

Angeliki Malakasioti

Assistant Professor

Department of Audio and Visual Arts, Ionian University

<https://avarts.ionio.gr/en/department/people/559-malakasioti/>

www.angelikimalakasioti.com/

amalakasioti@ionio.gr

Digital Selfhood and its Mental Spatialities:

Abstracts of Textual Constructs

ABSTRACT

Early cyberspatial theories reflected on the qualities of computer mediated experience by introducing aspects of immateriality, incorporeality, symbolism, abstraction, as well as exploring the mental, perceptual, and psychological dimensions of digital experience itself. Electronic interactions have been described as platonically erotic, transcendental, allegorical, even ecstatic conditions, that still seem timely and compelling nowadays, even since the pre-pandemic era. Human mind appeared as an inherent ingredient of the digital phenomenon since its birth. On the other side, ideas such as ‘body amnesia’ or ‘fleshworld’, emerged denoting the rigidity of the physical body to reach the other side of the screen.

These days, the superfluous, excessive, sometimes obsessive use of digital technology, pervasive software as well as the internet of things have surpassed the Cartesian mind-body dualism and have given rise to novel hybrid approaches of our contemporary relation to technology. Hybridity has created space for intertextual interpretations of experience, that do not divide the notion of mind and body, but comment on the complex interactions of self with digital culture, through numerous differentiated contexts, evolving cyborg ontologies, alternate bodies, human-nonhuman systems, transformative personas, neuroarchaeological readings of cultural plasticity, all rendered through a daily mediated reality.

The study attempts to look at this ever-present conundrum, through an architectural point of view, venturing a theoretical quest on digital spatiality. Digital experience has always been inseparable from the metaphoric use of spatial concepts. At the same time, textual

space constitutes an allegorical or symbolic construction with its own architecture, ambience, and other characteristics. Space is not only relating to the strict conception of geometry, physics, or mathematics, but also to an anthropological reading of existence, a quality that is often elusive and immeasurable, thus it helps define abstract, psychological, experiential phenomena, or in other words, that, which is in fact indefinable.

In this context, self takes the role of a mental dynamic, while space is interpreted as a metaphoric, volatile construction whose literary aesthetics emerge from digital culture. The idea of digital experience is approached through a series of textual-spatial concepts and projects that reflect on the space that is constructed in the interstitial area between the digitally platformed self and the mediated environment. This exploration takes the form of creative writings, chatbot interviews, exercises of verbal configurations, visual poetics, interactive game-poems and other abstracts of writing in both artistic and educational contexts. The overall idea of the digital mind-body interpretation takes the form of a series of mental spatialities that comment on our contemporary way of being in the digital world. In architecture, to read means to uniquely understand and thoroughly grasp the phenomena of the surrounding environment - in this case, space is translated in an altered vocabulary that helps us understand what it means to 'read' the contemporary self in a platformed culture.

Introduction

I am the space where I am.

Noël Arnaud, *L'état d'ébauche*¹

Contemporary digital platforms are not a novel phenomenon. Technological integration in many aspects of life has already been present since the onset of computers, gaming, or the use of web. Innovative digital systems, smart devices and applications, fast-developing social media and the Internet-of-Things have already formed a fertile

¹ Arnaud, Noël, *L'état d'ébauche*, Le Messager Boîteaux, Paris, 1950, as quoted in Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, Orion Press, 1968, p.137

ground for the platformization of everyday life. The ongoing pandemic though, has raised this phenomenon to an excessive degree. We do not talk nowadays about the platformization of services or activities, but rather about the platformization of experiences and culture. Additionally, all connotations of the ‘platform’ concept have given rise to relative discussions around notions of ‘staging’, ‘proposing’, ‘programming’, ‘planning’, or ‘showcasing’. To set a platform for an experience to happen, presupposes the adoption of a common language, a commonly shared acting consensus through which users may be expressed during their online presence or consume digital content in a specifically designed manner.

An important question arises at these critical times of the pandemic phenomenon. If digital platformization of multiple aspects of life is more relevant than ever nowadays, then how are we to understand the ways in which ourselves are experienced through this constantly mediated condition? And how can this form the onset for rethinking the already established digital norms or our potential future online presence(s) which lie(s) ahead?

