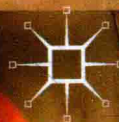


THE **NEW TIME** AND **SPACE**



JOHN POTTS

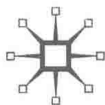


The New Time and Space

John Potts

Macquarie University, Australia

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The New Time and Space

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Introduction

This book examines the ways in which the conceptualisation and experience of time and space have been redefined in the contemporary era. Mobile phones, networked communications and freely accessible digital information have contributed to a shift in the way we experience and conceptualise time and space. Globalisation and international network coverage have collapsed distance and delay in communication. Mobile networked communication fosters a form of virtual time and space, which is superimposed onto territorial space. Time is increasingly composed of interruptions and distractions, as smartphone users are overwhelmed by messages.

In the networked age, we are living with changed parameters of time and space. When the local is instantly and effortlessly linked to the global, our sense of space and distance alters. The scale of distance is overcome; telematic communication – online or with wireless phones – is co-present at a distance. There is a new virtual dimension to the public sphere, a new immaterial venue for social life. In this changed relationship to space, the virtual is layered onto the actual. The physical location – in geographical space – is less important than the virtual space – on the network. This tension between the two types of space is evident every day, when commuters are annoyed by a fellow user of civil space loudly enjoying a conversation on his mobile phone; or when parents try in vain to wrest their children's focus to the dinner table discourse and away from the texting or social media conversations currently absorbing their energies.

The New Time and Space explores the significance of these shifts within contemporary culture, while providing an intellectual history

of time and space. In pursuing this theme, the book confronts the issues arising from the impact of digital technology and the internet. What has happened to the space of privacy in the age of social media and reality TV? What has become of the public sphere and public good in the era of personalised social media? Has online media made us better informed, or simply overwhelmed? In an age of smart machines and convergent media, why do individuals feel so short of time?

One feature of the book is its use of contemporary art. There are many examples cited from contemporary art, film, media and literature, on the premise that artists serve as the antennae of their society, picking up conceptual shifts and investigating them in creative works. The new time and space has been sensed, often in advance, by artists, and explored in many forms, including video art and performance.

It may be objected that my approach in *The New Time and Space*, focused on the effects of networking and digital media, is technological determinist. I have dealt with the question of technological determinism elsewhere;¹ it may suffice here to state that my focus in this book is on the cultural effects that ensue from the use of the new technologies. The properties of these technologies – digital mobile devices and global networked communications – are important in the possibilities they create. My approach in this regard has more in common with the German tradition of media theory, variously described as ‘hardware theory’ and ‘media archaeology’, than it has in common with much of the media theory and sociology of technology in the Anglo-American tradition. The German school – including the writings of Friedrich Kittler, Wolfgang Ernst and Bernhard Siegert – has pursued an investigation of ‘the agency of the machine’, in Ernst’s phrase.² The dominant Anglo-American strand, by contrast, has been pre-occupied with the ‘social shaping of technology’ as traced in the political economy of media and technology; yet this social focus has often under valued the properties of the machines themselves. This shortcoming has become so evident in the age of the internet that the clumsy term ‘affordances’ has been imported from psychology, to describe the latent potential of objects.

Yet a substantial body of theory in media and technology studies exists – in English as well as in German, French and other languages – that has not needed recourse to ‘affordances’ to describe the role

played by technology in cultural expression. This strand of thought can be traced back to Nietzsche, who wrote in 1882: 'Our writing instruments contribute to our thoughts'.³ This aphorism is prescient of profound developments in contemporary culture. Nietzsche was writing – or typing – about the typewriter, but his idea has been tested – and contested – in the context of succeeding generations of mechanical and electronic technologies. That the properties of a medium can contribute at least in part to the nature of the transmitted message is now a familiar idea. That the technology of that medium affects the cognitive functions of those who use it is a more radical re-voicing of the same idea, and one consequently more likely to be resisted.

