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The Problem of the Political in Cyberspace

Abstract: The central discussion in this paper concerns the articulation of ways whereby liminality is inscribed in cyberspace architecture, in order to show that cyberspace is a political performative space. In this regard, I argue that cyberspace is politicized in terms of its liminality. Cyberspace is constituted as an *in-between space*, that is, a space that is permanently in process, simultaneously functioning as a point of connection and division. As my analysis shows, this liminal aspect of cyberspace stands as an important connection to the notions of liminality in performance studies. By analyzing cyberspace as a new space for the production of the political, I propose that techno-performance is a new political notion of performance.

Keywords: Internet, cyberspace, Wikileaks, liminality, performance, interface

Liminality

The term *liminal* signifies an *in-between space,* which is at the same time a point of joining and separation, an actual as well as symbolical space on both sides of the border. It also refers to the temporal quality of "being in-between" – that which is in a process of transition, transitory. Unlike the notion of the border that marks a clear line of separation and differentiation between certain notions, spaces, or forms of existence, the liminal marks a hybrid *in-between* space, where differences and similarities are not separated in a clear way. For example, in anthropology, a liminal phase in a ritual – for instance, a ritual of initiation – is one where one has already left her pre-ritual status but still hasn't reached the status that she will obtain when the ritual is over.[1] In other words, liminality is a form of activity whose spatial, temporal, and symbolical quality of being in between opens the possibility of transgression, resistance, and

[1] Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, London, Routledge, 2003, 159.

perhaps even the transformation of social norms.[2] If we apply the term liminal to political and cultural processes and changes, we can use it to name those periods when social hierarchies, traditions, and established social orders can be brought into question, shaken, and temporally or permanently changed. Therefore, we can say that revolutions are always liminal periods, i.e. liminal stages. This is not to claim that liminality is emancipatory *per se*, but that it opens the possibility of taking emancipatory action. In this regard, I will consider the liminality of cyberspace as a possibility for taking an active engagement in reality (which includes cyber-reality).

In performance studies, the *liminal* refers to that which is in between two concepts or elements (e.g. between performance and ritual), referring to both of them, but not belonging to either. In other words, to say that a performance is liminal means that it is *in between* two possibilities of existence, but does not become either one of them. According to Richard Schechner, performance studies as a field of research insist on and persist in inhabiting the liminal spaces between theory and practice, post-discipline and discipline, theatre and ritual, art and life, the arts and culture, etc.[3] A liminal position is seen as the most efficient in terms of theoretical and practical problematization of social and political relevance. Emancipatory performative practices, the performance of marginalized identities as well as different versions of transgressive performances are all understood in terms of liminality. The foreground features their characteristics and/or ability to have been developed and situated in concert and symbolical *in-between* space. This means that the efficacy of performance – which is a characteristic that refers to a concrete goal realized trough performance - is defined in relation to its liminality, i.e. ability to produce activities whose spatial, temporal, and symbolical *liminality* questions and provokes existing social norms.[4] Therefore, according to Schechner, liminality is the central concept for articulating the efficacy of cultural performance and performance studies, whether it is seen as transgressive or resistant.[5]

The Interface as a Place of Joining and Separation

Cyberspace is generated in hardware-software interaction between a living organism and z digital system. In cyberspace, the real and the virtual, the present and the absent, time and space, the private and the public, the public and the counter-public, the corporeal and the disembodied, the human and the technological – are all together in their differences. It is important to emphasize that cyberspace is never ideologically neutral – it is constituted within a certain social context and in relation to specific goals. As a technologically generated reality, cyberspace is both a product and a means of production of socially and culturally generated fantasies that create and shape our bodies and our identities.[6] Regarding the analysis of the liminal nature of cyberspace, I will focus here on the notion of interface. The interface is important because it functions as a locus of joining and separation, and as such, presents a real and

[2] For critical reflection on the development of the concept of liminality in performance studies see also: Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, London–New York, Routledge, 49–53.

[3] Richard Schechner, op. cit. 129–136.

