New Media Studies: Space, Technology, & the Reality of Digital Experience

As Henri Lefebvre argues, "space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning" (154). In his analysis, Lefebvre breaks down the historical notions of space into three categories of spatialization: the "perceived space" of everyday social life (38), the "conceptualized space" of urban planners and cartographers (38), and "representational spaces" which are generally systems of "non-verbal symbols and signs" that are "directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols" (39). Moving beyond the idea that people and objects are merely "in" space, Lefebvre claims that these spatializations are spatial patterns of social action: social relations "project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself" (129). In addition to being a cultural product, space is also a medium through which social relations are produced and reproduced. Expanding on this idea, Foucault states that the space within which we live is not a void inside of which things or individuals can be placed; rather, "[w]e live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another ("Other Spaces," 23). Baudrillard builds on Lefebvre's studies on the lived space of everyday life to describe how our postmodern society is organized around modes of representation that simulate reality such as television and cyberspace. In our moment of instantaneous access to images and information the subject becomes "only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence" (qtd. in Rodriguez). In other words, the postmodern individual becomes an entity predominantly influenced by experiences with technology and media.

The danger of technology is the crucial role it plays in working to define reality: the ability of what Heidegger calls "the essence of technology" to embed itself in human existence and transform the way we understand and make sense of the world (Question Concerning Technology). Essentially, technology is, as Michael Heim argues, "a mode of human existence" which creates new environments (*Metaphysics* 61). Katherine Hayles posits something similar with her concept of technogenesis: "the idea that human and technics have coevolved together" (*How We Think*, 10). Analyzing the impact of digital technologies on individuals who experience bodily effects from their interactions with digital media, Hayles argues that embodiment "takes the form of extended cognition, in which human agency and thought are enmeshed within larger networks that extend beyond the desktop computer into the environment" (ibid. 3). The environment serves as scaffolding for human cognition; as such, living in our technologized and information-rich ecology "brings with it associated shifts in habits, postures, enactments, perceptions" (Flesh and Metal, 299). In short, our embodied experience of digital technologies alters our everyday being-in-the-world.

Hayles' position on the embodied experience of digital technologies highlights a point of contention in contemporary theories of technology: namely, the misrepresented opposition between the digital and the real. This presumptive disconnect, as Tom Boellstorff argues, forecloses a comprehensive examination of "world makings and social constructions of reality in a digital age" (*Ontology* 388). Additionally, it belies the reality of experiences one has in online sociality and social virtual worlds; for the "reality of virtual worlds is shaped by their status as persistent contexts of social immersion" (395). Embodiment in a virtual world through an avatar

necessitates emplacement: "it emerges through the mutual possession of virtual bodies and virtual places" (396). These virtual worlds can defy the laws of physics and, as Bonnie Nardi observers, permit "forms of socialization not possible in the real world" (18). The possibilities for action available in virtual worlds can be understood as Gibsonian affordances that mediate cultural activity within these social spaces. In essence, they offer a "curated sociality" (24): a procedurally circumscribed set of possibilities for avatar embodied personhood and social activity. With the increasing uptake and prevalence of social virtual worlds, we must seriously contemplate how designers construct and procedurally encode the "lived space" of such worlds to either support or inhibit individual and cultural activity. For, as Nardi concludes, "[t]he affordances designers deem important will shape a significant portion of human social activity now and in the future" (24).

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