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PREFACE
THE INTERNET AS NON-PLACE

With the advent of technology our perception and conception of space has experienced a radical transformation. Whereas space was first commonly understood in a concrete and/or geometrical fashion, in contemporary society a more abstract consideration of space has manifested itself. Such an extension of our understanding has been necessary in order to examine a new spatial frontier, the Internet. The Internet has presented itself as a virtual landscape made accessible through modern technologies. The function and definition of the Internet, of which virtual space is a key component, is highly contested. The objective of the edition that lies before you is to explore the current debate about Internet space from different conceptual frames. At the core of each of these inquiries lies a consideration of the fundamentally political nature this hard to define space is susceptible to,

The function of this preface is twofold: first I will present my personal consideration of the Internet. Here I will argue, in line with Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, that the Internet is a non-place as defined by the French anthropologist Marc Augé. The characteristics of the non-place overlap heavily with those of the heterotopia and the lived space. However, from all these notions, the non-place is most explicit in addressing the lack of identity of the space. As such it is most relevant in an interrogation of the politics that occur here because this void provides ground for the construction and contestation of virtual relations, the prime component of Internet space. The complication of defining the space of Internet can hereby be seen as symptomatic of the fact that the Internet, as non-place, has no own identity. As such what Internet embodies is a result of the ideals set forth by the

individual who engages with its space. From this deposition it becomes fairly evident how, as a social construction, the Internet is a political playfield, the key proposition this edition holds to.

The second purpose of the preface is, after having established the Internet is a non-place, to grant a brief introduction to the three articles of this journal and their theoretical enterprises. The articles each offer their own distinct academic analysis of the virtual space of the Internet. These investigations necessitate the appropriation of the insights provided by Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Jürgen Habermas, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In specific the topics to be covered include an examination of the role of metaphors in regard to space, the conquest and appreciation of this territory in relation to the physical world and lastly the application of this space as a political instrument to facilitate in closing the 'gap' between citizens and their governments.

The Internet as Non-Place

In *Remediation* (1999) Bolter and Grusin project the notion of non-place onto the likes of cyberspace, claiming that "Cyberspace is a shopping mall in the ether; it fits smoothly into our contemporary networks of transportation, communication and economic exchange" (179). Bolter and Grusin discuss passing through a non-place as an experience of 'hypermediacy'.

Reformulated, they find the media within the non-place to define it (Bolter and Grusin 179). In this line of logic the non-place is dynamic in its identity, acting as a chameleon absorbing other identities to fabricate its own. By examining the non-place as put forward by Augé in more depth it will be made clear why the Internet can be described as a non-place.¹

¹ Defining the Internet, in specific, as a non-place is further underscored by Manuel Castells who in *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) introduces the concept of the space of flows. According to Castells "there is a new spatial form characteristic of social practices that dominate and shape the network society: the space of flows. The space of flows is the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows. By flows I understand purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors" (412). Despite using a different term, the space of flows finds, in its reflection on the changes of society, an *identical twin* of the non-place.

In the eyes of Marc Augé contemporary society finds itself in a state of *supermodernity*: a time of 'overabundance of events' symptomatic of an 'acceleration of history'.² The non-place is "the space of supermodernity" (Augé 111). The primary constituent of supermodernity is the quality of excess (Augé 30). The consequence of this excess is the establishment and subsequent development of the so-called 'non-places'. A non-place can best be understood as a *place* that has no history and consequently is devoid of identity. Airports, shopping malls and highways are all examples of the non-place. They "have the peculiarity that they are defined partly by the words and texts they offer us..." (Augé 96). This characteristic is fairly explicit in the case of the Internet. Furthermore, the non-place is 'bracketed' from other places due to entry and exits points one must pass. Thinking about the Internet this is the process of having to log onto the web. Augé asserts that the non-place is highly regulated and structured. This is an observation that will be dealt with, in relation to the concepts smooth and striated space, further on in the preface.

