Space and Place as Human Coordinates

Space and Place as Human Coordinates:

Rethinking Dimensions across Disciplines

Edited by

Arianna Maiorani and C. Bruna Mancini

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Space and Place as Human Coordinates:
Rethinking Dimensions across Disciplines

Edited by Arianna Maiorani and C. Bruna Mancini

This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

SPATIAL ODYSSEYS

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE
(POET LAUREATE)

Space is where we intrude, where we leave traces—DNA, shadows, archives, imprints and footprints (carbon, electronic), the smell of ourselves, our lingering aromas, our seductive perfumes, our stains. Space is what we occupy—in our occupations, our offices, our classrooms, our haunted workspaces, our bloody remains in the trenches, our bloodbaths. It's what *Lebensraum* requires: Graveyards, gas chambers, firing squads, gulags, all-those-motherfuckers-pushed-up-against-a-wall….

Space is where we assert our being, our identities, in architecture, home renos, in arranging the bathroom just-so, the home bar, the home library, being sure to include an S & M dungeon in the bedroom (*Fifty Shades of Grey*) or in the drawing room of the mansion (*Histoire d'O*). Space is where we explore the homelands of memory and undertake the odysseys of hybridity—to be black skin with white masks (*pace* Fanon), or transgender in the Cathedral, to be as androgynous and Everyman/woman/ person/child, which is one of the identities of the Divine.

Space permits us to layer on cultures as we layer on languages, faiths, cuisines, veils, saris, parkas, burqinis, so that we are always nomadic, even if we are hunkered in one place. What do I mean? It's clear. For instance, for a so-called black to learn English locates him or her in a de facto universe of English—cosmopolitan and borderless (except where it crashes into another language); perhaps he or she picks up the King James Version of the Bible? Perhaps he or she scans the canon, Chaucer to Shakespeare (or Canterbury to Avon); and then goes from Wordsworth to Eliot (or the Thames to the Missouri). Perhaps he or she is perturbed to have to read Malcolm X alongside Margaret Atwood, or Ezra Pound alongside Amos Oz. Perhaps he or she experiences a muddled identity, a mottled identity. What if he or she is in England? How is he or she really African? Space is

where one finds oneself no place—no place recognizable. Space is where one is suddenly "no longer at ease" (Achebe).

Space is where I'm free and where I'm caged. It's where I'm open-hearted and closed-minded; where I roam and where I'm surrounded, pent-up. It's where I run wild and where I'm called to account. It's where I'm uploaded and downpressed; rising up and hanging (like "strange fruit"); or hung up (troubled) or freefalling. Space is that void where the white dwarf becomes a black hole. Space is a labyrinth, a maze, where I disappear, falling up an Escher staircase or down a Carroll rabbit-hole. Maybe it's the grave. (I can't return to the womb?)

Space is dislocation, disjuncture. What happens when a Belgian relief vessel slams into a French munitions ship in the harbour of a Canadian port—Halifax (NS)—which is, during World War I, controlled by the British Empire at its zenith, but in its first fight-to-the-death-struggle with Germany. The European ships, both bound for the Western Front (then a furnace—an abbatoir—of contending beasts), to rescue some Belgians and slay more Germans, collide in the harbour of the greatest naval port on the North Atlantic (where Trotsky had been a prisoner a few months before), and the munitions vessel is soon engulfed in flames—as if a mortal sun. The French crew abandons ship: their vessel is a floating, sub-atomic-bomb. The fire—unstoppable—is blistering and flustering the ship. The crew members row—then run—for their lives and throw themselves down on the ground in the adjacent, Mi'kmaw settlement of Kepe'kek ("From the narrows of the great harbour"). When the munitions explode—December 6, 1917, a7 9:06 a.m., a fireball, mushroom cloud, and tsunami result, wiping out the proletarian-industrial North End of Halifax, killing 2,000 people immediately, injuring another 9,000, but also destroying Kepe'kek (which the European Canadian settlers call Tufts Cove). What accidents of space and transportation and "glocal" politics allow a European imperialist war—with its munitions of wet picric acid, chlor-benzol, guncotton, mono-chlorbenzol, guncotton, and TNT—to cross the Atlantic and devastate an Indigenous community, already oppressed by the vicissitudes of European colonization over the previous three centuries?

Space mandates collisions, perpetually, so that an Africadian poet, so young, can be photographed, standing in a field in a Black-Mi'kmaq community, Three Mile Plains (NS), in 1980, and sport an African-American-styled Afro while holding up a photograph of Mao Zedong, while three horses chomp grass immediately at his back. Space offers such relentless surrealism of juxtaposition, of incongruities, of overlaps and palimpsests, all as uneven as flames.

The evil beauty of exploded Hiroshima; black rain pouncing upon brusque maggots; prayer fading upon corpses. Conquered Hawaii with its unconquerable volcanoes: Magma, inundations, oblivion; naval bases that can launch atomic warheads assaulted by the spontaneous, untargeted, sonorous roaming of lava-bombs. A slaver throws its "cargo" overboard! J.M.W. Turner imagines black stick-figures swirled around in a shark-infested vortex. Cavalier *Chivalry*? Waves of aristocratic Brits and their lower-class minions charging, with fixed bayonets, at machine-gun nests. Space is where Nature ain't always natural. A scene captures a painting; a pose survives in a statue.

Space is where language becomes lingo, a dialect, yinkyank, so that a sulking child, anywhere else, is a "sooky baby," specifically in Nova Scotia—home of the Bluenoses. Space is where the whole page becomes a field for deploying words (see Charles Olson; see M. NourbeSe Philip). And what space is that? Truth and reconciliation? Where? In a courtroom? On a turntable?

