. There is no ‘outside’ for a cyborg, which means that it is only a stranger to itself. Like the cells of a hologram, or the electronic terminals which comprise the internet, every node in the network that constitutes a cyborg is a perspective on the whole, but no one perspective contains the whole. And this, we’ll also see later, is one of the great paradoxes of the cyborg: the whole is never outside its parts, but it is always greater than their sum.

Just as the chip-brain model instantiates a different form of Stranger, the cyborg, it also describes a different kind of space. Like the cyborg which ‘inhabits’ it, cyberspace has the form of partiality. In more conventional terms, it is a fractal or subspace, a dimension greater than n and less than n+1. The Mandelbröt set, for instance, a paradigm of fractal space, repeatedly ‘infolds’ to generate infinite series of planes (in two dimensions), but never ‘fills’ a volume (three dimensions). In terms of the duality which interested Simmel, the space in cyberspace is neither an a priori condition of experience nor a symbol of human interaction, but rather ‘sub-conditional’ and ‘sub-symbolic’ order of information. In the first case, it is a self-enclosed space of endlessly ramified conditions—‘if-then’ connections, branching tree-logics, programmed loops, switches, and engineered feedback mechanisms—which never attains the status of an a priori. And in the second case, it is a hyper-production of signs which never amounts to the symbolic. Virtual systems like cyberspace, as Baudrillard says, never achieve the ‘radical Otherness’ or ‘exoticism’ of the symbolic, but are always more of the Same, more variations on a ‘code’ (cf. Baudrillard 1993: 113ff.). In cyberspace, the contradictory unity of the Stranger—the practical synthesis of mobility and immobility—becomes a paradox of infinite ramification within a bounded territory, or of infinite mutation within immutable form. Cyberspace is less than a space of pure freedom, or pure nomadism, since it can never be more than its program and hardware. It can never exceed its
instructions and engineering, its design. At best, it generates a kind of delusionary freedom. And it is less than fixation at a point. Each perspective in cyberspace, rather, provides only a partial ‘fix’ on every other, and is itself only a contingent collection of partial fixes.

Cyberspace, in the same way, is less than a ‘social’ space. The social forms, for Simmel, are identities; they reveal the resolution of contradictory elements in ‘coordinated and consistent lines of interaction’ (1950a: 403). For Simmel, the Stranger is one such form. The Stranger, he says, is the one who opens up a group to an ‘outside.’ His social relation to the group, and hence his social identity, we’ll see later, involves a synthesis of contradictory ‘distances,’ since he is both close to the group and far from it, inside and outside it at the same time. Social relations in cyberspace, however, do not constitute identities. In the brain-chip model the very notion of ‘social distance’ is indeterminate. There is no contradiction between inside and outside to resolve, since every node connects to every other. Close and far, likewise, have little meaning, because every node of the system is equally and instantly accessible. The cyborg is like a rhizome, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) term. It has no outside, only a continuously bifurcating ‘interior,’ endless divisions of its surface (the Mandelbröt set again). Because it develops fractally, the interior never generates an identity. The cyborg has no social or group ‘identity’ in the normal sense, i.e., an inside counterposed to an outside (or a Self to an Other). Rather, identity in cyberspace is a matter of simulating a connection to an outside. In fact, this is the brain-chip’s primary function, to return to this image, to simulate a channel that opens beyond itself. And this is the crux of the connection of the cyborg to Simmel’s Stranger. The cyborg is a simulated Stranger, a simulated connection to an outside. Its ‘identity’ is ‘sub-social’—not both inside and outside the group simultaneously, like Simmel’s Stranger, but between the group and non-group, a fractal Stranger. The simulated Stranger, in one sense, still does connect an inside with an outside, but the outside is the social itself, and the connection is a fake.

Postmodern Simmel

My idea here is to ‘postmodernize’ Simmel, to use his theory of strangeness to make some initial sense of the social effects of current communications media, if ultimately only to admit its inadequacy. I don’t want to place too much significance on the word ‘postmodern,’ or to revive old debates about postmodernism’s political or cultural value. Nor am I particularly wedded to the word ‘cyberspace,’ which has been relentlessly trivialized and commercialized in the last few years. Still, there are many ways in which Simmel is indeed a kind of postmodern theorist—not as someone situated at the end of the modern age, but one whose work signals what modernity is from the very beginning. In Lyotard’s ironic formula, ‘a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism, thus understood, is not modernism at its end, but in the nascent state, and this state is constant’ (1979: 79). Simmel’s work on strangeness points to an essential rupture of the modern, which could be reformulated as the dissolution of the symbolic order of society and its replacement with technical/instrumental systems of communication. Cyberspace communication represents a paradoxical evolution of the form of strangeness that for Simmel defined the origins of the modern age: the opening of a closed society to an outside, to an Other. Today, however, it is the outside has disappeared—or rather, it has become what Baudrillard calls a ‘simu-
1. Each of these forms of communication certainly has its own unique features. I don’t intend to analyze their differences in any detail here, only to suggest how a general theoretical frame like Simmel’s might be able to organize our thinking about them.

The term ‘cyberspace communications’ refers to computer-mediated communications in all their diverse forms—email, MUDs (multi-user dialogs) and MOOs (MUD object oriented games), IRCs (internet relay chats), electronic newsgroups and bulletin boards, tele-presencing and tele-conferencing, interactive virtual and augmented realities, soft-, hard-, and wetware systems (informed interfaces) of all sorts. The list of variations on this theme grows with each passing year. These new technologies have generated many questions about their social and communal features, or lack of them. What is the nature of interaction over these networks and the status of the persons who use them? Do these systems change anything in the conditions and possibilities of interaction? What are their implications for fundamental social processes like exchange, cooperation, conflict, and power? How do they effect fundamental social bonds like trust, intimacy, and reciprocity (see Katz 1996; Chesebro 1995; Perrole 1991, 1987; Stone 1995, 1992, 1991; Turkle 1995, 1984; Walter and Burgoon 1994)? To what extent, finally, do these networks even constitute social formations and relations, or only double them in electronic form, i.e., produce merely virtual communities, virtual classes and statuses, virtual exchanges, etc. (Castells 1997, 1996; Bogard 1998, 1996, 1994; Kroker and Kroker 1997, 1992; Kroker and Weinstein 1994; Rheingold 1991, 1993; Jones 1994; Benger 1987; Baudrillard 1983a, 1983b)?