The Internet as Heterotopia

History professor Mark Poster is critical of the evaluation of the Internet as non-place because he finds that it "performs theoretically a defensive maneuver that sets up a binary of real place/false place" (np). Poster suggests using Foucault's notion of heterotopia to evade the real place/false place dichotomy. However, even Augé in his book notes that 'place' and 'non-place' should not be treated as a dichotomy as this would lead to negative connotations in the handling of the non-place (Augé 81). Place, in the sense Augé uses it is different than de Certeau's notion of non-place, seeing it as

² During a lecture given in 1964 the French philosopher Michel Foucault proclaimed, "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (np). He went on to state that that "We are at a moment. I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (np). It seems that the theories put forward by Augé hark back to these observations made by Foucault. However, in the case of Augé supermodernity can be directly joined to the impact of Internet on the collapse of space and time.

void *place*. Augé uses place as an anthropological place, referencing the historical background and identity (81). Nonetheless, in order to counter the negative allusions to the term non-place, Augé deems it necessary to cover de Certeau's assessment of space. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) de Certeau provides a clear way to understand the relation and consequently distinction between space and place stating that "space is a practiced place" (de Certeau 117). From such a conception it is granted, that a place is defined by a singular fixed location that can only be occupied by one thing at a given instance. For Augé, however, "the act of passing gives a particular status to place names, that the faultline resulting from the law of the other, and causing a loss of focus, is the horizon of every journey (accumulation of places, negation of place), and that the movement that 'shifts lines' and traverses places, is by definition, creative of itineraries: that is words and non-places" (85). As such the non-identity of the non-place actually entails it as a hub in a network of relations, defining itself according to these. The construction of Internet from virtual relations has been addressed and makes this point evident.

Having established that Augé is himself in fact careful in avoiding a dichotomy between real place and false place, it becomes interesting to look at the notion of a heterotopia. The relevance of such a comparison is based on Posters suggestion that a heterotopia would provide a better term to describe the Internet as it provides a way out of the dichotomy. I contend, however, that the terms non-place and heterotopia, to a great extent, can be used interchangeably.

To Foucault there are two types of spaces that are related to all other sites: utopias and heterotopias, but unlike heterotopias, utopias have no real place in reality (3). This harks back to the Internet where the computer acts as a portal to the virtual space. Incidentally, in order to define non-place, Augé also makes a comparison to utopia. He finds that "the non-place is the opposite of utopia" (Augé 111). As Foucault and Augé both define their concepts according to utopia, their similarity to one another is not surprising.

It is intriguing and works clarifying when we examine how the following six principles formulated by Foucault with respect to the heterotopia are equally applicable to the non-place: all cultures have heterotopias, they can be given different functions in relation to changing society over time, can juxtapose several real places in one, have a temporal dimension, are isolated through a system of opening and closing and lastly are related to all other spaces (np). This relates to the idea of conceiving of space as a network of relations. The similarities between the mentioned principles and the characteristics Augé addresses are cunning. The main difference between the concepts, however, can be found in that a heterotopia has a mythological and religious character, which in the non-place is substituted by the consumption driven dimension, in addition to a mediated existence.

Virtual Relations of Internet Space

Having established the Internet as non-place, and touching on some of its characteristic, in order to understand its political nature it is important to discuss the fundamental component of this virtual space. It enables an appreciation of the complexity of the Internet and its identity. Professor of Literary Theory and English Literature at the University of Silesia, Poland, Wojciech Kalaga, develops the concept of virtuality from Gilles Deleuze's notion of Idea (95). Kalaga defines virtual by looking at the relations between objects/subjects. These relations, he states, are the constituents of the virtual. They exist relative to the mind and this is the case in respect to the concrete as well as for the abstract (Kalaga 1). Kalaga points out the common misconception that the virtual is the product of technology (3). He argues that the virtual has always existed, however, technology provides much easier access to it. The virtual is based on relations and can be accessed through material objects. The object providing access to the virtual establishes a synthesis between the materiality and immateriality of the two. The political facet of the relations is the fact that, unlike the manner that is suggested by the theory as just discussed, these are not equally distributed

(3). The discrepancy between the separate values of each of the relations is a vital point of examination as it relates directly to the political focus and the analytical objectives of this journal.

The Lived Space

The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre offers a similar take to the heterotopia, but he named his concept *l'espace vécu* (the lived space). Just as is the case with a heterotopia, it lies between representational space and the representations of space. In the lived space meaning is "produced and modified over time and through its use, spaces invested with symbolism and meaning, the spaces of *connaissance* (less formal or more local forms of knowledge) space as *real-and-imagined*" (9). The relation to Foucault is made explicit by Edward W. Soja when stating that a heterotopia "is another space, what Lefebvre would describe as *l'espace vécu*, actually lived and socially created, spatially, concrete and abstract at the same time, the habitus of social practices" (18). It is relevant to make the reference to Lefebvre's notion because his thoroughly Marxist approach to space clearly establishes it as a social construction and as such an inherently political process. In the article "De macht van de metafoor" written by Levien Nordeman, Lefebvre's understanding of the production of space is used as a departure point in exploring the relation between metaphors, power and space.