[4] For a critique of liminality and the introduction of the concept of "liminal norm" see: Jon McKenzie, "The Liminal Norm", in: Henri Bial, *The Performance Studies Reader*, New York–London, Routledge, 2004, 27.

[5] Richard Schechner, "What is Perfomance Studies Anyway", in: Peggy Phelan and Jill Lanne (eds.), *The Ends of Performance*, New York–London, NYU Press, 1998, 360.

[6] Yvonne Volkart, *Technologies of Identity*, in: Marina Gržinić and Tanja Velagić (eds.), *New-Media Technology, Science, and Politics*, Vienna, Löcker, 2008, 216.

symbolical manifestation of cyberspace as luminal, i.e. *that which is in between*. Interactivity is a key element in relation to cyberspace and, as such, it opens questions of participation, the direct mediation of a body, and possibilities of actions in a digitally generated space. This means that entering a cyberspace, via an interface, is a material act realized by means of different physical, hardware components (such as a joystick, keyboard, touchscreen, or virtual reality headset). This place of contact – the interface between the real and the virtually real – stands as the point where the user is invited to introduce her own "fingerprint", i.e. material body, in the form of a mistake. According to Marina Gržinić,

> The interface can be considered an obscene stain constantly reminding the user of his or her inability to become fully subject in cyberspace, and we might also say the same with regard to the mistakes. Mistakes in the image are like a fingerprint on the film, a scratch or scars on the skin – the evidence of the existence of the image. To make a mistake is to find a place in time. […] This is a situation of producing a gap, a hiatus, where we can insert not only a proper body, but also its interpretation.[7]

In the context of cyberspace and cyber-technologies, the concept of gap, hiatus or liminal space seems important in terms of subjectification as well as a space for political and ideological action.

An interface suggests an interactive relation between the presence (ontology), appearance (morphology), and occurrence (reception) of a space-time event in the artificial world (phenomenology). This means that analyzing the interface will provide the possibility of a critical understanding of the interactive processes that connect cyber- and non-cyberspace. Looking at the flat surface of a screen, people enjoy the illusion of presence in another space, as well as that of direct communication with a computer.[8] Interactivity and telepresence have become part of everyday life and a networked computer a "magical device" that provides us not only with the possibility of being present in a remote place, but also of being simultaneously present at several different places. Providing permanent omnipresence and a continuous flow of information – from work, to personal communications and socializing, shopping, following the news and all kinds of entertainment, or any other activity that one can think of – the computer has become the basic means of accessing all kinds of information, while the screen has become the dominant medium of communication.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis the metaphor of the screen defines phantasm as a screen that separates the subject from the Real as the symbolically unrepresentable part of reality. In this way, the screen appears as the very form of misunderstanding, the impossibility of communication and perceiving the reality. The relation between an image and what it shows and expresses is never direct and/or literal, but always mediated by a cultural text or phantasm as the separation of the subject from reality. This means that a screen image does not represent the reality or its individual aspects in a direct way, but via texts to which it refers. Lacan's concept of the *gaze* and especially the *mirror stage* was hugely influential on theories of the screen.[9]

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[7] Cf. Gržinić Marina, *Spectralization of Space: The Virtual-image and The Real-time Interval*, http://international-festival.org/node/28702.

[8] I use the screen as a paradigmatic form of interface.

[9] Developed in the 1970s by a group of French and British theorists, such as Christian Merz, Laura Mulvey, Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean-Louis Comolli, and Stepehn Heath.

The *gaze* is the mechanism whereby an image *imposes its meanings,* while the mirror stage is a stage in which a subject is permanently captured by its own image.[10] This means that the gaze belongs to the image rather than to the subject. The viewing subject has the impression that the observed object returns her gaze and therefore she constitutes her own image in relation to the image of the object. Screen theory treats screen images as signifiers that encode meanings, as well as mirrors in which spectators recognise themselves and acquire subjectivity. A major advantage of this proposition is its ability to unmask precisely those ideological messages that are inscribed in the images, intended to make a direct and formative impact on the spectator. This concept significantly contributed to the development of the politics of the image and the critique of mass media, which function as a "white screen" for the subjectivity of the viewer. This means that a screen image functions as a transmitter of ideological meanings as well as a locus of the gaze, since the viewers have the impression that they too are being watched.[11] In his later works, Lacan insisted that accepting subjectivity was not only the consequence of an imaginary self(mis)recognition, but that the human subject also needed to be influenced by the law of the signifier and confronted with the Real – that which resists representation. The Lacanian Real is different from the everyday reality that we perceive, which is always in the realm of the symbolical. By contrast, Lacan's Real is pre-imaginary and pre-symbolic, i.e. refers to that which cannot be symbolized in language. On the other hand, an interactive screen as an interface with cyberspace introduces even further complications.

