The Usage of Space in Dialogical Self-Construction: From Dante to Cyberspace

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It is commonly acknowledged that Western modernization has changed the outlook on identity, from the ascribed identity in premodern times to the identity management in our late-modern times. Dante's *Divina Commedia* and the usage of Internet by visitors of a Dutch hip-hop site are analyzed to come to a more differentiated conclusion. Both examples clearly illustrate the dialogical nature of self-construction. The differences are to be found in the spatial distribution of the voiced positions. In the case of the Divina Commedia, self-construction is situated in a narratively defined space where the distribution of dialogical positions obeys the preordained moral structure of the medieval cosmology. The medium of the Internet, on the other hand, facilitates a relatively open exchange between positions that are not bound by time and space, resulting in a more tentative self-construction. However, both examples have in common that exploration as well as demarcation are necessary to guide the process of self-construction.

In the literature on self and identity, it is by now a commonly accepted conclusion that we have changed over the centuries in the way that we perceive, present, and represent ourselves (e.g., Baumeister, 1987; Côté, 1996; Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Taylor, 1989). The historical relativity of self and identity is often bracketed together with the claim that even such a deeply psychological domain as our own personhood is strongly intertwined with the prevailing social practices and ideologies in contemporary society. The aforementioned authors explain the individualistic stance of today as a product of Western modernization, conceding that nowadays we live in a world where we are experiencing an unprecedented freedom to

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choose our own course through life and where we are expected to do so on our own terms. Taylor, followed by others, described this as a process of increased subjectivism, with our own individuality becoming the measure for a meaningful life. This is in marked contrast with, for instance, the medieval society where people were assumed to see themselves as an inseparable part of the existing social and religious order. The erosion of the traditional value systems is for some authors even reason to prophesize the demise of the unitary self with its conventional criteria of personal coherence and stability and to herald the advent of a “protean self” (Lifton, 1993) with its postmodern features of plurality, changeability, and expressiveness (cf. Featherstone & Burrows, 1995; Gergen, 1991; Turkle, 1997).

A concise description of the most important sociohistorical changes in self and identity is given by Côté (1996). He starts from the observation that identity formation always involves a linkage between subjective aspects of self and the social context in which the self is enacted. Structural changes in the social environment usually incite corresponding shifts in the way people position themselves as individuals. Table 1 presents a simplified version of Côté’s historical framework, supplemented with the identity criteria that are particularly valued in the different stages of Western cultural history. As shown in the table, Côté distinguished between the premodern, the early modern, and the late-modern period. The transition from premodern to early modern society took place roughly in the 18th to 19th century under the influence of rapid industrialization and urbanization. The transition from early modern to late-modern society concerns the shift we are witnessing today from a production-based to a consumer-based economy. Côté also distinguished between the personal and the social aspects of identity. The social identity refers to the individual’s position in a social structure. The more private, subjective part of identity is represented by the personal identity (i.e., how we shape and experience our own individuality).

Western history shows a shift in the social identity from an ascribed identity in premodern times to a so-called “managed” identity in our late-modern times. In the earlier ages, individuals inherited their social identity from the social status conferred by tradition, church, and birth. In terms of personal identity, this meant a heteronomous (as opposed to an autonomous) attitude (i.e., an uncritical adherence to the social conventions). People were valued on their loyalty to existing meaning structures (i.e., worldview, moral stance, communal practices, and tradi-

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tions). The shift from premodern to early modern times was one of increased interiority. Social identity became something that had to be achieved by demonstrating a sufficient degree of self-actualization. On a more personal level, this meant a more individuated identity based on a recognizable, integrated biography making personal unity the measure of mental soundness. The market orientation of our late-modern era requires a more strategic outlook on matters of personhood. It turns the social identity into a commodity; something that has to be actively managed, by "reflexively and strategically fitting oneself into a community of 'strangers' by meeting their approval through the creation of the right impression" (Côté, 1996, p. 421). People start to mirror themselves in the strategic impression management that they see in today's media. As a consequence, the inner criteria of personal unity are being replaced by the more transactional criteria of flexibility and expressiveness.