But the concept is explicit in Nietzsche's statement; it has been pursued in far greater detail by several theorists since the second half of the twentieth century. It has been expressed most famously in the work of Marshall McLuhan; more recently, writers such as Jack Goody, Walter J. Ong, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Joshua Meyrowitz and Pierre Levy have elaborated this notion in a more scholarly fashion. Goody developed the concept of 'intellectual technologies', asserting that writing creates a 'different cognitive potentiality'.⁴ Ong, in his studies of orality and literacy, argued that 'more than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness'.⁵ Eisenstein elaborated a detailed account of the cultural and political effects of the printing press as 'agent of change'.⁶ Meyrowitz, in *No Sense of Place*, examined the cultural impact proceeding from the specific technological form of television.⁷ Levy, writing in the age of the internet, described hypertext as an 'intellectual technology' which modifies the 'cognitive ecology' into which it is introduced.⁸ The approach pursued in all these works, in common with the texts of those German writers cited above, emphasises the properties of specific media and their effects in shaping sensory and cognitive activity.

My study of the new time and space, in the context of mobile networked technology, takes place within this theoretical tradition. But my focus is not primarily on technology: it is on the shifting conception and experience of time and space, culminating in the present condition. This is characterised as a heavily mediated hybrid social space, and a pressured sense of time experienced as a montage of fractures. Certainly social and political factors are considered in the

formation of this condition, and the wilful technological optimism emanating from Silicon Valley – a re-voicing of an earlier, twentieth century, technocratic enthusiasm – is heavily criticised in this book.

I bring a historical perspective to developments wherever possible, tracing the development over time of ideas, practices and beliefs concerning time and space. One of these is the changing status of privacy, a form of space around the individual that came to be considered a right only recently; the public devaluing of this ‘right’ in the years since the advent of social media in 2004 is placed in a longer historical context. There was once little or no privacy; at one point it was constituted as desirable, then as essential, for civil society; within the ‘radical transparency’ of twenty-first-century social media, privacy has been decried as an obstacle to connectivity, rather than a right. The radically altered status of privacy across a relatively short span of history is a narrative comprising many elements: political, economic, social, cultural as well as technological. The properties of the technologies, and the possibilities they create, are one focus of my study in this book. But the new time and space is ultimately forged by the uses made – by individuals and by collectives – of the technologies of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1 provides background for the contemporary conceptualisation of time and space. This chapter takes the very long view, drawing on ancient beliefs and the slow formation of concepts of time and space. It includes a survey of the varying means of understanding time and space through human history, from the mythological time and space of the earliest societies, to the philosophical inquiry of Ancient Greece, and the linear time conceived within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The later development of scientific measurement and analysis is considered within the context of the empirical measuring and control of space and time. The impact of technologies such as the map, clock and calendar is weighed, as well as the technologies of communication and transport of modernity. The later electronic and digital technologies of communication are placed within an historical process beginning with the telegraph in the 1830s, whereby the message for the first time outpaced the messenger. The re-conceptualisation of ‘space-time’ generated by relativity theory and quantum physics is also discussed as a re-shaping of thought in the twentieth century.

Chapter 2 frames the analysis of contemporary time and space through a survey of the most influential theorising in recent years.

Included in the discussion are influential twentieth-century theorists of both time and space, as well as contemporary theoretical debates. This chapter includes discussion of the transformations of time and space perception in modernity, with emphasis given to Bergson's influential theory of duration and time. E. P. Thompson's assertion that each mode of production implies a different form of temporality is discussed, with reference to the 'time-discipline' of industrial capitalism. Henri Lefebvre's similarly Marxist perspective on the 'production of space' is also detailed. Alternative twentieth-century perspectives on space are voiced in Carl Schmitt's notion of *nomos* as orientation to space, and Bachelard's poetics of space. Contributions from Jameson, Virilio and Harvey to theories of postmodern space-time are considered. Castells' account of network society's 'timeless time' and 'space of flows' is assessed, along with Giddens and others on networked space and time. Recent findings in neuroscience concerning the perception of time and space are canvassed.