Space is travel, ardent as nausea. You gotta go through it—to get through it. Maybe you're violated and silenced en route? Maybe you're Dave Bowman in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film adaptation of Arthur C. Clarke's novel, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Maybe—like him—you tumble into and "through" a black monolith, venturing instantly across galaxies—only to end up, aged and dying, in a mock Washington, DC, hotel room, only to be reborn, at death, as a star-child. Maybe space promises us the infinite because our only *visible* eternity is death. (Believers, thou art excepted.)

George Elliott Clarke is a poet, novelist, playwright, and critic who served as the Poet Laureate of Toronto from 2012 to 2015 and as the 2016–2017 Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate. Among his numerous collections of poetry are *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983), *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile: Fugitive Poems 1978-1993* (1994), *Illuminated Verses* (2005), *Black* (2006), and the dramatic poem *Trudeau: Long March, Shining Path* (2007). *Execution Poems: The Black Acadian Tragedy of George and Rue* (2001) was awarded the Governor General's Literary Award. Among the numerous honours and awards he received, are the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Achievement Award, the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Fellowship Prize, the Planet Africa Renaissance Award, and the appointment to the Order of Nova Scotia. He is professor of English at the University of Toronto.

HUMAN COORDINATES: RETHINKING SPACE AND PLACE ACROSS DISCIPLINES. A SEMIOSPHERIC INTRODUCTION

ARIANNA MAIORANI

A Semiospheric Introduction

Fifty years after mankind 'conquered' outer space and marked its first space outpost in a place on the Moon, we live in a world where most of the basic notions that fuelled the ideas and entrepreneurship that led to space travel have been radically modified by the advent of hyperspace. Since the opening of the World Wide Web to public use in the early '90s, our concept of space has acquired another dimension, that of the online world where websites mark an infinite but virtual territoriality made of virtual places. We live now in a world where younger generations communicate across the world through the internet in a matter of seconds, where images from all corners of the Earth appear online anywhere and at any time, where who and what matters *must* be present on the internet. It is a world where online identities are deemed to be truer and more important than offline ones – the term 'offline' here replaces the term 'real' on purpose as the difference between *real* and *virtual* dimension is now a matter of perception. It is a world that, rather than looking towards outer space, seems to be concentrated on the manifold depths of the hyperspace, whose exploration passes through the tiny door of a smartphone screen.

The period comprising the last two decades of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st has marked an evolutionary change in the perception and understanding of founding concepts like *space* and *place*, a type of change that has impacted on most of the planet's societies and cultures for better or for worse, and that has obviously also involved a reconsideration of the ideas of border and borderline. How does research in humanities and social sciences cope with this change? Is there any specific interest in researching the change and remodelling of human understanding and awareness of basic concepts like *space* and *place?* Can we critically

capture whether and how the remodelling of these culture-founding notions impacts on our ever-changing reality and understanding of the world? Most of all, does this remodelling and reconsideration activity involve a re-elaboration of human epistemology?

Answering these questions is an academic enterprise that will probably take decades and serious consideration from several disciplines both within and outside the humanities. As a first step towards this academic endeavour, this volume intends to show how these questions are eliciting a move towards bridging the epistemological and methodological gaps that are traditionally taken for granted between social sciences and humanities. In Lotman's terms, these questions are stirring the architecture of the current semiospheres that generate our cultures. This whole volume is indirectly inspired by Lotman's concept of *semiosphere*[1] and the theory of culture that evolved around it; it investigates the changing notions of *space* and *place* in current contexts and therefore it naturally addresses the notion of *boundary* from several perspectives. In Lotman's semiosphere, the boundary is where the processes of resemioticisation, identity negotiation and exchange take place. Boundaries are *places* where *spaces* are defined. Boundaries are not only spatial but also – and mostly - semiotic[2] and they can also define a personality that depends on a semiotic context[3]. The semiosphere itself is "the result and the condition for the development of culture"[4] as well as the semiotic structure that marks with its boundaries "the outer limit of a first-person form"[5].

By focusing on the notions that define and are defined at the same time by boundaries - *space* and *place* - this volume inevitably addresses language as a modelling system (not necessarily only verbal language) and communication as a modelling activity. It investigates the role of narration as a structuring process through case studies that focus on current cultural phenomena. Without directly referring to Lotman's work, the authors of the various chapters interrogate mythology, religion, literature, geography, and art, all modelling systems that constantly work to re-elaborate culture as a

---

[1] Lotman 2000 (1990).

[2] "Lotman's model of culture as a semiotic space differs from those of most other representatives of the spatial turn in cultural studies. While the latter are mainly concerned with the study of real places and spaces, such as continents, landscapes, cities, rural or urban spaces in literature, painting and films or on maps, Lotman's semiosphere is a more abstract and often not geographically localizable mental space." Nöth 2014, 13.

[3] Lotman, 2000 (1990), 138.

[4] Lotman 2000 (1990), 125.

[5] Lotman 2000 (1990), 131.

living thing, as an organism that has more recently been defined as the *technosphere*[6]: the semiotic sphere where technology allows for cultural interconnectivity that was unthinkable before the advent of the internet and the expansion of the semiosphere into the virtual space[7].

The idea of text - any type of text – as a model of the world is at the core of the research questions that motivate each contribution to this volume. Culture is seen as a set of interconnected texts of different nature[8] and realised through different modes working in interplay. From social semiotics to multimodality and linguistics, anthropology and film analysis, literary criticism and discourse analysis, this volume offers the perspectives of research areas whose epistemological activity has been considerably changed by the development of digital tools and social media and that can build bridges between humanities and social sciences to lead the way to fundamentally interdisciplinary research on the evolution of culture. All the chapters in this book are written by specialists in specific areas who want to open their research to scholars from other disciplines to create a true multidisciplinary platform for reflection, discussion and debate.