Although it’s impossible to predict very much in such a rapidly evolving field, there is a feeling in the burgeoning literature on cyberspace that a social change of truly epic proportions is occurring—perhaps even involving a transformation of the nature of sociality itself. Cyberspace’s celebrators sometimes see this as a kind of liberation, a potential revolution in knowledge and expression surpassing even the impact of print technologies (e.g., Rheingold...
Its detractors, on the other hand, see cyberspace as a further technical narrowing of life, the mechanical reduction of expression to controlled flows of information (Kroker and Weinstein 1994; Kroker and Kroker 1997, 1992; Brooks and Boal 1995; Stoll 1995; Poster 1990; Pfohl 1992; Haraway 1985; Bogard 1996). If he was around to witness its development, Simmel would certainly belong to the latter group. A skeptic of technical rationalization in general, it is easy to appropriate Simmel’s language and describe cyberspace as the latest triumph of ‘objective over subjective culture,’ or more darkly still, of ‘social-technical mechanisms’ over life (Simmel 1950b: 409). Simmel claimed that technical modernization produced greater individual freedom, but at the cost of a generalized indifference—to survive in the overly monetarized and mechanic milieu of the modern world, individuals became blasé. They developed, in order to function in an increasingly information-saturated environment, a distanced, objectivating attitude that also, we’ll see, characterizes strangeness (Simmel 1950b: 413ff.). One could say that cyberspace, too, is a zone of freedom, but within the context of an objectivity even more radical and monstrous than Simmel could have imagined—instants and virtually unlimited access to information, but within a tightly determined technical matrix of electronic codes, screens, channels, and switches. For Simmel, objectivity was a synthesis of certain contradictions of distance specific to the form of strangeness, of connection and disconnection, immersion and separation, involvement and disengagement. Here again, especially in relation to themes of partial identity and otherness, it is possible to develop intriguing analogies to the form of cyberspace communications. More on this below.

For now, this reading of Simmel aligns him with interests and agendas typically associated today with postmodern sociology. In the last several years, Simmel’s work has reemerged as a focal point in the debate about postmodernity (cf. Weinstein and Weinstein 1992). Is he a modernist, a late modernist, or an early postmodernist? Simmel’s emphasis on the values of individuality, freedom, and life make certain authors (e.g., Levine 1991, 1985, 1977, 1971; Scaff 1988) read him as a classical liberal modernist, seeking to balance Enlightenment rationalism with romantic self-expression. David Frisby (1992) calls him a ‘sociological impressionist’ in order to characterize both his concept and method, and to link him to a kind of high- or late-modernist aesthetics in which style dominates substance. For Frisby, who identifies himself with critical theory, Simmel comes across as the disconnected, abstract intellectual, a sociological ‘flaneur’ (a concept Frisby takes from Benjamin 1968: 166ff.) I do not want to spend more time on this debate here. I will say, however, that in general Simmel’s ideas are not easily assimilated to either positivist or critical theories, both of which are essentially modernist projects. For the former, his concepts are too difficult to measure; for the latter, they are too relativist and apolitical.

The postmodern reading of Simmel, on the other hand, sees an early ‘deconstructor’ of 20th (21st?) century culture, and emphasizes how uncannily his concepts capture a specific feeling of life in hi-tech, hi-speed, information societies. That feeling is strangeness, in Simmel’s specific theoretical sense, as a contradiction between nearness and remoteness, or mobility and fixation, that characterizes all social relations (Simmel 1950a: 402). Cyberspace communications, in a word, are strange—at the push of a button, territories dissolve, oppositions of distant and close, motion and stasis, inside and out, collapse; identities are marginalized and simulated, and
collectivities lose their borders. For Simmel, the form of strangeness is associated with the calculating objectivity and empty indifference of a role whose only function is to transmit messages and connect systems of communication. Here, his work prefigures and mirrors what many postmodernists view as the contemporary supremacy of all the worst aspects of techno-culture—the idolatry of media images, the disappearance of the subject, the conversion of knowledge and imagination into information, the nihilistic qualities of ultra-processed space and time (what Kroker and Cook [1986] refer to as ‘excremental culture’).

There are other links between Simmel and postmodernism as a philosophical and methodological perspective. For Simmel, strangeness is a form of interaction, and although forms are conceived as abstractions, they are not abstract generalities. Rather, they are specific, emergent features of interaction seen from particular points of view or distances, each of which embodies its own internal reason (Simmel 1950d: 8). There is no abstract hierarchy of forms in Simmel; no single form dominates or subsumes others, and no form is purely abstract—not even the form of ‘sociality’ itself, which Simmel makes clear is neither a universal nor an empty category (Simmel 1950d: 3ff.). As Tenbruck notes, Simmel’s formalism ‘is not—it could not be—abstraction from content-phenomena, in which the forms inhere and through which alone they can be set forth, but abstraction from a content-perspective’ (Tenbruck 1959: 75; cf. also Weinstein and Weinstein 1993: 11). Simmel does not study the forms of interaction by observing what different interactions have in common, but by drawing analogies between forms of interaction seen along a continuum from up close to far away—even ‘commonality’ itself, in this way of thinking, is a distance-dependent category (Simmel 1950a: 406). For Simmel, different distances from interaction produce different depictions of it, each, within its own field of relevance, fully adequate to its object. In the same way, I will not claim that interaction in cyberspace has a dominant form that it shares with other kinds of interaction (e.g., face-to-face communication). Rather, I will adopt Simmel’s more radical perspectivism here. In referring to ‘strangeness’ as an important feature of cyberspace communications, strangeness is not meant as an abstraction divorced from all content, but an abstraction within a particular constellation of object relations. Strangeness in cyberspace is analogous to strangeness in face-to-face communication, but it is not identical to it, nor is it simply the common form of both. What is important is not the form itself, but how the form is operationalized—or ‘bio-mechanized,’ given the nature of my problem. That is, the question of the form of interaction is going to translate into one about the medium of interaction. How does strangeness ‘operate’ in this new medium, cyberspace (electronic codes/images/screens)? How is this analogous to media of face-to-face communication (language/gestures/bodies)? All these questions are internally related to the problem of distance in interaction, which is itself an integral concept in the analysis of strangeness. The Stranger, we have already seen, is one whose ‘distance’ from others involves a contradiction—the Stranger is the one who is both ‘close and far’ (1950a: 402) As I will explain below, there is not a much better metaphor for contemporary travelers in cyberspace, or indeed, for the technology of cyberspace itself.
The Stranger

Simmel is remarkable in his way of expressing a contradiction. Reversing the old cliché, he writes that the Stranger is the ‘one who comes today and stays tomorrow’ (Simmel 1950a: 402). He is not the stranger no one knows, but who everyone and no one knows at the same time. He is the stranger in our midst, someone who lives both inside and outside the group. For Simmel, the Stranger is always the potential wanderer. Although he is here among us, in the community, he has not settled down; he has not, as Simmel says, ‘overcome the freedom of coming and going’ (1950a: 402). The specific character of the Stranger, I’ve noted, is one of this potential mobility or mutation, or what amounts to the same thing, a virtual sedentariness. He is, in one of his many incarnations, the middleman or the trader, someone who ‘doesn’t own the soil,’ but who acts as a means of exchange and communication between individuals and groups that do. Simmel says he ‘comes into contact, at one time or another, with every individual, but is not organically connected, through established ties of kinship, locality, and occupation, with any single one’ (1950a: 404). The Stranger brings those who would remain outsiders to each other into contact. In that sense, he occupies an unstable, shifting space between isolated units, acting as message bearer or medium (channel) between what would otherwise be two fully separated elements. But he is never fully separate from either. As a channel, the Stranger provides the illusion of transport, of erasing distances and bridging two spaces, two viewpoints, two languages, two systems of action, etc., bringing them into contact. The Stranger does not move; rather, he is the virtual form of movement (or mutation).