Chapter 3 contains the book's analysis of the contemporary experience of time and space. This chapter considers the ways in which our experience of time and space has been transformed by new communications technologies and networking. It proposes that a virtual network of time and space has been superimposed over the physical world, so that 'no one is where they are', as one respondent complained to psychologist Sherry Turkle in her recent book *Alone Together*. Individuals connected to the network via phone or laptop may be physically present but are in effect absent, engaged in a virtual conversation. Social media has created a new form of virtual space, in which individual users are frequently engaged. The physical world is increasingly overlaid by the virtual networked sphere: the term 'Hertzian space' has been used to describe the space of frequencies enabling connection. Mobile phones are also GPS devices, precisely locating users in space and enabling connection with others. Social media apps have been designed to 'read' social spaces, letting the user know how to interpret the people occupying that space.

Our time is more filled than ever with messages, constant interruption and distraction; even social media devotees frequently complain of having too little time. Much of this new communication is concerned with the present moment and 'phatic' communication for its own sake, resulting in an intensification of the moment and a loss of reflection and sense of the past. When so much activity occurs online, the notion of public space is transformed. When private phone calls

are loudly enacted in public, the divisions between public and private have shifted. Our sense of time has been altered now that our days and nights are so filled with messages and information.

Chapter 4 discusses images and ideas of spatial displacement in recent works of art. The theme of displacement is considered in the context of the globalist aspect of contemporary art, itself a reflection of globalisation. The intensified movement of goods, information, capital, images – and people – around the world provides the setting for contemporary artists' treatment of displacement in a wide range of contexts. The chapter is illustrated with recent artworks from Documenta, the world's premier international art event, and elsewhere.

Chapter 5 discusses the temporality – or range of temporalities – found within contemporary consumer network society. One concern of this chapter is how contemporary culture, so enamoured of the new and the present, is informed by a version of technological progress, particularly in the context of information technology. The world of Web 2.0 and social media is a world fixated on the present and the near-future; the past is already gone and is barely relevant. The construction of the past in commodity culture is appraised as one of contempt: the present evinces an attitude of contempt for the inferior and 'primitive' condition of earlier times. In this regard, nostalgia is construed as the 'ideological twin' of progress, in that the past is represented as other, backward and ultimately undesirable. I discuss alternative perspectives on the past found in the work of contemporary artists, where the past is represented not as nostalgia or commodity, but as part of an ongoing dialogue with the present. In the work of Anselm Kiefer, Thomas Demand, Walid Raad and William Kentridge, the past has an enigmatic quality, devoid of the sentimentalising aspects of nostalgia, existing in the present in a complex, often unsettling, manner.

Chapter 6 considers the profound impact of various technologies on privacy, which is interpreted as a form of space. Privacy is the right to one's personal space. It is the right to control the immediate physical space, often in the domestic environment, as well as the right to control the immaterial sphere of information on the self. The use of networked information for 'data-mining' is a recent violation of that informational space. This chapter provides a brief history of the idea of privacy, linked to the effects of surveillance technology and

networked culture. The profusion of cameras and telephoto lenses, the obsession with celebrity and the explosion of social networking have all intruded on the space of privacy, so that the status of privacy has been fundamentally changed by the growth and acceptance of these technologies.

Chapter 7 examines the political and social consequences of the networked distribution of digital photographs. Consideration is given to the power of social media to affect political discourse through the distribution of photographs, with reference to the role of blogs and photographs in the Arab Spring. The role of photographs on Instagram, Facebook and other social media is also discussed, as part of the construction of the 'relational self'.

Chapter 8 investigates the properties of sound in digital technology. Software programs enabling the manipulation and editing of music and sound render audio in visual terms as a waveform. This visualisation of sound through digital technology is an instance of the spatialisation of time which Henri Bergson criticised as a misunderstanding of the nature of time. This chapter explores what it means to 'see' time in the form of visualised sound, whether it amounts to a reduction of the richness of time, or makes possible creative play with the properties of time and sound.