Through a social-semiotic approach, Petroni uses multimodal discourse analysis to explore how technology has been, and still is, modifying our understanding of space and place as both physical and ideological dimensions, and to investigate how these changes have impacted on our way to build and entertain relationships with the world and the others. Moving from a background built on Castells's, Van Dijk's and Bandura's studies on the socio-semiotic construal of human relationships, Petroni argues that the question is whether a clear distinction between digital space and digital place can be made in a world where social media have become a major platform of human experience. In doing so, Petroni also explores the new

---

[6] "Particularly with the convergence of digital and multimodal cognitive technologies, the technosphere has been expanded not only geographically but also qualitatively in terms of connectivity and ubiquitousness. [...] Such interconnectivity has increased the possibilities for cultural exchanges in the global virtual space of the semiosphere and can be said to be the enabling element of what we perceive as globalization and the rise of what we call digital culture." Bruni 2015, 105.

[7] "If we consider the current state of contemporary globalized culture we can say that the evolution of the technosphere has enormously increased the possibilities to navigate and reach synchronically and diachronically much larger extensions of the semiosphere than ever before." Bruni 2015, 106.

[8] "Lotman's work was literary in orientation, although he was interested in other textual systems including cinema, but his purpose was scientific [...] his own analysis is empirical and historical in character, but at the same time it is devoted to theory-building, conceptual modelling and elucidation of causal processes in sense-making systems." Hartley 2015, 87.

meaning acquired by concepts such as *ubiquity* and *connectivity* that seem to permeate digital interactions and that problematise the role of physical distance in digital relations. Thus, social networks are revisited as both metaphorical space and as interconnected places that reshape sociality and facilitate the advent of an era where communities are turned into networks. This is also an era of problematic informational agency that fosters the phenomenon of targeted advertising and Petroni's chapter leads to the conclusion that the very model of human society needs perhaps to be re-thought and re-formulated.

Following the investigation on the impact of new media technologies on human perception and drawing on multimodal discourse analysis and communication studies, Maiorani's chapter focuses on the academic issues that were raised by the radical impact of interactive communication: how has the *multimodal digital space* changed our idea of interaction? And how has this interactivity changed the shaping function of modes? This chapter discusses the substantial reconsideration of discourse analysis practice in an era where the traditional linearity of text has been replaced by the place of its digital unfolding; an era where communication is no more an exchange of signs but a process of interactive exchanges that generates new forms of text. The chapter also considers space as not just *where* communication happens but as *how* it happens: space as a semiotic dimension of hyper-texts that contributes to contemporary meaning making practices.

Equally interested in the impact of technology on human perception of space but focused on film text, Tirino's chapter poses the space of a flight zone at the centre of a multifaceted investigation of the relationship between place*,* technology and nostalgia: the physical, the digital and the emotional components of human experience. Tirino explores the complexity of the notion of space through the analysis of episodes of flight in Miyazaki's films, focusing in particular on the tension created by three emerging definitions perceived in the films: space as a capitalistic construction; space as location of identities; space as ecological dimension. In this study, the complexity and mostly theoretical notion of space is compared to the more concrete notion of place, where the author investigates people's contexts and identities that emerge through physical, digital and emotional links.

Drawing on a more geographical notion of space but equally focusing on key features of human experience, Gerst, Höfler and Vallentin's chapter is based on interconnected case studies that target different geographical places where the same problematisation of space occurs through the experience of a border. The chapter compares data collected from security actors at the German-Polish border, in Georgia's Greek community, and in a rural Guatemalan community. Using conversation analysis, social

interaction analysis, ethnography and linguistics, the authors propose an ethnomethodological approach to the exploration of *space* and *place* as interrelated notions through which human beings experience the world. At the centre of this study is the very notion of *place-making* as a complex social communicative practice, one from which the problematic role of indexical ambiguity emerges. *Indexical ambiguity* is generated by different ways of experiencing space and place in proximity of geographical and political borders: Gerst, Höfler and Vallentin's case studies show that in a communicative situation created through spoken text, whereas differentiation between urban and rural spaces is experienced by speakers with clarity, the distinction between different places that materialise around speakers' experiences generates ambiguity. *Space* and *place* are therefore reconceptualised as *processes* that are carried out through interaction and then expressed through linguistic means. Through a constructivist and praxeological perspective, the authors arrive at the definition of *space* and *place* as processed situational achievements whose linguistic denotation can only be clarified by contextual interpretation.

With a similar interest in the dynamics of contextualised human experience and spoken text, Lazzarotti's chapter uses an anthropological approach to explore *place* as *inhabited space*. Starting from a focus on the meaningfulness of spaces, the author studies the meanings linked to sensorial experiences that connect places to identity: thus, he arrives at the conclusion that place and space are dynamic entities, interrelations that hold on to the shaping and maintenance of identity. The core of this chapter is therefore an investigation of how meaning transforms space into place. Lazzarotti starts from questioning the very notion of alterity and its assimilation through narrative processes in a case study based on data collected through fieldwork in Taiwan. He eventually arrives at describing alterity as a *clash* between the extra-ordinary experience and the shaping of the ordinary that through everyday cultural narratives makes sense of the world and construes it as 'normal'. The narratives through which this shaping activity is carried out are performed and become coding devices that have the precise function of turning spaces into places: "without alterity there is no narration" affirms the author, thus clearly indicating that a place generating stories of alterity is an *altered space*. Alterity is also a culture, and *locus* is precisely the place where alterity is located and re-shaped through a narrative. Lazzarotti also explores how these narratives create order and populate it with essential elements called *existents*. Borrowing Altan's categories of *topos* (the motherland)*, epos* (historical memory)*, ethos* (sacralisation of norms and institutions)*, logos* (means to social communication) and *genos* (symbolic transfiguration of kinship and lineage)

to define the elements through which a people makes sense of reality, he identifies the factors through which identity and coherence are created and maintained in a people's world, a world whose construction provides a specific identity to a place. Lazzarotti's chapter marks a methodological breakthrough in the study of how identity, alterity, space and narration work together to shape a place.