Because for Simmel, the forms are synthetic categories, he uses dialectical tools to comprehend them. In this sense, he is not a postmodern theorist; he does not deconstruct the form of the Stranger, but examines it from the point of view of its internal contradictions. Simmel’s Stranger is not just close and far, but one who, in a sense, overcomes this opposition in a practical synthesis. Simmel is never really clear, however, whether the opposition is ever fully resolved. ‘The Stranger’ begins with the claim that the form of strangeness is a ‘unity’ of fixation and liberation from all fixed points (1950a: 402). But the essay as a whole seems to play on the unresolved tensions in strangeness, its lack of any formal unity. For Simmel, however much the Stranger embodies contradictions of motion and distance, he never completely transcends them. The figure of the trader, Simmel’s paradigmatic Stranger, always intrudes on the group as a ‘supernumerary,’ a figure in excess of the number required for an exchange (two); he is never presented as a force that negates and transcends the poles of the exchange. Weinstein and Weinstein (1993) note that Simmel’s theory never totalizes—the dialectic does not resolve itself in a higher unity. The third term, the ‘excessive element,’ remains on the same plane as the elements it relates. Still, Simmel remains largely a modernist. He cannot comprehend that the Stranger might be a subnumerary, a figure less than the number required for an exchange. Baudrillard (1990) notes that there is no exchange in simulated systems. Exchange requires an outside, an Other; i.e., it is still part of the symbolic order, which the contemporary order of simulation destroys. A cyborg Stranger is always less than two. The nodes it connects are not distinct poles, nor is the cyborg distinct from them. Like
Simmel’s Stranger, it achieves no higher unity or identity, there is no ‘third element.’ Unlike Simmel’s Stranger, it cannot be called a contradictory identity, but is rather a multiplicity of partial identities that proliferate internally as copies of each other.

All social relations, for Simmel, contain aspects of strangeness; it is a dimension of group life itself. We are, in that sense, all strangers to one another, even in our most intimate relations. Ultimately, even in our relations to our own selves. Paradoxically, strangeness implies not difference, but common social bonds or identities. Simmel writes that sharing ‘common’ bonds itself constitutes a dialectic of close and far: ‘The Stranger is close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of a national, social, occupational, or generally human, nature. He is far from us, insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people’ (Simmel 1950a: 406). In that sense, for Simmel, our relation to the Stranger never gets down to the level of the ‘purely individual’ (there is no such thing for him)—the Stranger is always a type (or typification) that oscillates between the particular and the general. This also means that Strangers are never ‘complete strangers.’ They always have some common features of the groups or individuals (or selves) they connect.

Just below the surface of these passages, always barely concealed beneath his continually shifting perspectives, is Simmel’s vision of the tragedy of modernity. Simply stated, it is that modern life creates a society of Strangers, close but unknown to each other, homeless, shifting, marginal types. This is not to claim that strangeness is an invention of modernity, and not even that it is embodied in a greater number social relations today than in the past. Rather, it is about a shift in the form of content (the material form) of strangeness, how strangeness ‘plays itself out’ in the modern world. That shift, for Simmel, involves an historical transition from subjective to objective culture. One’s relation to a Stranger, Simmel writes, is always more abstract and general than the relation one shares with one’s ‘in-group.’ The modern Stranger, in particular, approaches the group with the attitude of ‘objectivity’ (1950a: 404). By this, Simmel does not mean the specific attitude of value-neutrality or detachment of the scientist, but a dialectic of indifference and involvement, which is also a kind of freedom. The objective individual ‘is not bound by commitments which could prejudice his perception, understanding, and evaluation of an event’ (1950a: 405). At the same time, however, Simmel notes that because of this very lack of commitment and prejudice, the Stranger is often in a position to be entrusted with secrets that others in the group are too close to share. In one sense, because he stands ambivalently ‘outside’ them, the Stranger can come to know members of a group better than they know themselves. Such objectivity involves both freedom and necessity—the potential mobility of the perpetual outsider, the stability of the trusted confidant.

In ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life,’ Simmel draws our attention to this contradictory freedom of the modern urban dweller. For him, it derives from the impersonality of the metropolis, and plays itself out in a kind of psychological dissociation or indifference, Simmel’s famous ‘blasé attitude’ (Simmel 1950b: 413-415). The blasé attitude is an adaptive trait, a resistance of the personality to the ‘mental overstimulation’ of the urban environment. In this context, Simmel
poses what he calls one of the deepest problems of modern life: how to preserve personal freedom in the face of the overwhelming forces of ‘the techniques of life,’ by which he means the whole host of modern ills: monetarization, consumerism, competition, information saturation, mediatization, in a word, objective, oppressive culture (Simmel 1978, 1968). The answer, for Simmel as it was for Nietzsche, is that for modern man the instinct for freedom turns inward and is directed on the self. This is not at all a good thing, of course, but rather the condition of nihilism, the will of modern man to secure the Subject against the towering forces of its objectification and the collapse of all systems of value (cf. Nietzsche 1969: 84-87). Modern man’s freedom is the same contradictory freedom that the Stranger has, a mixture of detachment and involvement, dissociation amid a multitude of entanglements. It is, for Simmel, freedom as psychological indifference or reserve, a blunting of ‘discriminatory powers’ against sensory overload. And freedom as the very swirl modern life—the continuous, rushing flow of individuals whose fleeting and abstract connections to one another form at best a kind of pseudo-community, with all the connection, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) might say, of bodies in a vortex. For him, this ‘strange,’ contradictory freedom is something entirely new. It has no analogy in earlier forms of (Western) society—traditional societies knew nothing of it; what small freedoms they had were also less abstracted, less mediated, less objectivating. The price of modern freedom, it turns out, is the overwhelming strangeness of life. All this is well known, however. What we want to ask now is how this strangeness plays itself out in postmodern society, and in particular cyberspace, where the ‘social-technological mechanism’—the objectivization of life—which Simmel feared appears to have taken on new forms once again, indeed to have grown to even more monstrous proportions.