A quick reading of the historical changes in Western personhood, however, carries the danger of overstating the differences between past and contemporary forms of self-construction at the expense of the commonalities. For instance, one might ask whether cases of self-doubt or of a playful adoption of could-be identities were indeed absent in medieval times, as Baumeister (1987) seemed to suggest. Similarly, one might ask whether the need for a certain personal coherence and stability is indeed becoming obsolete, and whether this eventually leads to "the erasure of individual self" (Gergen, 1991, p. 49), as Gergen claimed in his presentation of present-day multiphrenia.

Such an extreme interpretation of the nature of the self may be associated with an insufficient differentiation between the implicit and the explicit aspects of self and identity, between the "I" and "me" (James, 1890). Most people experience themselves as an I (i.e., as a separate, more or less coherent, and autonomous agent), and they address each other in this quality (Benson, 2001; Harré, 1998; James, 1890; McAdams, 1997). It is a sense of self that we all have in common, and it underlies all our actions; but that usually remains implicit (Lewis, 1991). However, from time to time, people may find themselves in circumstances that require a more straightforward, explicit definition of the self. Such more outspoken self-definitions are the products of active self-reflection and are often elaborated through self-narration, discursive self-presentation, or social enactment. How this is dealt with and how much personal investment is involved depends on the specific cultural and historical circumstances. It may take on a strongly individualistic shape as often is the case in contemporary Western society, or take on the more collectivist imprint of many non-Western cultures (i.e., Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997) and our own more tradition-oriented past (Giddens, 1991; Taylor, 1989). Hence, it is not so much the underlying psychology of self and identity that has changed over the centuries, but the format of self-construction.

Regardless of its specific sociohistorical format, every self-construction and identity formation may consist of cycles of intensified "selving" (McAdams,
Selving refers to the process through which we give shape to the feeling of being an I (i.e., by apprehending our subjective experiences as an indication of who we are). This peculiar interplay between I and me can best be regarded as a double movement between expressing aspects of self in a meaningful way and appropriating these objectified meanings as personally relevant (Josephs, 1998). Expressing aspects of self involves the coupling of personal experiences, feelings, and considerations to recognizable scenarios or roles that can be exchanged with others. This goes from I to me. Appropriating well-elaborated, meaningful scenarios and roles as personally relevant is a matter of envisioning the person that one could become; it goes from me to I. In short, selving implies a reciprocity between exploration and demarcation.

The dynamic interplay between I and me lies at the heart of any self-construction. The precise relation between I and me, or the implicit and explicit aspects of identity, however, can be rather fragmentary and uncertain. As Hermans (i.e., Hermans, 1996, 2001; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992) repeatedly emphasized, the self, whether as I or me, is in fact distributed over many co-existing self-positions that belong to the person’s private and social repertoire. The notion of the dialogical self expands on the Jamesian distinction between I and me by stressing the inherent multiplicity of the self. The self is not so much a pre-existing, unified whole, but emerges from the dialogical exchange of relatively autonomous positions that in one way or another are of special relevance to the individual. By juxtaposing these positions, moving between them, and subsequently endowing them with their own voice, the individual is able to make those positions more articulate; they become interacting characters “in a process of question and answer, agreement and disagreement” (Hermans, 2002, p. 148).

Whether this dialogical process takes place within the confinement of one’s imagination or in actual interaction with others, essential is its spatially distributed nature (Hermans, this issue). When people think or speak about themselves, they do so in anticipation of the fact that each utterance may evoke a reaction from a different position that puts the utterance in a different perspective. It makes the self a decentralized phenomenon that refuses to respond to the Cartesian dichotomy between the inner self and the outside world (Hermans, 2001). As William James (1890) already indicated, the self is actually an extended self that also occupies others, material possessions, memories and future plans, actualized and potential identities, imaginary voices and actual reactions of others, and so on. The central problem of dialogical self-construction is to create order in this multitude or, following the spatial analogy of the dialogical self, to locate oneself in a universe of possible readings. As Ciarán Benson (2001) put it, “Who I am is a function of where I am” (p. 11).