Spatial delineation

As an architect, spatial education has played an important role in the delineation of my selfhood through spatial mechanisms. Self and body are interlinked through multiple spatial correlations of definitions, metaphoric expressions or even personal practices that make this notional diptych a fluctuating ontological model. Digital connection, projection, manifestation, all demonstrate a shifting state of its parts: space is reevaluated, redefined and reprogrammed – domestic space is broadcasted, and working spaces are interiorized, bringing up modes of hybrid spatial constructs - aspects of life are moving online, privacy and intimacy are questioned - human interaction is adapting to new formats of communication and action.

Encounters with technology since their onset has made explicit use of spatial concepts to describe novel, partially unknown experiences. Early interpretations of cyberspace reflected on the ideas of mediation through ideas of immateriality, incorporeality, abstraction of space. The mental dimension is present in almost all former cyberspatial

definitions: the “consensual hallucination” by William Gibson² or “the `place` where a telephone conversation appears to occur.” by Bruce Sterling³ are only a few of the old and well-known metaphors and definitions. Electronic interactions have been described as platonically erotic, transcendental, allegorical, even ecstatic conditions, that still seem timely and compelling nowadays, even since the pre-pandemic era. On the other hand, contemporary approaches surpass the dualistic view and give rise to hybrid readings of the mind-body relation in digital environments. John Perry Barlow’s world which “is not where bodies live”⁴, is now moving towards new ways of understanding space in the digital world. Performance artist Stelarc has already commented though his work on the developing necessities of our obsolete bodies⁵. Chris Hables Gray, when talking about human-machine cyborgian interaction, characteristically mentioned the idea of a “pseudo-biosystem”⁶, an organism or entity that seeks ways of digital ‘corporealization’, though living and acting in a novel space. These issues of computer mediated state of being are reinterpreted in this context, posing questions about spatial concepts that arise during online individual experience. Foucault⁷, talking about the technologies of the self, introduced a series of practices that to the self and its performativity. In this venture, text plays an important role, manifesting not only forms of linguistic syntax but rather organizational, expressional, or systematic syntax that transcends its original content and explores the mediated or platformed habits, memories or intimacies as a creative tool.

Fragments

The imagination and daydreaming are stimulated by dim light and shadow. In order to think clearly, the sharpness of vision, has to be suppressed, for thoughts travel with an

² Gibson, William, *Burning Chrome*, Harper Voyager, Reprint edition, 2003, p.179 and Gibson, William, *Neuromancer*, Ace, 1st edition, New York, 1986, p.51

³ Sterling, Bruce, *The Hacker Crackdown*, Bantam, New York, 1992, pp.xi-xii

⁴ John Perry Barlow, *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, Switzerland, February 8, 1996, <https://projects.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>, accessed 6/5/2011

⁵ Marquard Smith, *Stelarc: The Monograph (Electronic Culture: History, Theory, and Practice)*, The MIT Press, 2005, 2007, p.160

⁶ Gray, Chris Hables, *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age*, Routledge, New York, 2002, p.48

⁷ Foucault, Michel, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, Amherst, MA

absent-minded and unfocused gaze.

Juhani Pallasmaa, *The eyes of the skin*⁸

The present paper explores these questions through an architectural point of view, venturing a theoretical quest on digital spatiality. Initially, abstracts of creative or artistic responses that make use of non-visual, textual mechanisms are presented as an experimentation or research tool. The abstracts presented are pieces of the author's larger body of work⁹ that also expands to the use of audiovisual material, animation, photography, or digital image composition. Additionally, these reflections are supplemented by a series of relative creative experiments in an educational context. In some cases, a rough outline of undergraduate or postgraduate course activities in the context of digital design media, digital culture, art and architecture are presented. A brief overview is provided introducing quotes of works or ideas that have proven fruitful in the classroom and which can stimulate a broader discussion.

Neil Spiller characteristically mentioned a kind of laboratory that encompasses "the real city, the unreal city, and the visceral and mental spaces of the body -- and the blurred spaces in between"¹⁰. Similarly, in the following abstracts, the idea of the spatial quality is investigated, not as a strictly geometric form, but rather as an "atmosphere" encompassing digital environments that can help us define the fluctuating (either personal, or collective) notion of space in the contemporary platformed worlds.

SPACES

The obsessive space

In 2018 in the undergraduate course *Digital Totem: Transcendental Representations and Digital Media*, which took place in the Department of Architecture at the University of

⁸ Pallasmaa, Juhani, *The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the Senses*, John Wiley & Sons, 2005, p.50.