**Strangers in Cyberspace**

Simmel’s ideas can be applied figuratively, as a kind of ‘useful fiction,’ to the present-day situation. The Stranger, we’ve seen, has a cyborgian analogue in the operations of (post)modern communication system, which links together remote sites and operators. For Simmel, the form of the Stranger involves a synthesis of contradictory distances. The cyborg, however, is about much more than a ‘unity of close and far.’ In cyberspace, the relation of strangeness is taken to its logical (and imaginary) conclusion, where the dialectic of distance devolves into a more radical deconstruction of identity, a blurring of organic and inorganic boundaries, a mutation whose science fiction image is the brain-chip with which we began. In cyberspace, the form of strangeness is revealed not just in the *person* of the Stranger, the one who comes and stays, but in the communications network, i.e., in the *social* (and increasingly) *bio-technological mechanism* itself. Cyberspace represents an evolution of strangeness that dissolves not only the distance between persons who would otherwise remain remote to each other, but between persons and machines, organic and technical systems.

If we want a postmodern analogy for the Stranger, we don’t have to look much farther than the PCs on our desks. Like Simmel’s Stranger, computers, too, are in a sense objects that ‘come today and stay tomorrow’—they are ‘traveling machines’ who never leave (the one on my desk is security bolted to the wall), or ‘immutable mobiles’ that allow their stationary operators to change
perspectives or points of view (cf. Virilio 1995, 1991). They do not move to communicate, i.e., to transmit a message, or to ferry their users to distant locales and remote experiences. They are impassive and open to any and all kinds of information; they carry out our instructions silently and efficiently, without passing judgment on them. They are, in a word, **objective**, indifferent to our ways of doing things, but always ready to get involved. As we’ll see, we entrust them with our secrets—our documents, our files, our private thoughts—because we assume that our ‘real’ identities are safe with them (only I and my machine ‘know’ my password). Of course, computers are not human beings, and I am not interested in anthropomorphizing them. What I want to isolate here is not just the computer, but the dynamic form of the computer-operator **interface**. Strange-ness in postmodern communication is a function of this interface, or better, system of interfaces. Simmel’s Stranger, in a way, disappears as a dialectical relation between embodied agents (persons) only to be reincarnated as the cyborgian network of machine-body interfaces we call cyberspace. The Stranger, i.e., is not just the individual message bearer anymore, but the **entire message bearing system**.

In one sense, cyberspace is like the telephone upgraded to a virtual technology that has interiorized its own exterior (moved the outside in, so to speak). The telephone began as an essentially passive medium, linking together external speakers whose relations to the medium were themselves essentially passive and external. Today, however, the telephone is increasingly a computer, and vice versa. In computer communications, the technology is interactive, not passive, and the connections are internal (cf. Zuboff 1988). Donna Haraway (1991; 1985) was among the first to recognize the radical societal implications of these changes, the extent to which the cyborg of science fiction has materialized in a society of plugged-in, wired individuals. It has been nearly half a century ago that Norbert Wiener introduced cybernetics as the science of ‘communication and control in the organism and the machine’ (Wiener 1948). Today, cybernetics also researches communication or interactivity **between** the organism and the machine. Research today is largely about refining and smoothing these kinds of connections (in developing new programming and interface technologies, neural nets, artificial intelligence, ergonomics, virtual and augmented reality systems, and so forth) (Bogard 1996, 1994). In cyberspace, the exact line between the communicator (or communication) and the medium of communication—between the material content and the form of communication—has become difficult to draw, and is becoming more so every day. Interaction with the machine is not easy to distinguish from interaction with the operators at the other end of the line. For example, in popular forms of computer communication, such as IRCs, MOOs, and MUDs, real personas (material content) can merge with shifting, online personas (ideal form), creating uncertainty about the identities and intentions of communicators. Sometimes, users of these systems can choose tailored identities from lists of options; more often, they create their own (often fictitious) identities (cf. Van Gelder 1985; Perrole1987: 104ff.; Perrole 1991; Turkle 1995, 1984; Stone 1995, 1991). I will come back to this below in the discussion of partial (simulated) identities and its relation to trust in cyber-communications. For now, all this merely illustrates the notion attributed to McLuhan that in the age of information ‘the medium is the message’ (which
means that the content of a medium is always, from a different point of view, another medium) (McLuhan 1964). The form and content of messages merge. When we communicate across cyberspace, we talk to the machine as much as to the person(s) at the other end of the line.

William Gibson, of course, introduced the idea of cyberspace in his popular trilogy of sci-fi thrillers in the mid-1980s (Neuromancer, Count Zero, Mona Lisa Overdrive) (1984, 1986, 1988). There, the term referred simply to a ‘consensual hallucination,’ the global data matrix, a simulated timespace that one could ‘jack into,’ populated by hackers, information police, and data dumps. One would be hard-pressed to call Gibson’s version of cyberspace a ‘community’ and even less a ‘territory,’ but something much closer to transpolitical corporate anarchy. Everyone in this realm is looking for ways to turn information into cash and influence. People’s bodies are ‘meat,’ useless impediments when it comes to getting and moving information, and distrust rules relationships both online and off. Everybody is a spy or a simulator or a crook. Cyberspace, in Gibson’s hands, is anyplace whatsoever and noplace in particular. It has no boundaries, political, economic, even experiential. The hero, a luckless hacker who gets caught up in a scheme by an artificial intelligence to upgrade its circuits and take over the world, can even jack into another person’s sensorium, effectively canceling any notion of embodied agency or perspective. As Gibson writes, in cyberspace ‘There’s no here, there.’ He represents cyberspace as a phantom-realm of simulated architectures, pulsing with virtual light, protected by layers of ‘ice’ or encrypted security systems, a (no)place for simulated encounters and deadly intrigues. Even more, cyberspace cancels out any need for real interaction or real pleasure. Our hero is happiest when he’s plugged in, experiencing the ecstasy of leaving his body and dissolving into information. The real world, by contrast, is useless and boring to him.