The focus of Berazhny's chapter is also on geographical space but it targets specific places as semiotic constructs created for contemporary tourism. Through a methodology that draws on multimodal semiotics, linguistics and social studies, Berazhny explores how geographical locations are turned into tourist destinations in texts that enable contemporary touristic discourses. By introducing the notion of *entextment*, this chapter shows how through a complex semiotic evolution initiated by the contemporary industry of tourism, geographical places expand beyond their physical boundaries and become semiotic identities that can be explored both physically and virtually. The chapter investigates the possibility of creating a methodology that can capture all aspects of the evolution of touristic destinations: in this way, Berazhny manages to study *places as texts* and *places in text* at the same time, providing both a methodologically innovative case study and a comprehensive overview of the different research perspectives that can contribute to an adequate understanding of this complex social phenomenon.

Tempestoso's study also starts from a focus on physical and geographical borders to explore identity in its fluidity. Through the perspective of literary criticism and theatre studies, Tempestoso studies spaces where hybridisation, culture, and multi-ethnic society produce identities that are not fixed, that flow and change due to the impact of transnationalism and cross-border mobility. *Transnationality* is the lens through which space and place are investigated in this chapter. The core of Tempestoso's investigation lies with the narratives of 'inbetweenness': drawing on Appadurai's work and Bhabha's notion of *third spaces*, those locations of boundless time and space between national territories that harbour hybridity and counter-narratives, her study rotates around the poetic texts of transcultural writer Caryl Phillips, where transnationalism embraces more than one place and where space and place are distinctive categories in the discussion of transnational identities. The connection between home and place in Phillips's work is problematised by Tempestoso's study as 'home' is no more identified with a localised place that supports identity. The same problematisation invests the connection between space and freedom, all cultural configurations that are linked to territoriality. Moving from Phillips's transnational cartography, Tempestoso also explores globalisation

as the trigger for the erosion of the concept of border and the process by which migrants constantly construct identity through travel. She then arrives at the conclusion that transnational space, rather than being bound by specific geographical coordinates and physical properties, is made of social relations that constantly redefine cultural coordinates.

Equally based on poetic texts is De Leo's chapter, which focuses on how space is turned into place through the perception of memory and emotion in Seamus Heaney's work. This is an investigation of language as a generating force, a creative workshop where place is distilled from space through semiotic processes enacted by poetry. Drawing on Lefebvre's theory of tripartite space – space as *perceived*, *conceived* and *lived* – the author individuates a differentiation between the concept of environment that exists by itself without the inherent implication of an observer, and the concept of landscape, which involves the creativity of an observer who is specifically linked to a time and a people. This chapter follows the transformation that the landscape undergoes in Heaney's work to become a place that acquires a historical, social and cultural dimension, a force that generates a *langscape*: a semiotic process through which the space occupied by land is repossessed through poetry, a place for defending the freedom of poetic creativity.

Mancini's chapter concludes this series of contributions by projecting a spotlight on one of the places that most vividly represent the constant mixture and re-elaboration of cultures and the proliferation of interconnections that characterises the Western world of the 21st century: London. Always working on literary texts, Mancini's chapter revisits the very notion of migration, the notion that actually designs territoriality in space by highlighting borders between places; she focuses on the crossing of these borders and the dynamics around it. In Mancini's terms, London's space is the place of a myriad of possible itineraries that are both synchronic and diachronic and that transcend the single work of literature to become a living body. The range of novels explored by this chapter covers the late 1990s up to the late 2010s, thus offering a cross-millennial snapshot of the multifaceted transformations that the notions of space and place have undergone when the process of narration involved the exploration of a great capital city.

This collection of essays shows an important convergence of research interests from scholars in social sciences and humanities that gravitate around terms that represent the cornerstones and tenets of our perception and understanding of culture. It is multidisciplinary by nature because the notions of *space* and *place* run through research domains and their traditional, superimposed boundaries. This convergence was simply created by shared interests in these two terms: the ultimate aim of this volume is to

indicate a series of possible research intersections that can inspire and foster cross-disciplinary debate and future interdisciplinary research, and that can generate common research grounds through shared research questions. Our hope is that this book offers a *space* to connect scholarly interests that are still in different *places*.

Bibliography

Altan, Carlo Tullio. 1995. *Ethnos e Civiltà. Identità etniche e valori democratici.* Milano: Feltrinelli.

Bandura, Albert. 1989. "Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory". *American Psychologist*, 44 (9): 1175-1184.

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Bruni, Luis E. 2015. "Sustainability, cognitive technologies and the digital semiosphere." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(1): 103-117.

Castells, Manuel. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford, Blackwell.

Castells, Manuel. 2001. *Internet Galaxy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Hartley, John. 2015. "Urban semiosis: Creative industries and the clash of systems". International Journal of Cultural Studies, 18 (I): 79-101.

Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.