The question of who and where I am is for many people reason to outline their identity more clearly. As indicated by the theory of the dialogical self, this does not
happen in splendid isolation, but by conferring with real or imagined others; and it is guided by the cultural standards of what counts as a worthwhile life and what is a valid way of defining a fitting identity (Taylor, 1989). Culture operates in this sense as a collective voice that organizes the meaning of the dialogical relations (Hermans, 2001). However, given the fact that over the Western history the traditional canons of Christian faith have been superseded by more personal standards, it becomes interesting to see how this loss of organizing power affects the spatial characteristics of the self-dialogues.

To provide a more differentiated description of the historical changes in self-construction, we analyze two examples that represent the extremes of Côté’s (1996) historical schema. The first is Dante Alighieri’s (1319/2002) *Divina Commedia* (*Inferno*) as a case of the heteronomous identity formation in premodern times. The second is the usage of the Internet as a medium for late-modern identity management by the visitors of *theBoombap*, a leading Web site of the Dutch hip-hop scene (http://www.theboombap.nl/). In both examples, the spatiodialogical nature of self-construction plays a decisive role. However, as we see, the space that Dante creates in his mind is the closed, predefined space of the classical narrative; whereas the cyberspace of theBoombap is more openly negotiated, using the new technologies of mediated interchange.

**DANTE’S DIVINA COMMEDIA: A CASE OF PREMODERN SELF-CONSTRUCTION**

Dante’s (1319/2002) divina comedia is a poetic account of the author’s journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven. It was written somewhere between 1307 and 1321 and it almost immediately earned a reputation amongst Dante’s contemporaries. Robin Kirkpatrick (1987) placed the *Divina Commedia* between the epics of antiquity and the greatest novels of the modern era because it combines the qualities of both:

Representing himself as the protagonist in the story he has to tell, Dante writes of a journey that is simultaneously inward and outward: inwardly, he sets himself to explore both the worst and best of which human beings are capable; outwardly, he aims to investigate nothing less than the whole of the physical and spiritual universe. (p. 1)

Dante (1319/2002) is a forerunner of modernity in questioning his own identity through introspection and a critical soul searching. At the same time, the *Divina Commedia* is a period document in its extensive use of doctrines, metaphors, and symbols that allude to a medieval Christian worldview with its closed and preordained cosmology.
Part 1 of the *Divina Commedia—Inferno* (Dante, 1319/2002)—begins with a discomforting realization:

Midway through the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark wood, for I had strayed from the straight pathway to this tangled ground. (p. 3)

In the middle of his life, Dante found himself in a desolate and impenetrable forest, without actually remembering how he got there. He is lost and the easy way out—a sunlit hilltop promising a clear view—is blocked by three savage animals: the leopard, the lion, and the she-wolf. They symbolize Dante’s main character flaws: lechery, pride, and greed. In Dante’s despair, the only thing left to do is to confront the dark shadows around him that forebode the underworld. Guided by the appearance of Vergilius, Dante starts to descend the abysses of hell; a journey into the roots of human sin. Mirroring himself in the fate of the damned, Dante is forced to recognize his own moral shortcomings. By subsequently climbing Mount Purgatory, he has the opportunity to repent his past; and with a cleansed soul he is granted a view at the heavenly spheres, after which he returns to the reality of everyday life with renewed spiritual strength.

Modern readers will immediately recognize an identity crisis in the overture of the first *canto*, or better, a midlife crisis where life has stagnated and the future seems hopeless. It is a situation that Taylor (1989) described as

an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of not knowing who they are, but that can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand. They lack a frame or horizon within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or trivial. The meaning of all these possibilities is unfixed, labile, or undetermined. This is a painful and frightening experience. (pp. 27–28)

This certainly holds for Dante (1319/2002). His journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise becomes no less than a form of systematic self-therapy to escape this condition (St. James O’Connor, 1999; Taylor & Finley, 1997; Wertheim, 1999).