Fortunately, the politics of cyberspace hasn’t caught up to Gibson’s bleak vision of the future, but we all recognize enough of its elements today to make us uncomfortable—the fetishization of hardware and software, the commercialization of information, the pressure to ‘jack in’ and cruise, the dissolution of material boundaries, instantaneity, the instability of agency and identity. Gibson’s once novel idea, that distance is no object in cyberspace, has become a commonplace. If information is accessible at all, then it is immediately accessible (cf. Godfrey and Parkhill 1979; Yurick 1985). Certainly, the kind of technical sophistication Gibson imagines (i.e., direct web to brain interfaces) is a long way off. But the ‘mechanism,’ nonetheless, has developed rapidly over the last several decades. It is difficult to comprehend the speed at which integrated digital technology is evolving today. How far is it to a future in which ‘travel’ in cyberspace replaces travel in real space, when movement between one remote ‘location’ and another is just a matter of going online, When bodies, perspectives, sensoriums can be exchanged on demand, when any conceivable experience can be programmed and replayed? In the minds of young cyberspace engineers, such a future is closer than we think. For many of them, programming, screen, and interface technologies will become so sophisticated and provide us with such convincing illusions of presence—of places, events, people, and transactions—that before long most travel will be virtual travel, and all becoming will be ‘virtual becoming’ (cf. Benedikt 1992; Stone 1995, 1992; Kroker and Kroker 1997,
1992; Kroker and Weinstein 1994; Bogard 1996). It is easy to imagine, in a future that in many respects is already here (and Baudrillard claims is already over!), donning virtual gear equipped with high resolution imaging and sound technology, and being ‘transported’ elsewhere, wherever and whenever, or in what amounts to the same thing, bringing the ‘outside in,’ collapsing the very difference between outside and inside, eliminating both. For Simmel, we remember, the Stranger is the embodiment of the dialectic of mobility and immobility. What better metaphor for cyberspace, which even does Simmel one better, resolving this dialectic by substituting virtual (imaginary) space for physical space?

But even more than replacing physical space, we are slowly becoming aware that cyberspace also has the potential to substitute for (supplement? replace?) social space, i.e., for ‘real’ modes of communication and interaction. We have said that in postmodern society Simmel’s form of Stranger disappears, but comes back, or is reincarnated, as the ‘social-bio-technological mechanism’ itself. What exactly is this ‘social-bio-technological mechanism?’ For Simmel it was objective culture, i.e., human life concretized and alienated in its own institutions, history, and machines. Today, the computer network is our condensed, compacted form of objective culture. The push is on to get all institutions onscreen—the computer becomes our school, our workplace, our theater, and our church. Or to store all recorded history online—texts, images, sounds, artifacts of all sorts. Or to make the computer a repository of objectivized culture in the most extreme sense—a place where we can file and find our dreams and desires, our fantasies and nightmares, a virtual territory without limits, constrained only by an engineer’s imagination (this is, seen from the dark side, Microsoft’s Bill Gates multimedia vision of the future). Or to make the computer our body, our identity itself. Simmel already knew that objective culture was more than just ‘objects,’ but a complex mixture of persons, consciousness, knowledge, and machines, solidified in a structure from which everything exclusively human was eliminated or, in what is the same thing, to which everything uniquely human was sacrificed. In postmodern society, objective culture, to use a phrase of Baudrillard’s (1983a), goes into ‘orbit,’ and communication itself becomes a form of technologically induced ‘ecstasy’ (Baudrillard 1988, 1987; also Bogard 1990). The ‘object’ is informated, cut loose from the ground in order to circulate weightlessly, without regard to social boundaries. The social has no inside or outside. Or rather, it is relegated to a permanent Outside or Otherness that can no longer be accessed, only referred to in simulation, and the social order, once based on trust, symbolic communication, power and difference, is now generated as an informated delusion of these processes, played out on our screen, one day, perhaps, wired directly to our brains.

Cyber-trust

The Stranger, for Simmel, is a medium or message bearer linking two (or more) groups. But he is more than this—he is also attached to the groups he connects, although in an unresolved and contradictory way; as Simmel says, he is both inside and outside them. As a medium, the Stranger is the condition of communication between the inside and outside, between ‘us and them,’ between one and two. He is a ‘part’ of both groups, but they are also a part of him. After all, he is the one who carries their messages. We could say that he is like a moving point on a fixed line which, if we
generalize this to the idea of a whole society of Strangers, has no endpoints (where everyone becomes both message source and messenger, a contradiction between sedentariness and mobility). It is easy to see the postmodern analogy here. Simmel’s idea already suggests our own not so distant future, a society of cyber-strangers, of messengers constituted as so many flows of information along fixed lines of communication.

Cyberspace communication, I’ve said, raises fundamental questions about the forces which generate and condition social relations. Often, these have to do with identity and how identity constitutes a privileged space in the vicinity of which relations like trust are constructed. These relations necessarily are formed on the basis of incomplete knowledge of others and carry various risks—of betrayal, discovery, shame, criticism, etc. (cf. Giddens 1990, 1987). In cyberspace, like all spaces of communication, identity is always a problematic affair, a product of shifting strategies and alignments (cf. Stone 1991; Morley and Robins 1995; Bruckman 1993). For Simmel, the contradictory identity of the Stranger, and his problematic ‘location’ in the group, are precisely what allow specific forms of trust to develop. Simmel shows how we are often willing to trust Strangers in ways we cannot trust friends, who are too ‘close’ to us and to whom, consequently, we are too vulnerable. Trust between personal friends carries higher risks (of emotional damage, damage to the relation, etc.)—in this sense, the Stranger acts like a surrogate friend. Secrets are in one sense easier to tell a stranger, who can be both receptive and neutral, functions of his special role in mediating communication. Again, the analogy to today strikes me. In cyberspace communications, strangeness as a matter of this contradictory identity and its special relation to trust and secrets is built into the very operation of the medium. In cyberspace, persons confide in the medium itself, which they trust not to judge or betray them, as much as they confide in one another. The medium, i.e., becomes, like the Stranger, a kind of surrogate friend, someone (something) to tell our secrets.