Lotman, Yuri M. 2000 (1990). *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Nöth, Winifred. 2014. "The topography of Juri Lotman's semiosphere." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18 (I): 11-26.

van Dijck, José. 2013. *Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CHAPTER ONE

ARE SOCIAL MEDIA INHABITED
SPACES OR PLACES?
HOW PUBLIC AND PRIVATE
ARE RECONTEXTUALISED
BY DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

SANDRA PETRONI

Introduction

Space and place have always affected the way we perceive, conceptualise and categorise our experiences of the world and our human relations (Trusso 1995, 2002) and it is for this reason that these two universal concepts, along with the interconnections between space and place and their differences and analogies, have been speculated in any culture and in any field of research, such as philosophy, religion, science, geography, astrology, language, linguistics, economics and information technology. More importantly, it is quite impossible to study these two fundamentals within a discipline without blurring its boundaries and migrating towards other fields of knowledge. There are so many relations between humanistic and not humanistic approaches when we tackle these two topics that a cross-disciplinary view entails a 'must-do' approach.

This contribution investigates how in contemporary society the substantial presence of digital technology has re-designed the concept of space and place and modified our relations with the world and with other people. Thus, we are continuously pushed towards reconfiguring our identities, practices, social norms and beliefs. Our society is today characterised by a pivotal aspect that is the pervasiveness of digital technologies in our daily routines. When Castells describes our present-day society as a "network society" (1996, 2001) he emphasises mainly the two crucial affordances (Gibson 1977) of digitality: one is the ubiquity of

technology (Baron 2008, Böck 2004) and the other is the power of
connectivity (Beer 2009, Van Dijk 2013a). The image of a "network
society" perfectly depicts these processes.

Web 2.0 and 3.0 are the technologies for the evolution and the
diffusion of social media, a group of Internet-based applications that are
grounded in the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, its
"new participatory web culture" (Jenkins 2006, Beer 2009), and allow the
production and exchange of User Generated Contents (UCG), i.e. the
several forms of media content that are free online and generated by users
(e.g. collaborative projects like Wikipedia, blogs with the possibility to
post personal comments, content communities like YouTube, social
networking platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and virtual game
worlds). The evolution of networking technologies has redefined the role
of social network sites and today we can describe them by quoting Ellison
and boyd (2013, 158):

> A social network site is a *networked communication platform* in which
> participants 1) have *uniquely identifiable profiles* that consist of user-
> supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided
> data; 2) can *publicly articulate connections* that can be viewed and
> traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with
> *streams of user- generated content* provided by their connections on the
> site.

It is possible to state that the real networking potential identified by
Castells in these technologies is perfectly instantiated and exploited by
social media, and this explains why today the 'old' representations of
networking – websites, portals, search engines etc., - integrate their layout
with social networking functionalities (Petroni 2014, 2015).

The aim of this contribution is to define if social media can be
conceptualised as social spaces and places and if a clear distinction
between digital space and place can be made. Linked to this issue, there is
the necessity to investigate how these new places and/or spaces of
sociality affect the way we construct our Self and the relationship to
Others and how these reconfigurations of the Self and the Others re-shape
the no longer dichotomic concepts of public and private. In order to
speculate on these matters, in the first part, we will start tackling the
reconceptualisation and recontextualisation of digital space and place
followed by the transformation of the traditional model of sociality[1] into a

---

[1] Sociality is the degree to which individuals tend to associate in social groups and
form collaborative societies (Smelser and Baltes 2001).

"network sociality" (Wittel 2001, Papacharissi 2011). Then, the attention will focus on how mobile technologies on the one hand and social media on the other re-design space and place by both fostering a sense of co-presence, nearness and intimacy and at the same time being experienced as alienating media. Philosophers such as Nancy (1991), Agamben (1999) and Lingis (1994) have already suggested that the concept of community should be re-thought in the light of the new networking scenario. In the second part, in fact, the reconfiguration of the public and private in social media environments will be dealt with and the work of Chouliaraki and Morsing (2009), Papacharissi (2011) and boyd (2011), in particular those of the last two scholars, will be the theoretical framework of our analysis. In real life humans are social actors who perform their 'face' (Goffman 1959). In digital space, instead, spaces or places are simulated through the mediation of technologies in a dynamic process of meaning production. Following Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, we will discuss how the change in agency (Bandura 1989, 2001), which is strongly affected by the processes of ubiquity and connectivity, implies a redefinition of the sign-making processes which, in turn, will require new paradigms of discourse in the future.

Who or what inhabits digital spaces and places?

Defining space and place is one of the most debated issues of human history. We can take inspiration from Philosophy, for example, and see how Greek philosophers conceived space: Plato's view of the world (*Timaeus*) as a boundless three-dimensional extent where geometry governs the notion of space, while Aristotle in his *Physics* speculates on the connection between space and place directly connected with matter. Over the centuries, philosophical speculations have tried to clarify the interplay between the two concepts and the result is that we cannot talk of place without talking of space, without making use of those elements that are necessary to describe both.

Although space is more abstract than place (Tuan 1977), we can no longer consider space only as an existential fact or as part of a conceptual framework. It is a social product that is continuously *in fieri* (Lefebvre 1991, Massey 2005). In accordance with part of contemporary Philosophy, 'humanistic' geographers (Relph 1976, Tuan 1977, Buttimer 1980, Cresswell 2004) provide a clear distinction between space and place.

> What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.... The ideas 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware

of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (Tuan 1977, 6)

Human Geography describes the place as being the space experienced by humans. Spaces then are governed by signs and codes formulated by the society to which we belong. Spaces produce meanings and when individuals incorporate those meanings in their practices, spaces become places (Tuan 1977), and the relations established between the places and the individuals give rise to a common identity with strong emotional and psychological ties among individuals. Place identity informs the meaning and value that places have for their inhabitants and it contributes to the creation and conceptualisation of the Self (Smith and Bender 2001). Place identity is widely related to the idea of community building in which not only do geographical bonds elicit the creation of a community, but also social bonds contribute to its formation. Feelings of belonging and security are social forces which involve culture, language and experiences translated into social practices (Bauman 2001, Blackshaw 2010).