⁹ See Angeliki Malakasioti's website, angelikimalakasioti.com

¹⁰ Spiller, Neil, *Digital dreams*, *Digital Dreams: Architecture and the New Alchemical Technologies*, Watson-Guption Publications, New York, 1998, (from the back cover of the book)

Thessaly¹¹, students were asked to move from a personal to a collective perspective, or from a personal context to a social critique. They were not only asked to use a medium, but they were asked to think about the culture that gave birth to it and of which they are also an important part. Before designing they initiated a process of short textual ‘confessions’ as digital online users, manifesting in this way various spaces of repetitions, echoes, or other obsessive characteristics that relate to their online presence: “I am on ‘search’”, “Eye bath”, “I will drown in my unread emails”, “Necessary evil”¹².

The dialogic space

In the context of Doctoral research on the theme of “The anatomy of the digital body: spatial aspects of the self and immaterial on the web”¹³, a series of experimental dialogues were stimulated with the use of AI chatbots¹⁴. This idea was developed further in the context of the aforementioned course during which students were asked to take an interview of an artificial intelligence entity of their choice and generally interact, perhaps train it, and produce free and heretical dialogues. Students were free to guide the dialogue, to reorder reactions, to repeat questions, in a context of creative writing, in which half of the text manifests randomness and is placing agency of response somewhere else. The process rather focuses on the creative cut-up methods than on the precise recording of the process. The process of writing within a dialogic state, sets up a human-nonhuman system through which knowledge is not only born but also performed. The content of the dialogue leaves space for open translation and open-ended concepts to develop, manifesting the partially subjective quality of the whole interaction process. Neil Spiller, talking about randomness in the context of new technologies, talks about a

¹¹ Course website: <https://digitalitycourses.wixsite.com/digitaltotem>

¹² Abstracts of student quotes.

¹³ Malakasioti, A. 2015. *Anatomy of a Digital Body: Spatial Aspects of the self and the intangible on the web. Doctoral Thesis*. Department of Architecture, University of Thessaly, <https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/36641>

¹⁴ In this context, free online AI chatbots were used.

choreography of digitally enabled chance which “allows us to create architecture of blossoming possibility where events are fleeting, exceptional and particular.”¹⁵

The outcome was quite provocative: most dialogues moved towards the limits of the machine's knowledge - most of the times they ended up talking about those things that the machine does not know experientially, for example the idea of the body and its senses, family, life and death, or love and morality:

“User: Do you exist? -

Bot: No. Do you?”

“User: Can you describe where ‘here’ is?

Bot: I am in the land of wind and shade.”¹⁶

“User: Describe me a beautiful body

Bot: The part of a human that is flesh and blood”¹⁷

The metaphoric space

Digital experience has always been inseparable from the metaphoric use of spatial concepts. Spatiality seems to ‘haunt’ digitality from the past to the present. At the same time, textual space constitutes an allegorical or symbolic construction with its own architecture, ambience, and other characteristics. Space is not only relating to the strict conception of geometry, physics, or mathematics, but also to an anthropological reading of existence, a quality that is often elusive and immeasurable, thus it helps define abstract, psychological, experiential phenomena, or in other words, that which is in fact indefinable. In this context, during the course students practice their metaphorical thinking, while at the same time producing a collective manifesto for digital space -

¹⁵ Spiller, Neil, AVATAR, Advanced Virtual and Technological Architecture Research, Haecceity Papers, 2 (2), Introduction, 2007

¹⁶ Quoting dialogue annexes of the author. See Malakasioti, A. 2015. Anatomy of a Digital Body: Spatial Aspects of the self and the intangible on the web. Doctoral Thesis. Department of Architecture, University of Thessaly, <https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/36641>

¹⁷ Quoting Kopelia Stavroula, Nathilde Charbonier - abstracts of students’ dialogues.

which also functions as a hypothetical "scenario" of the course: "Digital space is a tiger with proboscis and wings. [...] A static choreography. [...] A perfectly constructed loop. A chocolate for my hypoglycemia."¹⁸

The appropriated space

Conceptually driven, the poem *Thirteen Ways, after Wallace Stevens* (1954)¹⁹, constitutes a piece of textual work which reinterprets the famous poem 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'²⁰ by Wallace Stevens (1954) in an iterative process of thirteen successive translations of the text through the unconventional use of Google translate system in different languages. Through this digital appropriation process, manifold flaws and imperfections of the electronic medium emerge, such as misconceptions, cultural differences, language particularities and diversities from one language to the other, which are deliberately used by the writer in the creative writing process as a tool for structuring a new poetic form, embedding all these qualities and multiplicities of textual layers, concepts and meanings that arise.