Dante (1319/2002) staged himself as the protagonist of the story, but simultaneously holds on to his role as a narrator by continuously commenting on the events and the reactions of the protagonist. The *Divina Commedia* is written as an ongoing dialogue. Throughout his journey, Dante is accompanied by the moral examples that he revered in real life: Vergilius, Statius, Beatrice, and Saint Bernardus. They guide him on his way and also function as his more perfect alter egos. He meets numerous characters from his own past, public figures in the Italian society of that time, the great names from antiquity; in short, anyone who Dante regarded as being significant to his life. The number of dialogical positions in the
Divina Commedia is truly kaleidoscopic. It exemplifies the Bakhtinian notion of inner thought as an exchange of utterances between imaginary positions that each have their own voice (Hermans, 2001).

The voices are set in the hermetic cosmology with which Dante (1319/2002) and his contemporaries were so intimate. Dante sketches a Ptolemaic world with Earth and man at the center of the universe. Both created by God, Earth and man are surrounded by the nine celestial spheres where the planets follow their set trajectories and around which the firmament lies as the final decor. Beyond must be God as the primum mobile, that is, the moving force that keeps everything running. Within this Ptolemaic universe, Dante subsequently places a Christian universe: high above us paradise, deep below hell, and in between Mount Purgatory. Paradise is the desired destination of all beings, as they want to return to their creator. This fundamental desire is threatened by the evil that has come into the world because of the fall of man and the revolt of the angels. This way, the celestial and the human, the physical and the spiritual, the moral and the psychological, the personal and the divine, are all incarnations of one and the same metaphysical design.

Dante (1319/2002) first enters hell to face its horrors. Here, the evildoers are constantly reminded of their sinfulness, according to the principle of the contrapasso, the ultimate reciprocity. Magicians and seers, who think they can foresee fate, stumble around with their heads backwards, only able to look back. Sexual sinners are swirling in restless, never-ceasing passion. The schismatics tear their own bodies to shreds. The heretics, being sentenced to the stake, burn eternally in their tombs. This way, the damned are put away at the place in hell that has been assigned to them by the nature of their evil. The sexual sinners are sentenced to the second circle of hell. According to Dante, the heretics are much stronger sinners and therefore reside deeper in Hell, in the sixth circle. However, in the eyes of Dante, the magicians and the schismatic even represent a bigger sin and are condemned to the eighth circle. In the deepest pits of hell, the traitors of benefactors are found. Among them, the biggest traitor of all is seated—Lucifer, the archangel who renounced God—chewing on Judas and the assassins of Julius Caesar. Taylor and Finley (1997) characterized this spatial hierarchy of sins as one where, “the descent is ordered in terms of increasing injury and unrelatedness to others” (p. 10). In other words, it is a matter of loyalty.

The moral topology of hell (Dante, 1319/2002) is strongly flavored with the author’s own rancor against those who destroyed his political career. As many of his fellow townsmen in Florence, Dante took side in the conflict between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines and, ironically enough, fell victim to the feuding factions within his own party. In his absence, Dante was sentenced to death and had to live in exile for the rest of his life. Quintessential to Dante’s reckoning with his past, however, is his attempt to integrate his own frustration in the larger
theological framework of Christian salvation. The infidelity between people is the profane version of the unbelievers’ lack of faith in the divine order (Kirkpatrick, 1987).

With the manifestation of Lucifer, surrounded by the mortals who have forsaken the loyalty of others, Dante (1319/2002) reached the touchstone of evil. When he and Vergilius climb down the hairy legs of Lucifer, the whole perspective suddenly inverts. Lucifer’s legs prove to be jutting out of the ground and, while descending, Dante and Vergilius actually turn out to ascend from the darkness of hell into the daylight of Mount Purgatory. The reversal that takes place between hell and purgatory is not only Euclidian. It, above all, constitutes a spiritual and psychological conversion. In 1274, at the Council of Lyon, purgatory was added to the repertoire of salvation to offer man the possibility of repentance and purification (Le Goff, 1981). Dante is the first who conceived it as equal to heaven and hell. The turn from eternal punishment to purification is also symbolized by Mount Purgatory itself. The gradually mounting terraces of purgatory replace the ever-deepening circles and pouches of the infernal pit. The terraces are seven in number, representing the seven cardinal sins.