If we move from the conceptualisation of space and place in the real domain towards their mapping onto the digital domain, one of the first questions is whether these digital spaces are inhabited like real spaces and places and, if so, whether we can expect them to generate the same community formation processes. Since the advent of the Internet, users have been classifying and conceptualising the new experiences deriving from the use of new technologies. To some extent, their immediate perception was that of using a medium, a computer, thanks to which users could re-create real social practices and (inter)actions in virtual contexts. These virtual environments, e.g. a chat room or an email platform, have been perceived as spaces and they have been represented in terms of spatial metaphors (Maglio et al. 2002, Maglio and Matlock 2003, Izwaini 2003): a 'room' where users can chat, a platform used as a 'mail box' where users receive, archive, send mail, etc. Therefore, virtual spaces have volume, they are containers in which systems of signs are well organised and meanings can be produced exactly as they are in the real world. By producing these meanings in virtual spaces, users transform them into places where activities that are regulated by the geometry of space can occur, or rather *take place:* a text-based collaborative technology (e.g. chat) can both design a space (a chat room) governed by a textual spatial geometry and transform it into a social place where users talk, meet, work, buy, sell etc. (Snowdon, Churchill and Munro 2001). In the same way, digital spaces become places when they become the *loci* of living and

lived experiences (Giddens 1984), the places where communities are constructed.

The re-conceptualisation of space and time in digital environments seems to follow the same social mechanisms of the real world. Both spaces, real and virtual, are inhabited by individuals/users who live and act according to sets of rules and norms. However, the mediation of technology turns technology itself into another inhabitant. According to the concept of network society described by Castells and to the two affordances of digitality - ubiquity and connectivity - it is possible to state that social media networks can be conceptualised as both a metaphorical space (Roher 2001, Jasińska 2006) and a well-organised and interconnected place. Within social media, networking is the main social practice: when it is applied to forms of social organisation, it affects and redesigns society and all areas of human activity (van Dijck, 2018, 2013a, 2013b; van Dijck and Poell 2013). Connectivity becomes then the pre-requisite that allows for this social transformation. In doing so, connectivity technologies play a crucial role in community formation. Although for many years we have talked of virtual communities as places characterised by stability, coherence, embeddedness and belonging, and inhabited by users joined by friendship, common interests, beliefs, values, (Rehingold 1993, Baym 1995, Preece and Maloney-Krichmar 2003, Dubé et al. 2005, Herring 2008), today the power of connectivity, or rather the potential residing behind the connectivity algorithm, has re-shaped the concept of 'community sociality' into a 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001). If networks are "appropriate instruments for a capitalist economy based on innovation, globalization and decentralised concentration", and also for a "culture of endless deconstruction and reconstruction" (Castells 1996, 470), it is evident that the sense of "strong and long-lasting ties, proximity and common history or a narrative of the collective" (Wittel 2001, 51), typical of a community sociality, is transformed into a sense of dis-embedded intersubjectivity, integration and disintegration. Network sociality implies social relations that are not "narrational" and that are therefore no longer based on shared experience or common history as in community sociality, but that focus on the quick acquisition and collection of information and data. For Manovich (2001), databases feed the new discursive practices of the 21st century. For this reason, social relations are "informational" since they find their roots in the Informational Society[2], and sociality is strongly embedded in technology

---

[2] Castells makes a distinction between Information Society and Informational Society. As the author argues, "[…] information is the portion of knowledge that human beings share with one another and it is the foundation of all intellectual and cognitive activities of societies. By contrast, the term informational indicates the

and embodied in the potential of connectivity. Network sociality is not grounded in a shared history or a shared narrative, but it is characterised by a multitude of experiences and biographies which, in turn, are instantiated by the users' profiles. In social media networks, people are removed from their original place to be recontextualised in largely disembedded social relations and connections on a global scale, which are endlessly under construction and never achieve a sense of community.

Ubiquity is one of the crucial facets which characterise new technologies and divide the new media from the old. Connectivity technologies play a pivotal role for ubiquity in that they define our perception of space and place. In particular, mobile devices, either encapsulated in the environment or carried around by their users, are reshaping the nature of the public and private spaces and places. They can foster a sense of co-presence, nearness and intimacy but can also be experienced as alienating media. Since contemporary societies are framed by technology, as Heidegger suggests (1969), they are greatly challenged by paradoxes in all facets of life since antinomies are intrinsic in all human social practices and they are embedded forces in any cultural system.

Over the last decades, Philosophy of Technology has been strongly attracted by controversial tendencies implicit in technology itself. Mobile technology has further fuelled speculations about paradoxes arising from the concept and the perception of mobility. At the beginning of the 20th century, Simmel tried to explain the contradictory experience of interacting with someone who is both spatially near and socially distant at the same time (1950). Additionally, philosophers such as Nancy (1991), Agamben (1999) and Lingis (1994), argue each from their perspective that the idea of community should be re-defined because of the new mobile network society. The tension between proximity and distance, nearness and isolation, intimacy and alienation, is an important characteristic of contemporary societies. Can mobile technology augment this condition of distance in proximity? Position in space is no longer important thanks to mobile devices and individuals may feel close whatever the distance that separates them. The link between physical proximity and social proximity is further fragmented. The near/far dichotomy conceives a user who is always available, present, but *in absentia*. Heidegger also argues that new technologies abolish distance by abolishing nearness. As Arnold claims (2003, 243), "the purposes of mobility are achieved through performances

attribute of a specific form of social organisation in which information generation, processing, and transmission become the fundamental sources of productivity and power, because of new technological conditions emerging in this historical period." (Castells 1996, 21)

that simultaneously require fixity. We can move, but we are always there. Because the mobile phone is portable, yet provides a fixed individualised address, it provides its users with a high degree of independence, mobility and flexibility." We are digitally encaged because we are un-wired. Thanks to mobile devices, an individual can be "an isolated island in public" through what Morley (2003) defines as a process of "psychic cocooning". The cocooning effect refers to the fact that users are connected to their network of personal links, at the expense of relations with the outside world and without interacting with different voices or coping with diverse contexts (Petroni 2015, 242). The public/private dichotomy is another issue strictly related to the technological (r)evolution and above all to how social media technologies reconfigure public and private spaces.