Take, for instance, the now almost legendary story of ‘Julie,’ which illustrates this in the case of gender (we could construct similar stories today for race, age, class, weight, whatever). Stone (1995) recounts the tale (originally in Van Gelder 1985) of a disabled woman who over the years became a trusted confidant and confessor to a number of women on a computer bulletin board (BBS). Julie’s accounts of how she dealt with her disability were so movingly rendered and passionate that a number of the participants began to reveal to her the most intimate details of their own lives. Confidences were exchanged, advice was given, people were inspired and lives transformed. Julie, as it notoriously turned out, was a male psychiatrist who logged onto the conference accidentally (so he claims) and found it too fascinating to log-off. ‘I was stunned,’ he said. ‘I never knew that women talked among themselves that way.’ He concocted the approachable sexual persona of Julie—vulnerable, victimized, and confined to her small apartment—to learn more, and eventually s(he?) became the center of the group’s conversation. When it came out, the news that Julie was a man stunned many participants and prompted one woman to say she ‘felt raped.’ Others said, pointedly, that they felt the sense of trust they had taken years to build up had been violently shaken.
The point of Julie’s story is not simply that persons can use electronic networks in a deceitful way, nor that computer messages can’t always be trusted (both of which are true), but that the medium itself generates a ‘strange’ form of trust—not between intimates (i.e., friends and lovers) or between nameless, faceless, isolated individuals, but somewhere ‘partway’ between these extremes (somewhere, as I’ve said, between one and two). It is trust as a function of the medium-generated erasure of the cultural border between outside and inside, between the real social world, relegated permanently to a simulation reference which can no longer be accessed, and the virtual world of the screen (cf. Morley and Robins 1995). Persons on the ‘other end of the line,’ like our psychiatrist, don’t simply disappear into their online ‘doubles’ (Julie). In a special sense, they disappear into the medium itself—if Julie is a ‘good double,’ it is because the medium doesn’t betray her (his?) secret. At the same time, the medium can also be said to disappear into them—if it is a good medium, it carries their messages neutrally and objectively (i.e., lies and all) (cf. Baudrillard 1988: 207-219; also 1983b). The ideal medium is one in which the connection between communicator and communication is indiscernible, where all that remains visible is just the communication itself, a ‘partial,’ disembodied identity, making all messages untraceable to either their source or destination. This is the sense in which the system of communication, the apparatus itself, can become a ‘trusted confidant’ of those whose messages it carries. What is trusted is not just the communication or the communicator, i.e., the content of the message or the person who sends it, but the material form of the communication itself, the technology and its system of interfaces—just as for Simmel, what is trusted is not just the message or even the person of the Stranger, but the material form of the Stranger, his objectivity, neutrality, non-judgmentality, i.e., his disappearance as a carrier of information with an identity uniquely his own (he is always somewhere between, somewhere ‘on the way’). What is interesting about the story of Julie is thus not Julie per se, but what it tells us about the formal qualities and technology of cyberspace. Julie was a cut-and-paste figure—all her qualities were abstract and edited. But, in that sense, so were all those who responded to her online. Although they did not disguise their identities in the deceitful way the psychiatrist did, and without diminishing the nastiness of what he did, in the end, everyone involved was complicit in one way or another in staging this piece of digital theater, placing their trust in the medium not to betray them. Onscreen, the psychiatrist was able to construct and maintain an identity that was simultaneously credible and a complete fantasy. His interactants ‘shared’ this fantasy, but it was a kind of sharing based not on personal knowledge but the strangeness of the medium, the fact that the channel of communication had collapsed nearness and farness, closeness and remoteness, all the criteria for sortings into in-groups and out-groups, etc., and disappeared. There was a kind of intimacy here, but as Simmel would say, it was a strange intimacy, closeness (indeed, as many of the participants reported, love!) combined with remoteness and anonymity, and built entirely on abstract commonalities (i.e., stereotypes of ‘women like Julie,’ of the disabled, of what it’s like to be confined, to be a ‘woman in general’). Julie was not the real Stranger here; she was only an onscreen form of the deeper, more fundamental strangeness that enveloped and defined the whole system of communication. The story of Julie is not just about trust in Julie, but trust in cyberspace as a medium. And again, not only the psychiatrist’s trust in the medium to let him be ‘someone he really wasn’t,’ but the trust of the women participants in it as
well, to let them be ‘who they really were’ (some women remarked that it was only when they got online that they felt they could be themselves). In the end, they both trusted in the neutrality and strangeness of the medium, albeit in different ways, not to betray their fantasy of an online friendship. In the end, that was the real secret that both confided in the medium and that neither wanted betrayed—that the fantasy wasn’t real, and that the ‘outside’ social world that they continuously referred to in fact ended along the ‘inside’ edge of their computer terminals.

Julie’s story is now part of the lore of electronic bulletin boards, the precursors of IRCs, MUDs, etc. This meant she essentially had a textual identity (Julie was only words on a screen). But in the imaginary of those engineers who design today’s cyber-systems, soon we will interact with virtual bodies, customize their appearance onscreen, even, if we look far enough ahead, ‘touch’ them (the recent and awful film, Lawnmower Man, gave us a sci-fi glimpse at the ‘tactile’ future of cybersex) (cf. Bogard 1996: 156; Durkin 1995; Mazur 1994). It is in these kinds of visions—along the disappearing line between the real and the imaginary, truth and fiction, between real people and data constructs—that Simmel’s nightmare of the triumph objective culture comes closest to full expression. Objective culture, paradoxically, has to do with the disappearance of the object—in this case, the medium of communication itself. The Stranger, who for Simmel embodies objective culture in modern society, disappears and is reincarnated in postmodernity as a material medium that tends, like the Stranger himself, towards its own immateriality. The development of communications media today is guided by a principle of unobtrusiveness (e.g., the less apparent the particular distractive qualities of the media—e.g., screen, interface, channel—the better, truer, more real, more objective the image) (Bogard 1994: 317-318). Simmel, although he didn’t say it, of course knew that the Stranger was always involved in a disappearing act. This is, in fact, the condition of his objectivity—that although he stays, he is always mobile, always gone, present and absent, here and there. All message bearing systems (forms) aim to disappear this way into their message (cf. Serres 1995).

What ultimately is interesting in the story of Julie is that when the psychiatrist’s secret—the ‘real’ outside—was finally exposed, what suffered was not just participants’ trust in people, although that was surely the case, too. More than that, the system of communication itself no longer inspired confidence. One could not trust the medium to support a collective fantasy. It lost its strangeness—inside and outside, us and them, public and private, suddenly all these distinctions reemerged. What was revealed in the process was that trust was not a function of the truth of the message, but how it was conveyed. Julie, for her online group, was ‘too good to be true’ anyway; she was the perfect listener, sympathizer, confessor—her very unreality was the condition of her acceptance. Trust in Julie was trust in the fiction of Julie, i.e., trust that the fiction was true. When Julie’s real identity became known, what devastated trust was as much the loss of this fiction as the discovery of a truth. That fiction disappeared when the medium suddenly reasserted itself and lost its strangeness.
Cyber-Privacy

Trust, I think, is profoundly related to the modern idea of the private individual. Simmel, admittedly, was not concerned with this idea in ‘The Stranger,’ but it is easy to insert it into his text. Even as one who ‘stays tomorrow,’ the Stranger essentially remains a private person, and not just in those aspects he shares with the outside, but in his very function as a neutral and objective carrier of information. The Stranger’s private life is an unknown quantity to us, not because he leads a double life (in two groups at the same time), but because he does not obtrude in either—he disappears in the messages he carries. Does his private side in some way contribute to our trust of him (after all, trust by definition is founded on a lack of information)? And what does privacy mean when strangeness becomes a feature of the medium of communication itself?

A number of critics have seen the rapid development and deployment of information technology as a threat to personal privacy (Marx 1986; Rule 1973; Burnham 1983; Collins 1979; Giddens 1987; Laudon 1986). Privacy is often meant here in a sense similar to how Warren and Brandeis defined it in the 1890s, as the individual’s ‘right to be left alone,’ or in more contemporary terms, to be in control of the dissemination of information about themselves (cf. Office of Technology Assessment 1987, 1986, 1985; Westin: 1967). Computers, undeniably, allow modern institutions to collect and store unprecedented amounts of information on persons—their credit records, school records, tax records, medical and insurance records, and perhaps soon, their genetic records, etc. (Nelkin and Tancredi 1989; New York Times 1994; Dandeker 1990; Lyon 1994; Lyotard 1979). At times, it seems that computer surveillance and diagnostic technologies are so pervasive today that what few spaces of privacy, i.e., of ‘aloneness,’ are left to the individual are fast disappearing.