Even in the optimistic decorum of purgatory, people repent and suffer. They walk in endless circles, again troubled by the same contrapasso as in hell. The eyes of the envious, who could not bear to see others flourish, are stitched up with wire; the greedy walk around with emaciated bodies and hollow sockets; and the proud are burdened with heavy stones on their back. When Dante (1319/2002) talks with one of them, he is also forced to stoop, symbolizing his own sinful pride. This way, the seven cardinal sins have to be paid for, one by one and with painstaking punctuality. Only then, grace is possible and the prospect of paradise and heaven is dawning.

Heaven goes beyond the imaginative powers of humans (Janssen, 1999). It cannot be expressed in words, nor in pictures or music. Dante (1319/2002), however, continues writing; and many illustrators of the Divina Commedia have tried to translate his words in images. Botticelli, perhaps the greatest of all Dante illustrators, comes closest to the borders of the attainable. Whereas his portrayals of hell are full of details, heaven is drawn as an abstraction and we only see how Dante, now accompanied by Beatrice, is floating up from sphere to sphere. When they have reached the zenith of heaven, Botticelli limits himself to a minuscule drawing, and the last page remains blank. Here, Dante finally experiences the mystical unification that he sought with God.

With the Divina Commedia, Dante (1319/2002) created a whole universe in his mind. The plurality of voices resembles the modernistic and even post-modernistic kinds of self-construction that we are used to nowadays. The difference, however, is that in Dante’s case this takes place in a carefully orchestrated space, where each position has its preordained voice and place clearly marking out its moral function in the story. The closed moral and topological arrangement of hell, purgatory, and
heaven transforms Dante’s self-construction in a journey with an ultimate destiny, giving it a certain definitiveness that is absent in the more tentative identity negotiations of today.

THE BOOOMBAP:
A CASE OF LATE-MODERN SELF-CONSTRUCTION

Like Dante (1319/2002) in his Divina Commedia, the users of the Internet find in the virtual communities of the cyberspace a similar extension of themselves where they can freely explore and elaborate their identity. However, the crucial difference is that Dante did this in the confinement of his own imagination and by applying the rules of narrative composition. This makes the account of his journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven an example of _in vitro_ self-construction. Internet users, on the other hand, immediately go into the public sphere and use the transmitted reactions of real, albeit distant, others to mirror themselves. It is a newly emerged form of mediated _in vivo_ self-construction.

The Internet is one of the most, if not _the_ most conspicuous technologies of social saturation (cf. Gergen, 1991). Electronic communication has enabled us to sustain relationships with an ever-expanding range of other persons without having to maintain face-to-face contact. According to Gergen, this mediated multiplication of ourselves has led to an increasing population of the self with a wide variety of tentative part-identities to anticipate the fragmentation of our daily lives. Post-modernist commentators on the Internet (i.e., Rheingold, 1993; Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1997) basically subscribe to Gergen’s diagnosis. Take, for instance, Turkle’s claim that, “in real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along” (p. 10).

The cyberspace of the Internet has some procedural features that indeed suggest such a transformation of our social behavior (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Wynn & Katz, 1997). First, the communication on the Internet is based on the digital transmission of information through the computer terminal and the nodes and links of the World Wide Web without the body playing a decisive role. It makes social exchange relatively anonymous. Users can easily hide themselves behind pseudonyms, nicknames, so-called _avatars_ (emblematic images), and fake identities without running the risk of being exposed (e.g., Talamo & Ligorio, 2001). Second, because of the digital instantiation of the Internet, communication is hardly bound by time and space. The Internet branches off in all directions on a global scale; reason for the spatial analogy of “Web” or “net” (Wertheim, 1999). It is now possible to connect to individuals of the same mind that one could not have found in any other way. This way, the Internet houses numerous virtual communities that are devoted to a very specific interest or concern. They offer the surfers on the Internet
the possibility of a self-chosen niche in which they can explore a certain aspect of their identity and test its feasibility before an audience that they can identify with (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1997).