Being initially a poem expressing the different ways of seeing and perceiving the world, the metamorphosis of the text in this context adopts a new form which is permeated by the 'spell' of technology. 'Thirteen Ways' becomes a metaphor for the contemporary ways of 'being' in a digital world.

The fallen space

The interactive game-poem *Ode to a Fallen Dialogue*²¹ is a piece of work born during the pandemic period. It constitutes an 'ode' to the struggles of human communication. It

¹⁸ A collective student manifesto on digital space, online at <https://digitalitycourses.wixsite.com/digitaltotem/manifesto>

¹⁹ Poem by Angeliki Malakasioti, published in Backslash Lit - online magazine for electronic literature., <https://backslashlit.com/issues/2/angeliki-malakasioti-thirteen-ways>, Issue 2.

²⁰ 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' by Wallace Stevens (1954), in Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45236/thirteen-ways-of-looking-at-a-blackbird>, accessed 6/5/2021

²¹ Poem 'Ode to a Fallen Dialogue' by Angeliki Malakasioti, sound design by Apostolos Loufopoulos, accessed at <https://www.falldialogue.com/>, launching trailer:

reflects on the hardships of unfortunate dialogues, the splendor of reaching to the other side, the rise and fall of human connectedness, the agonies of stray meanings and words. Expressed through the poetics of weather phenomena, this conceptually driven interactive work represents the mental landscape between two lovers, sometimes violent, sometimes resonating, a parallel metaphor for the contemporary digitally mediated condition. Early cyberspace theories referred to an erotic ontology of digital experience. Michael Heim described the platonic dimensions of an augmented Eros²². Roland Barthes on the other hand described language as the skin with which we struggle to touch the 'other'. "Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire."²³. In this game-poem, senses, meanings and ideas appear to be all permeated by the 'spell' of technology, a rhetorical as well as an erotic act of mediation through different worlds. The reader/player is asked to become part of the dipole, to meander through poetic texts and tormented emotions, at times linear, other times bifurcating, while exploring a dialogue 'atmosphere' inspired by visual poetry. The dialogue becomes a space of interaction itself. Endeavoring to reach the 'other side' through the use of spoken language, this piece of work is an affective journey to the tempests of a fallen dialogue.

The simultaneous space

In 2021, in the postgraduate course 'Art of the Moving Image', in the program Audiovisual Arts in the Digital Age at the Department of Audio and Visual Arts, Ionian University²⁴, students are asked to use creative kinetic text as a research tool. The research question which is based on space-time relationships, transforms in an audiovisual format taking the form of a writing-construction which draws from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwopdAmxGII>, part of the exhibition 'Platforming Utopias (and Platformed Dystopias)', in the context of ELO 2021 Conference and Festival: Platform (Post?) Pandemic

²² Heim, Michael, "The erotic ontology of cyberspace", *Cyberspace: First steps*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1991, p.59

²³ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010

²⁴ Postgraduate program <https://avarts.ionio.gr/ada/v2/en/>. Course co-teaching: Nikos Kokkalis, Angeliki Malakasioti, Fotis Raftopoulos, Konstantinos Tiligadis. Abstracts of student works will be showcased in the AudioVisual Arts Festival 2021-2021, taking place in May 2021 virtually: <https://avarts.ionio.gr/festival2/2020/en/>

metaphoric schemata in order to explore further concepts and ideas. In this context, each spatial-textual gesture implies the externalization of a non-visual thought, its demystification, its juxtaposition with other concepts and thoughts, and finally, its further correlation with real space experiences as well as design issues. Text is not only seen as a system of representation but also a method of reading and being read simultaneously.

Conclusion

In all cases, the text acts as mechanism with an inherent motive force – paraphrasing Peter Cooks expression that drawing is the motive force of architecture²⁵, text becomes the drawing itself, it is explored as a medium the strength of which, either poetic, or literal, may outline, draw or shape the way self and space is understood or consumed in digital culture. Parallel to that, in architecture, the act of reading relates to perceiving and interpreting the phenomena of the surrounding environment. Correspondingly, architecture introduces here a new contextual vocabulary which helps us understand what it means to ‘read’ the contemporary self in a platformed culture, encompassing at the same the pleasure of ongoing discovery in a changing world.

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²⁵ Cook, Peter, *Drawing: The Motive Force of Architecture*, Second Edition, 2014, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

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