Steven Nock (1993), however, recently has put forward a far more interesting thesis: that computer surveillance is not so much the end of privacy as a technical response to problems generated by too much privacy in Western societies. Nock claims that the emancipation of young persons from traditional family structures in these societies has in fact significantly widened the contemporary domain of privacy and produced in its wake a radical crisis of trust. Too much privacy erodes the very basis of trust, which is sufficient information on the other to place confidence in his actions. It is not at all surprising if, again, this recalls Simmel’s reflections on the peculiar alienation and distance from others in the modern city. Nock explicitly identifies privacy with strangeness, and suggests that computerized surveillance, by making it easier to verify reputations (through credentialling, documentation, and intrusive ‘ordeals’ like drug testing, polygraphs, and genetic identification), is a means of restoring trust in social conditions that approach anonymity, i.e., in societies of Strangers (cf. also Collins 1979). Information stored on persons in computer files, that is, literally fills the vacuum of trust created by an explosion of privacy in (post)modern societies (the fragmentation of families and the consequent isolation, estrangement, and social distance between persons). As with the story of Julie, trust becomes a function of the operation of information-processing and media systems, of what can be gathered and known online. All this, again, challenges our traditional (re: modern) idea of trust, as a somehow close and open relation between
persons (e.g., friends) and forces us to see it in terms of the role of the communications media itself. Here, information compensates for a general absence of closeness with a disenchanted, *surrogate form of trust*, viz., trust between documented, licensed, and screened individuals—trust becomes an informed, technologized relation between data-constructs, what we could only call ‘cyber-trust.’ Trust as a function of information collected on individuals and stored on computers. I trust you and you trust me because our files (records) indicate that it’s okay to trust one another. On the basis of information that has been collected on each of us, we redeem, as best we can, an eroding, disappearing sense of mutual confidence and reciprocity, closeness and intimacy. Sensitive to the coming revolution in bio-technologies, Nock also notes how evolving biochemical forms of surveillance—genetic mapping and diagnostics—themselves dependent on computerization, will perhaps allow us to project reputations into the future (e.g., as information regarding susceptibilities to disease and disability) and allow trust to be established between individuals for whom intimacy might once have proven too risky. This de-coupling of trust and intimacy is, for Nock, the cost of increasing (not decreasing) privacy in the late 20th century.

In cyberspace, we have already seen, all these problems become a conceptual tangle. What exactly is the difference between trust online and trust offline? Between privacy on- and offline? Between ‘real’ intimacy between persons and mediated intimacies, i.e., intimacies that develop onscreen? In information societies, intimacy doesn’t disappear, but like trust gets updated and supplanted by an abstracted, formalized kind of intimacy characteristic of the new forms of communication. Likewise, we can perhaps distinguish a new kind of privacy in contemporary societies—one referring not to the aloneness of persons, but the aloneness, if you will, of the interface, of the connection between the person and communications device. We don’t need to look much farther for an image of this today than that of the isolated individual sitting wired to the computer, alone at his work- or playstation, but ‘intimately’ connected to the simulated events onscreen, and potentially, to the events on any screen, anywhere.

This, in fact, is one of our contemporary imaginations of the postmodern ‘community,’ persons having access to everything (and everyone) online, and *accessible* to everything (and everyone) online, yet profoundly isolated, confined to their cubicles, immobile, immutable, private (Bogard 1996: 125-141). Here once again, privacy retains or redeems the connotation of a deep aloneness, but in a paradoxical and heightened way, because it develops within the very context of immediate, absolute, and total connectedness. And trust gets established along a thin membrane separating privacy and intimacy. The people at the ‘other end of the line’ are never, in this sense, Strangers. The Stranger is, as always, our *channel* to these people, the medium in which we know them, the screen on which their (and our) secrets circulate and unfold. In that sense, again, what is interesting about Julie and her lovers is not that they represent an exceptional or deviant case of cyberspace communications, viz., the breakdown of trust, but how much they really illustrate the norm, i.e., that trust has become an abstract, shifting, informed form in postmodern culture.
In Simmel’s portrait of metropolitan life, intimacy and privacy are dialectically related. Against the city’s incessant bombardment of the senses, the individual intellect acts as a *screen* against information overload; it is, he says, our modern ‘organ,’ whose function is to protect and preserve the rapidly disappearing space of the Subject. Modern urban life requires a filter, through which the competing demands for engagement and withdrawal, intimacy and isolation, can be resolved. Today, this is one of the best ways to describe the experience of the ‘virtual, online metropolis,’ i.e., a screen (literally) on which intimacy and privacy resolve their contradictions (all contradictions of close and far, i.e., of distance). ‘Persons’ can be intimate in cyberspace while remaining completely anonymous nodes in real life, known only by their onscreen ‘hooks’ or ‘tags,’ their partial identities, like the CB ‘good buddy’ road warriors of the 70s, only uploaded to the planetary information highway. Nock is certainly right to show how information makes trust possible in societies where privacy has become the norm, but he doesn’t see how it also makes possible an artificial, media-generated form of privacy. Information is not just the medium for a different kind of trust, the instant, abstract, credentialized, coded ‘trust’ that exists among networked individuals. It is also the medium for a different kind of isolation, the aloneness made possible by the interposition of the network itself. Cyberspace does not eliminate social forms and relations so much as virtualize them, i.e., reproduce them as codes and structures of information (cf. Baudrillard 1983a).

Privacy still exists in cyberspace, like trust, but in a surrogate, fractal, and partial way, as a data-construct. Julie, in our story, had a private side which ran parallel to that of her impersonator, the psychiatrist. They were, literally, each other’s secrets. Likewise, intimacy in real life is not destroyed, but fractalized in cyberspace (in virtual space, it is possible to be ‘less than close,’ *less* than intimate, but still keep close, just as it is to be ‘less than far,’ but still retain an operational distance). In our societies, the medium itself is what is close and far, intimate and removed, private and engaged. In that sense, there is too much privacy in information societies in a double sense. Nock is right only up to a point. In a realm where too much privacy creates a crisis of trust, information networks substitute what ‘passes’ as a society based on reciprocity, intimate knowledge, a digital ‘simulacrum’ of the social order. But in doing so, it also constructs what ‘passes’ for privacy in that order, that is, *informed privacy, a simulation of privacy* —your password, your log-on, your profile, all absolutely unique, but all absolutely standardized, referred to a pre-coded operationality. There is, as Nock says, more privacy today, but privacy is not just a problem for information societies, it is also one of their effects. Information societies produce privacy as a virtual reality; not a world hidden from surveillance, but an already staged, programmed isolation and strangeness.