All of the aforementioned characteristics make the Internet’s cyberspace a perfect playground for putting into practice certain part-identities that are not quickly appreciated in real life. As Turkle (1997) put it, the Internet constitutes “a social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self” (p. 180). A student of ours, Sven Willemsen (2003), extensively studied this aspect of the Internet by analyzing the Boombap, a freely accessible and very popular Dutch hip-hop site. Like many Web sites, the Boombap has different functions for its visitors. It acts as a newsgroup where the visitors find the latest news about the hip-hop scene. It also houses a number of message boards. The boards act as the virtual meeting place where the visitors can actively engage in online discussions or perform on stage to improve their verbal proficiency, the raison d’être of every self-respecting hip hopper. A part of the boards is reserved for the ChittyChatChat, the chatbox of the Boombap site. Willemsen followed the cascade of messages on the ChittyChatChat for a period of 2 weeks to get an impression of the ongoing concerns within the Dutch hip-hop community. He also conducted 20 interviews with active members of the Boombap community, asking them about the role of the Boombap in their lives.

In the interviews, several reasons were mentioned to visit the Boombap and join in the ChittyChatChat. Of course, people wanted to keep posted about what is going on within the Dutch hip-hop scene, but they also appreciated the ChittyChatChat as a place to relax and engage with others who have similar interests and a similar lifestyle:

Well, it relieves me of the daily stress, I suppose … Some watch TV, I’m chatting on the Boards or just checking. At work, I have to be serious and the people I work with are much older than me … They can’t bullshit anymore …. And then I start looking there for the people that I can really hang out with, you know …. (Thomas)

Important for the visitors is the certainty that you start off from a common ground:

You know about each other that it’s OK with the roots. It’s something that you don’t have to discuss constantly … Hip-hop is a way of life and so it’s in the middle of everything. (Herman)

Being in the company of like-minded people also has the advantage that they are the kind of audience you want recognition from. It means that you matter in the eyes of the proper persons:
It's cool to be at your job and to start a discussion about something and three hours later just click it on and watch that it's still going. It says something about you, about people. It gives you some satisfaction ... Look, nobody is coming there to zero replies, because then you're just dissed. Look, because when people ignore you, that says something, basically. (Hans)

To become accepted is not easy, because the veterans of the Boombap community tend to act as gatekeepers. They are keen on exposing inexperienced visitors as "newbies" or "wannabees." Hans continued:

Look, I'm there basically to score points off people ... That's my thing. That's hip-hop ... I come there to find the confirmation that I have more knowledge than you. And if you come to tell me that the new CD of Nas is dope, and I drop this to you straight away, that you should check out the new Webfoolish record, and you don't know it, that says enough! Then, for me it's clear. There's always someone bigger ... . (Hans)

This implies not only that the community functions as a self-regulating social hierarchy, but also that the opposition between being a pretender or a genuine hip hopper is the main dimension in preserving the social hygiene of the group. Being sincere and not hiding behind a social façade is highly valued by the visitors of the Boombap:

At a certain moment, it could happen that you read: "Ohh ... There's Abdula again with his sarcasm and criticism, and so on!" However, at a certain moment, I noticed that people started to appreciate that. That a lot of people started to send me demos. Like: "Give me your opinion, because I know that, coming from your mouth, it's an honest one." (Abdula)

Others, on the other hand, indicate that they appreciate the freedom of the Internet to adopt another persona than the kind of person they are in real life:

People assume that the way in which people behave there [CvH/JJ: the Boombap] is the same as in real life. However, I know about myself that in ordinary life I'm much more silent. There, I'm stimulated to talk with others that interest me. There, I have whole sheets of text. That people maybe think: "Oh ... that's how he is!," but this person would be wrong then. It's in no way representative of how I present myself in life. It is part of me, but I feel just freer there. The environment is less oppressive. (Herman)

This suggests a paradox between the significance of cyberspace as a playground for self-construction and simultaneous need of the visitors to be taken seri-
ously. As a result, much of the mutual negotiations involve the delicate balance between the relative anonymity of the interlocutors, their sincerity, and the integrity of the group.

This tension is also apparent in the exchange of e-mails on the Chitty Chat site. The following excerpt involves what appears to be a rather severe transgression of the social codes by one of the visitors. It all starts with an e-mail in which a certain Dr Moriarty cast doubts on the reputation of the Boombap (in the tradition of the Internet, the visitors of the Boombap generally use nicknames as pseudonyms):

From: Dr Moriarty / 02-20-02 / 17:49
According to the visiting card that I got from an employee of the Boombap, this site is: “Holland’s most respectable and consulted hip-hop magazine.” If I were an employee of the Boombap, I would devaluate this slogan as quickly as possible.