Public, private and the networked agency

Investigating the concepts of public and private in relation to digital space and place implies a continuous shift from a physical dimension towards social and psychological conditions, i.e. how individuals conceptualise the actions and practices of their private and/or public sphere which are carried out through the mediation of social media. In *The work of art in the age of its mechanical reproducibility* (2002[1935]), Benjamin describes the upsurge of the private individual. He says that this process occurs when a new set of practices modifies the dwelling place since the subject starts appropriating the external world by collecting images and objects but at the same time perceiving this place as a protection from external reality. This transformation was made possible by the advent of new communication media, and it fostered changes in social relations: while the private space is augmented by media bringing the outer world into the domestic space, the public space of interactions becomes limited (and controlled). If the inventions of telephone, radio and television have been decisive for this social change, the creation of mobile technologies nowadays is more than crucial. Williams (2003) defines this process as "mobile privatization", an identity provided by a network society and empowered by technologies that offer a new mobility, new freedoms (watching anything, interacting with anyone from anywhere) within the seclusion of the private space. Mobile devices blur the boundaries between public and private simply because they allow users to stay constantly in contact with their own private sphere even when they are in a public space. People carry with them their private space of sociality, thus making

domestic sociality coexist or even overlap with workplace sociality. As boyd claims (2011, 45-46),

> Networked technologies introduce new affordances for amplifying, recording, and spreading information and social acts. These affordances can shape publics and how people negotiate them. While such affordances do not determine social practice, they can destabilise core assumptions people make when engaging in social life. As such, they can reshape publics both directly and through the practices that people develop to account for the affordances. When left unchecked, networked technologies can play a powerful role in controlling information and configuring interactions.

Social network platforms then become a genre of 'networked publics' since "[n]*etworked publics* are publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice." (boyd 2011, 39). boyd identifies three dynamics which configure networked publics:

- "Invisible audiences": audiences are not necessarily visible and co-present when a person is interacting online.
- "Collapsed contexts": there are no spatial, social, and temporal boundaries. Keeping social contexts separated becomes complex.
- "The blurring of public and private": if there is no control over context, public and private are no longer a dichotomy, they are scaled in new ways and are difficult to maintain as distinct. (boyd 2011, 49)

Over the last decades, the reconfiguration of public and private has been investigated by scholars belonging to the area of critical discourse studies (Kress and Hodge 1979, Wouters 1986, Featherstone 1991, Fairclough 1992, 2010) who have pointed out how public and institutional communication have changed and how technology has contributed to this change. In his critical approach to discourse analysis, Fairclough (1992) argues that we are witnesses to a process called "informalisation", or rather "conversationalisation", of public discourse that implies a transformation in style and register within communicative practices. On the one hand, private styles have crossed borders into public, official, and business situations; on the other hand, the public domain seems to invade private domain practices. For example, in academic or political contexts, the

tendency towards informal relationships and exchanges - both written and spoken[3] - among participants is a striking and pervasive practice that is endorsed mainly by the advent of new media and digitality. New communication technologies have been directly involved in the process of globalisation and informalisation (Castells 1996)[4]. The way new media technology has been developed and presented to the globalised world reflects the purpose of commodifying information and data. As Fairclough claims,

> [...] the process whereby social domains and institutions, whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organised and conceptualised in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption. [...] In terms of orders of discourse, we can conceive of commodification as the colonization of institutional orders of discourse, and more broadly of the societal order of discourse, by discourse types associated with commodity production. (1992, 207)

Therefore, technology by which information is produced, distributed, and consumed as a commodity, serves the informative and persuasive purposes at the same time (Thrift 2005, Beer 2009, Milioni 2015), and tends to be informal in order to popularise its consumption and to be perceived as 'user-friendly' (Petroni 2011, 73-74).

In social media, these two purposes are mainly instantiated by the practice of profile creation through which users present, or rather brand (Ellison et al. 2006, Page 2012, Zappavigna 2012), their online identity. Profiles are present in every social media platform and aim at presenting (Goffman 1959, Chouliaraki and Morsing 2009) users who have joined the network. At the same time, they are the *loci* of interaction and act as storage rooms where platform owners collect and marketise users' data along with data deriving from other social practices carried out within network sites, such as friending[5], commenting and updating. Through profiles, users build and present their private Self to Others and these Others can be known and/or unknown networked publics. The private Self is constructed following a set of rules established by the platform owners (Mager 2012, Milioni 2015) and reified by the affordances of the network,

---

[3] For example, the use of informal address terms, direct receiver address using the second person pronoun, or casual colloquial expressions and lack of formal politeness markers.
[4] See footnote 2
[5] The practice of creating a vast network of friends, regardless of whether the tie is weak or strong (Ellison et al. 2006, Ellison et al. 2007).

and these rules belong to network sociality. The result is a "Networked Self" (Papacharissi 2011) that shows her/his private individuality while operating within the "technical geography" of connectivity, i.e. the Internet physical telecommunications infrastructure, along with the other two geographical dimensions of the web, namely the spatial distribution of its users and the economic geography of Internet production (Castells 2001, 208).