A 'New' Public Sphere

Having addressed the Internet as non-place, relating it to various other concepts, we now move on to consider how the virtual space is and can be used. This includes looking at how dominant ideology is circulated as well as contested within this space. The access to and distribution of information through this platform leads to yet another fascinating dimension of the formation of politics in this virtual space. The struggle is made most clear in

the division between the so-called have and have nots. This concern of availability will also be discussed in the article. The Internet serves as a vast platform containing information that can flow both horizontally, between members of society, as well as vertically, from, for example, a government to its citizens.

There is often thought to be a gap between the government and its citizens. This gap, if it ever even existed, is thoroughly investigated in "Nieuwe media, nieuwe politiek?" by Sjoerd Hartman. It is important to keep in mind that despite the fact that media technologies *appear* to have realized ideals of a public sphere as envisioned by Jürgen Habermas, he himself actually contests that this is true. His critical evaluation stems from his stance that mere access to information is not sufficient for the establishment of a public sphere. It is only when there is active participation as well as critical evaluation that a public sphere can manifest. These two components are the prime ingredients in realizing a fully democratic political culture. Habermas finds that in the case of media "the public sphere becomes the court *before* whose public prestige can be displayed – rather than *in* which public critical debate is carried on" (201). Reformulated, he is of the conviction that media hijack the public debate as opposed to providing citizens with the information necessary for a critical assessment of politics to take place.

On the other end of the spectrum there are those who believe that the public sphere is in fact realized on account of the Internet. This is the position taken on by Brian McNair. He finds that a properly functioning public sphere requires mass access and participation by both vertical and horizontal means of communication (105). From this perspective by the mere fact that media facilitate the access to the public debate, the ideals of a public sphere are said to have crystallized in contemporary society. A consideration of the Internet as a public sphere relies more on the objectives set forth in respect to the latter term, than by the functioning and/or understanding of the Internet itself.

The Nation-State: Between Smooth and Striated Space

Computer technology facilitated by the Internet has extended space. As a 'new' development a period in time has manifested where an assessment of the value of the expanded space is scrutinized. Considerations as to the implications of implementing boundaries, a segmentation of this space, should be made. A crucial question at play in this inquiry is that of ownership. This is relevant because the final frontier remains open for acquisition. The persistent struggle within this space and the ownership/control of this space is fascinating as nation-states are being established. A nation-state suggests boundaries and locality, in other words, a containment of a region that is enclosed by a shared ideology. The formation and implementation of these confinements are innately political. A topic of investigation tackled by Michiel Kraijkamp who in "De cyberspacekolonien" provides stimulating insight on the subject matter. Here the relation between physical geography and the virtual topography is taken into consideration.

A fitting theoretical framework which is used in regard to the online nation-states is provided by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and explored by Mark Nunes in 'Virtual Topographies: Smooth and Striated Cyberspace'. In this article Nunes projects the spatial insights of Deleuze and Guattari onto Internet. He argues that the space of Internet can be considered as composed of both smooth and striated space. This division is made opaque when considering the two frequently used metaphors in reference to the Internet: "Surf the Net" and "Cruise the information Superhighway" (Nunes 1). Whereas the first metaphor insinuates a vast and unconstrained space, the latter subjects the Internet to a highly regulated existence.

The political implications this has is clarified when we note that "the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, traversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space" (Deleuze and Guattari 474). The instability and dynamic nature of Internet space makes it susceptible to

contestation and consequently the manifestation of political enterprises. Kraijkamp will demonstrate that there are political consequences when regulating the virtual space of the Internet, a process of transforming smooth into striated space. Moreover, the geography of the physical world further complicates the 'mapping out' of the Internet.

Concluding Remarks

What has been made apparent in this preface is that defining the virtual space realized through Internet is far from clear-cut. I have suggested that the array of different terminology put forward by several key theorists overlap heavily with the concept of non-place. However, fundamental to the understanding of a non-place is that its identity is, due to contestation, transitory and dynamic. In order to clarify why this is so, the composition of the virtual space of the Internet has been explained, drawing on the insights of Wojciech Kalaga, as a construction of relations. Furthermore, a short introduction to the articles in this journal has indicated that they will expand on this notion of politics when exploring the construction, production and attribution of the virtual space of Internet. Each will provide a distinct insight on the theme at hand, expanding on the theories that have been brushed on in order to get to the heart of the matter, the political being of the Internet.

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