This immediately triggered a cascade of reactions, and the discussion quickly degenerated in attempts from both sides to bring each other into disrepute:

From: K-Rock / 02-20-02 / 17:55
Moriarty, you just buy a Revu [CvH/JJ: A Dutch men’s magazine], dude, and don’t bother the people here. Hasn’t the school of James accepted you, or am I mistaken? Pfffff ...

From: Dr Moriarty / 02-20-02 / 17:56
My dear K-rock, should I take advice from someone who has a hyphen in his name?

From: Osco / 02-20-02 / 17:58
Better a hyphen than no period behind Dr, I always say ... Unless, of course, it’s your first name.

The verbal dispute continues, but suddenly Dr Moriarty comes with a rather enigmatic message:

From: Dr Moriarty / 02-20-02 / 18:39
You’ve just assassinated my character.

The whole discussion takes an abrupt turn when it suddenly appears that behind the nickname of Dr Moriarty is actually hiding another person, namely Brasko, one of the veterans of the Boombap community. Dr Moriarty, alias Brasko and aggressive as ever, motivates his action as follows:
From: Brasko / 02-20-02 / 18:59
Hahaha, think that I become angry. I dare to say that I’ve invented this, to
provogue absurd discussion on forums like this. Funny, how people start to
form groups to overpower the enemy. Bunch of sissies … do you still dare to
give Brasko a big mouth?

The ensuing reactions show that the people who are involved in the discussion
feel betrayed by Brasko. In the e-mails, they reproach his attempts to discredit
theBoombap:

From: Riddle / 02-20-02 / 19:01
Well, if you talk about theBoombap, you’re talking about me; sure, I’m
going to react.

From: Stuck / 02-20-02 / 19:16
Oh so you are playing undercover dickhead, gosh, how original.

The discussion gradually turns into a feud between Brasko and BoodeeBrown.
She just cannot stand that some people try to spoil the integrity of theBoombap
community, and she calls Brasko to account for his behavior.

From: BoodeeBrown / 02-20-02 / 19:17
…I find this really sad. What are you aiming at? Can you explain why
you are bitching all the time? Are you feeling too good for this world? If so
wtf are you still at the boards?

With this last remark of BoodeeBrown, we seem to be very distant from the
world in which Dante (1319/2002) lived. The reactions are direct and uncompro-
mising. This seems to suggest that the Internet affords an unprecedented freedom
to play with one’s own and each other’s identity. Nevertheless, the visitors of
theBoombap appear to be far more conservative than the post-modern qualities of
cyberspace seem to suggest. Many of the visitors feel personally involved, and crit-
icism is felt as a threat to the integrity of the community. This is especially the case
when the sincerity of the other interlocutors cannot be trusted.

DISCUSSION: A JUXTAPOSITION OF TIME AND SPACE

The process of Western modernization has changed our outlook on life as well as
on ourselves. The historical literature on self and identity describes an increased
individualization together with the erosion of clearly demarcated, firmly rooted
moral frameworks to guide the formation of identity (e.g., Baumeister, 1987; Côté,
1996; Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Taylor, 1989). From a traditional, authority-bound self-construction, we have moved toward a state of chronic identity negotiation and renegotiation. How are these changes to be understood? Were instances of identity negotiation indeed absent in pre-modern times, and has our late-modern identity become so virtual, flexible, and tentative that the whole notion of personal unity and authenticity has fallen into disarray? The examples of Dante’s (1319/2002) Divina Commedia and theBoombap suggest otherwise. Of course, such isolated cases do not provide any conclusive evidence about the historical prevalence of different formats of self-construction. Moreover, in comparing both examples, one has to take into account their means of mediation. The Divina Commedia is staged as a narrative, so that the positions and their successive voices are, in fact, the product of Dante’s imagination. This is in marked contrast with the Internet where the conversations are real and online, without a predictable ending. Nevertheless, the Divina Commedia and theBoombap provide a setting for self-construction that can be considered typical for the early and late-modern identity formation, as described by Côté.