A networked Self then implies a digitally mediated self whose "face" (Goffman 1959) should be constructed by the user as a social actor, who performs his/her identity on the stage of the social network. Another question is whether it is still possible today to build identities regardless of digital technologies. Our societies are based on infrastructures that mainly derive from technology, much of which is meant to collect and re-use data and information produced by users. The point is that we are not responsible for this process. We become informationalised and our identities become commodified (Thrift 2005), and these processes occur mainly out of our control. Information is no longer conceived as a mechanism to transmit knowledge just as the underlying technologies are no longer sophisticated technical devices. Information technology is a constituent of our social worlds (Castells 1996) and it reconfigures our agency. Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 1989, 2001), traditional notions of agency describe it "as a human capability for intentional conscious action" (Tucker et al. 2012). Human agency is the essence of humanness: humans are defined by their ability to organise, regulate, and enact behaviours that they believe will produce desirable consequences. However, in social networks space, many of our conscious actions like profiling, updating, friending, buying or selling, or simply searching, are re-arranged by a 'technical' agency, i.e. those algorithms (like Google or Facebook algorithms) which operate and re-organise our identities via networked technologies. Once private information is disclosed and becomes partly public, it is immediately recontextualised into other technological realms of digital databases and algorithms.

In these contexts, original meanings and signs are re-semiotised and re-used to fulfil different purposes and functions (Adami 2014). The most evident example is targeted advertising. The algorithm produces meanings on the basis of information unintentionally provided by users themselves and deliberately manipulated by the algorithm. Databases and algorithms become sign-makers and their meanings affect users' social behaviours and push them to feed this process constantly, thus turning databases into containers of social capital (Bourdieu 1986, Bijker and Law 1992, Thrift 2005, Mager 2012). "Technologies are 'surveillers of information' and act

as agentic forces over the constitution of individuals' identity. […] Agency and identity […] become, to a lesser or greater degree, technological formation." (Tucker et al. 2012, 21-22).

Concluding remarks and future scenarios for empirical research

Social media and their underlying technology are powerful tools. Their affordances possess a huge potential that can be exploited for the sake of cultural and social development, sustainability, welfare. The field of Social Networks and Media epistemology has been broadly enriched by insightful studies. However, investigation into the interconnecting different approaches and disciplines in this instance is not so usual, although it would be extremely useful in order to gain greater control over them. The stimulus to think of social media in terms of *space* and *place* has made this interconnection possible. In this work, we have drawn on Philosophy, Human Geography, Psychology, Sociology, Critical Internet Studies, and Social Construction of Technology theory in order to investigate whether social network and media can be conceptualised as spaces or places as, due to their pervasiveness, they have replaced most of our social practices and interactions. What emerges is that these technologies daily inhabit human space and place and continuously transform the traditional model of sociality into a network sociality. This phenomenon blurs the borders of space and place as it does with the borders between public and private *loci*.

Furthermore, this transformation is not limited to sociality. Since information technology translates our personal information, our identities and meanings, into data which are then elaborated, manipulated, and delivered back to us in the shape of new information, this mechanism expects us (human beings) to create consciously or unconsciously a two-fold space where meanings can be produced: one, the most evident and studied, is the networked public; the other, hidden and strongly ignored, is the space of databases (algorithms)[6]. Unfortunately, the discourse of database, or more generally the discourse of technology, is a field of research that is still unexplored. Databases produce meanings that are not narrated as in a novel or in a film or even in a webpage layout. Whereas human-generated discourse is developed in narrative constructions by telling a story from beginning to end, or in the enclosed space of a webpage, databases simply assemble data and their algorithms recreate

---

[6] A clear example of these spaces of 'dialogue' between users and algorithms is virtual games where human players play with virtual algorithmic subjects.

meanings within an endless process of networked signification. If in the past we have speculated on media by researching the aesthetics, semiotics and ethics of each single medium, there is now an urgency to identify theoretical frameworks that can approach the user's experience, perception and conceptualisation of such a collection of networked data modelled into a discourse of database. In 2001, Manovich launched a call for such a framework but so far he has remained basically unheard with the exception of a very few cases (Van Dijk 2013a, 2018, Moschini 2018). In the future, we envisage that along with traditional Social Network and Media Discourse studies, greater attention will be given to the discourse of information technology and coding.

Bibliography

Adami, Elisabetta. "Retwitting, reposting, repining, reshaping identities online: Towards a social semiotic multimodal analysis of digital remediation." *LEA - Lingue e Letteratured'Oriente e d'Occidente*, Vol 1/1, Florence, Florence University Press (2014): 223-43.

Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Arnold, Michael. "On the Phenomenology of Technology: The 'Janus-faces' of Mobile Phones." *Information and Organization,* 1 (2003): 231–56.

Bandura, Albert. "Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory." *American Psychologist,* Vol. 44, No. 9 (1989): 1175-84.

Bandura, Albert. "Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective." *Annual Review of Psychology*, n. 52 (2001): 1-26.

Baron, Naomi. 2008. *Always On. Language in an Online and Mobile World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2001. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World.* Maiden, MA: Polity Press.

Baym, Nancy. 1995. "The Emergence of Community in Computer Mediated Communication." In *Cybersociety: Computer Mediated Communication and Community,* edited by Steven G. Jones, 138-63. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications.

Beer, David. "Power through the algorithm? Participatory web cultures and the technological unconscious*." New Media & Society,* Vol 11(6), Thousand Oaks California: Sage Publications (2009): 985–1002.

Benjamin, Walter. 2002 (1935). "The work of art in the age of its mechanical reproducibility." In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings:*