Simmel’s impressionistic notion of strangeness is closer to this sense of privacy than Nock’s, who begins from the fact of privacy rather than its *facticity*, i.e., the staging or performance of its scene in cybernetic orders. Simmel already sensed that privacy in the modern age was not just compatible with continuous exposure, but that privacy, strangeness, had somehow already slipped into simulation, with its ecstatic dissolution of distance. Near and far—in cyberspace, that *can* mean *both* near and far, or *neither*. The question is undecidable and (I have to say it) strange.
Privacy in cyberspace societies is the experience of the collapse of distance. Strangeness is not just the isolation of the individual, but the ironic isolation of the cyborg, plugged-in and alone at (in) the screen, intimate and fragmented, outside and in, perfectly known, perfectly indeterminate—objective culture taken to its limit, the point where it disappears.

**Conclusion: Between One and Two—The Fractal Stranger**

In our updated reading of Simmel, it is often tempting to think of the Stranger as the third variable, or the shifting form between two and three, i.e., between the dyad and the triad, because the Stranger appears as the one who brings two, insider and outsider, together. But insiders and outsiders do not constitute a dyad. They would remain completely distant and unknown to each other without the intervention of the Stranger. Simmel’s Stranger, it turns out, is not the form between two and three, but *between one and two*, between the monad and the dyad. He bridges the distance between two monads, but in a curious sense that reflects his own contradictory status between them. For Simmel, the Stranger always retains a trace of the isolated individual. He is himself a monad, an autonomous and self-contained perspective, belonging to no group. But even the monad, Simmel notes, is a social relation—the isolated individual is only isolated in relation to others (Simmel 1950c: 118-120). The Stranger is a monad only in the sense that he is independent of the two opposing poles which he himself connects. As Simmel says, he has not yet overcome the freedom of coming and going. And while Simmel insists that the status of the Stranger ultimately involves a synthesis of such contradictory relations, it also suggests another interpretation, viz., that Simmel’s famous categories of interaction are not pure types standing in relations of opposition, but mixtures of varying proportions and consistencies. To say the Stranger is between one and two, in this sense, would not be to imply any possible synthesis, only to note an ‘impure’ or indeterminate relation, in the way fractal space is not a synthesis of n and n+1, i.e., of whole numbers, but an indeterminate, ‘subnumerary’ dimension between each with potentially infinite folds.

This blurring of boundaries between the monad and the dyad is an excellent image of the rapidly evolving symbiosis of bodies and computers, groups and communications networks, societies and cybernetic systems in postmodern society. The cyborg is not the monad, an autonomous whole or unified perspective. It is a *multiplicity* of partial monads, each paradoxically similar yet different, each at best a limited perspective on the whole, in the way that different terminals on an information network offer different points of access to the system. Neither, however, is the cyborg the dyad, in any formal sense. It has no outside, no Other, with the exception the Other it simulates (cyborgs can simulate human communication systems but they remain hybrid, mixed forms: part human, part machine).

Haraway (1985) thinks that cybernetic technology, divorced from what she calls an ‘informatics of domination’ (oppressive forms of organized control), has both creative and liberatory potentials. For her, the cyborg represents at least the possibility of escape from fixed identities and locations. In this way, it becomes both a practical and necessary theoretical perspective from which to analyze postmodern institutions, which increasingly organize themselves according to bio-mechanic log-
ics. We do not have to share Haraway’s feminist hope to agree that the cyborg, like Simmel’s Stranger, is neither monadic nor dyadic, but a multiplicity of unstable relations between human and technological systems. These relations arise in the contact of different surfaces: between the body of the operator and the screen, the hand and the keyboard, nerve endings and central processing units. And their sense is captured in words like ‘interface,’ ‘integration,’ ‘interactivity,’ ‘user-friendly,’ etc., words that suggest sociality but also the postmodern conversion of sociality (and gender) into informed forms.

In ‘The Stranger,’ Simmel conveys an unsettling sense of modernity as a field of both stasis and mobility, of relations that oscillate between closeness and remoteness, permanence and flux. At the same time, from the very beginning modernity evolves the socio-technical means for rendering these contradictions inoperative: message bearers, communication channels, interfaces, screens, in short, Strangers. We must insist on the technological, and not merely the biological or human, aspect of strangeness. Simmel himself never claimed that it was necessary for Strangers to have an exclusively organic form—in fact, just the opposite. Even while they are organic members of a group, they are ‘inorganically appended to it’ (1950a: 208). What matters, to borrow again from Deleuze and Guattari (1987; 1977), is their ‘mechanic’ form, as relays or conduits for information, as connectors and modes of virtual transport. Today, we can log on and, within the context of an artificially constructed environment, forget about distance, the limitations of space and time, for awhile at least. Digital networks, screens, simulation technologies and virtual systems: these are the Strangers in our midst. Like all Strangers, they create the illusion of collapsing the gap between close and far, stasis and flow, actual and virtual territories, at least while we’re online and connected. And if we are not yet continuously online today, if the science and technology of brainchips is not yet here, nonetheless our connection to virtual systems and modern telecommunications networks, both direct and indirect, voluntary and coerced, is becoming a pervasive and everyday fact of life for growing numbers of people on the planet. In ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life,’ Simmel already noted the totalizing imperative of information and its qualitative transformation of human consciousness. Already in Simmel, the metropolis is on its way to becoming the virtual metropolis. Indeed, cities like Amsterdam have already made a social and economic commitment to go fully online, to place the entire community—libraries, government services, schools, public forums, stores, etc.—on the net. In this immense doubling and redoubling of social forms, their conversion into calculated matrices of information, strangeness doesn’t disappear as a relation, but is transported to an even higher level of objective culture, a new, more abstract formation of ‘social mechanism.’ Simmel, as we’ve seen, foresaw that the new freedoms which life in the metropolis generated would come with high psychological costs—more abstraction, greater alienation and personal isolation. In the virtual metropolis, the gain in freedom, the ability to connect anywhere at the push of a button, will have to be weighed against the costs of further converting social relations and community into information, human beings into extensions of computerized networks, into cyborgs.
Simmel’s Stranger, then, is a theoretical bridge connecting modern and postmodern worlds. But having crossed it, perhaps we no longer need it. Concepts like ‘the Stranger’ only fit postmodern circumstances partway. They can only suggest an understanding of contemporary processes by way of analogy. The real Stranger is probably Simmel himself, a message bearer from the past that is our present. Simmel allows us to think of the postmodern as neither a negation nor a resolution, but as a rupture of the modern, an intensification or, if you will, a redoubling of the modern itself. An updated Simmel lets us conceive of postmodernity as a problem of strangeness, of the shifting and contradictory movement between one and two. With his help, at least we now have some new questions to ask of our own age.

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