The Divina Commedia (Dante, 1319/2002) and theBoombap community are both characterized by the dialogical nature of the social exchanges and the spatial distribution of the voices. As such, they are a perfect illustration of the fact that selving (i.e., exploring and demarcating one’s identity) proceeds according to the principles of the dialogical self: the embodiment of self through position taking, and the enactment of a self from a position in close dialogue with the voices of real or imagined others (cf. Hermans, 1996, 2001; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans et al., 1992). This dialogical interplay of hypothetical or real positions provides an excellent environment to act out part-identities; to test their viability; and finally, to reject or embrace them in a new conception of oneself.

The organization of the exchanges, however, diverges. In accordance with Côté’s (1996) outline of the historical changes in self-construction, Dante’s (1319/2002) journey through the afterlife is premodern in the sense that his struggle to escape a ruined life could only be solved by submitting to the doctrine of divine salvation. The negotiations on the Internet, on the other hand, seem to possess all the features of a late-modern identity management with its flexible and tentative adoption of changing imagoes. It replaces the classical ideal of self-mastery by the expressive individualism of contemporary life, as Charles Taylor (1989) would put it. This difference is also reflected in the spatial distribution of the positions. In the case of the Divina Commedia, the distribution follows the rigid composition of a closed narrative. This is in contrast to the digital information technology of the Internet, which is essentially nothing else then a platform for social exchange. The structuring of its content is dependent on the people who use the Internet.

The Divina Commedia (Dante, 1319/2002) is the report of a journey, written from the viewpoint of an omnipresent narrator who knows the destination of his
journey beforehand. As such, Dante’s story contains the typical elements of the traditional narrative about personal development (cf. Bruner & Kalmar, 1998; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 1997). In the center of the story stands the protagonist who must navigate all kinds of obstacles to achieve his goal. Essential in this configuration is the plot of the story; in Dante’s case, his final redemption. The author must at least have a basic apprehension of the plot to determine which episodes have been decisive in its coming about and how the episodes link together into a plausible storyline. The plot is also the moment in the story when the author and the protagonist have found one another and fuse into one person (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1997).

Because in the classical “master scenarios” (Bruner & Kalmar, 1998) of personal development the plot is so decisive for the narrative composition as a whole, the spatial organization is subsidiary to its temporal configuration. The Divina Commedia (Dante, 1319/2002), with its compelling succession of hell, purgatory, and heaven, is a classic example of this. As we have already seen, all three spaces follow the topological and spiritual layout of the Ptolemeic and Christian cosmology. The nine ever-deepening circles of hell, the seven terraces of Mount Purgatory, and the nine celestial spheres constitute a kind of staircase toward final redemption and unification with God. Each of the numerous encounters in the Divina Commedia is subservient to this end state.

Self-construction in the late-modern age of the Internet lacks such a spiritual grounding, let alone the neat standards of narrative composition. The Internet has created a cyberspace with an unlimited stock of virtual contexts to explore (e.g., Wertheim, 1999). It promises its users the freedom to express their own individuality without being restricted too much by the constraints of daily life. As a consequence, presence on the Internet has a high degree of tentativeness, resulting in an open interplay of capricious positions. The positions are not the imaginary product of the soul-searching individual, but are equipped with a voice by actual others. This makes social exchange on the Internet more lifelike, yet also more unpredictable. As a result, late-modern self-construction on the Internet is less a matter of making a journey than of surfing.

Virtual communities such as the Boombap survive on the Internet by virtue of common interests and a continuous negotiation and renegotiation between the visitors (Wynn & Katz, 1997). The course that those exchanges take depends on an ongoing play of action and reaction between the positions, without the certainty of a final closure. The dynamics of spatial juxtaposition are more typical for the negotiations than a temporal structuring. However, a minimum of social predictability and convention is required to establish a mutual understanding. The same holds for a shared confidence between the interlocutors in each other’s sincerity. This restriction of the postmodern attitude is necessary for a virtual community to function as a “safe haven” during identity surfing on the Internet.
REFERENCES