In Chapter 9, works of recent video and performance art are appraised as investigations of the current experience of time and space. Many of these works, by artists such as Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, Shaun Gladwell and Daniel Crooks, are conceptual explorations of the way space and time are perceived and experienced: hence they represent an intellectual construction, as well as creative imagining, of 'capsules' of space-time. Christian Marclay's *The Clock* is analysed as an extended meditation on mechanical time and the experience of duration. Performance art works, particularly the extended 'ordeal' works of Marina Abramovic and Mike Parr, are treated as engagements with time and the multi-layered character of duration. This final chapter also includes a brief discussion of recent literature and film, in which the complexities of contemporary time and space have been creatively assayed.

1

A Brief History of Time and Space

Before time and space

In the beginning, there was no time or space; in their absence, there was void or chaos. The cosmologies constructed by the human mind – whether expressed as mythology, religion or contemporary physics – have posited a state of formlessness, or of nothing, prior to the existence of time and space. Albert Einstein, whose theory of relativity occasioned a re-conceptualisation of time and space in the early twentieth century, noted that ‘scientific thought is a development of prescientific thought. As the concept of space was already fundamental in the latter, we should begin with the concept of space in prescientific thought’.¹ This insight pertains as well to prescientific concepts of time and to mythological accounts of the origin of time and space.

For long sections of its history, humanity has understood time and space through the prism of mythology, which provided narrative descriptions of the origin and nature of the world. Religion provided a later account, as did philosophy and, most recently, science. The experience and conceptualisation of time and space have been rendered in many forms, according to many systems of thought; there are striking differences, as well as surprising similarities, between the earliest mythological descriptions of the origin of the universe and the Big Bang theory of contemporary physics.

Cosmogony – the theory of the origin of the universe – is first articulated in mythology. These narrative accounts of the beginning of the universe are also descriptions of the birth of time and space. The

mythologies of traditional, pre-literate peoples often proposed an initial state before time and space, characterised by darkness, lack of form or, frequently, water. 'In the beginning there was no land, there was but one water': this phrase from the origin myth of the Kets typifies, according to Murad Akhundov, 'the overwhelming majority of cosmogonic myths', including the Sumerian Nammu, the Egyptian Nun, the Indian Asat and the Babylonian Apsu.² Marie-Louise Von Franz, in her survey of creation myths, cites a North American example: 'In the beginning there was no Sun and no Moon and there were no stars. Everywhere there was darkness and water.'³

Water recurs as the description of a state before the formation of the universe due to its amorphous nature: it represents the formless, indefinite disorder out of which form and order are created. Mircea Eliade cites a Polynesian cosmogonic myth: 'in the beginning, there were only the primordial waters, plunged in cosmic darkness'. The supreme god Io 'expressed the desire to emerge from his repose. Immediately, light appeared.' Form is instituted in the act of creation: 'Then he went on: "Ye waters of Tai-kama, be ye separate. Heavens, be formed!"'⁴ The material world itself is often described as emerging from a primordial state lacking definition and the properties of matter. From the Achomavi people of North America: 'In the beginning there was water everywhere and the sky was clear and cloudless, but suddenly a cloud formed in the sky, condensed and changed into Coyote.'⁵

The pre-existent state before form and matter was also a condition without time. For the Maya of Yukatan, 'in the year and the day of darkness... when the world was still sunk in darkness and chaos and the earth was covered with water', time did not yet exist: 'there were no days and no years'. Time, space, the world of matter and humanity come into being through an act of divine sexual union: 'one day appeared the Stag-God, who had the name of Puma-snake, and the beautiful Stag-Goddess who was called Jaguar-snake. They had human shape and great magical power; they united sexually and from that the world originated.'⁶

In some ancient mythologies, the initial void or formless state is given form or structure by a human quality or imperative. The cosmogony of the Rigveda states: 'In the beginning there was only water, and in the water was a living germ. Out of this living germ everything was born through Tapas' (desire). This first germ was the 'earliest seed