With the invention of cyberspace, the space *on the other side of the screen* is constituted as another regime of reality, rather than an image of reality. This means that an image is literally performed *on both sides of the screen*. In other words, the subject is *really* the one who watches and is being watched, which means that it is both determined by cyberspace and non-cyberspace.[12]

The Liminality of Cyberspace

In the following analysis, I argue that liminality is inscribed in both the concept and the realization of the Internet, which is the most prominent manifestation of cyberspace. The Internet was developed as an outcome of an "impossible alliance" that destabilised both of the parties involved: military technology and free culture. As analyzed by Margarita Padilla, the political complexity of the Internet is rooted in the fact that it emerged from the encounter between high science after WWII (nuclear science and atomic bombs) and the individualistic, free counter-culture at US universities in the 1960s and 1970s.[13] The beginnings of the Internet

[10] Lacan introduced the notion of the mirror stage first as a phase in childhood and later (from the early 1950s) extended it to the representation of the permanent structure of subjectivity, as a paradigm of the imaginary order. See Jacques Lacan, *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Practice,* http://www.sholetteseminars.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/LacanMirrorPhase.pdf, acc. June 20, 2014.

[11] Henry Krips, "Extract From Fetish: An Erotics of Culture", in: Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory,* New York–London, Routledge, 2003.

[12] Non-cyberspace is a term I have coined to explain the changes introduced by the invention of cyberspace in terms of reality, materiality, presence, and temporality. See: Aneta Stojnić, "Digital Anthropomorphism: Performers Avatars and Chat-bots", *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 2015, Vol. XX, No. 2, 71–78.

[13] Margarita Padilla, "Pozicije u sajber-prostoru", *DeArtikulacija*, 2012, No. 1, http://bijenaleumetnosti.rs/2012/download/De-Artikulacija1.pdf

relate to a research centre directly connected with the development of US military industry at the beginning of the Cold war, when there emerged a need for the development of a new communication network able to overcome the limitations of centralized systems such as the telegraph, telephone, and radio. The idea for a decentralized network came in response to the question of how to maintain communication in a hypothetical nuclear war. In 1962, Paul Bara, a researcher with the RAND corporation, offered the solution: a design of a stronger communication network, based on digital technology, which would use, instead of a centralized structure, a structure of knots characterized by intelligence (for making decisions) and autonomy (for executing those decisions). This idea was recognised as crucial in the context of military industry. By contrast, commercial civil industry did not recognize its potentials at first. In other words, it simply had no interest to replace the telegraph, telephone, and radio networks, which already functioned successfully. On the other hand, the universities got interested in developing the concept of a decentralized network. The first large-scale testing of the new network was conducted in 1969. The first knot was installed at UCLA and the seventh knot was installed at the RAND Corporation at Santa Monica. The network called ARPANET[14] was conceived as a tool for scientists to share data remotely, which soon developed into something completely unexpected: a fast electronic mail service for exchanging everything, from professional and technical to personal and private information. In a world characterized by strong geopolitical divisions, these students, who represented the techno-elite of an individualistic free culture, adopted the idea of a decentralised network as a possibility to build a new free world from scratch – a cyber-world.[15] According to Padilla, they accepted an offer from RAND Corporation to construct a strong reliable network, but had simultaneously been working outside of the corporate plan: they provided the Internet with powerful tools for civil use that corresponded with their counterculture ideas of a free new world. As elaborated by Padilla, this impossible alliance between the establishment and the antiestablishment, alongside the initial self-exclusion of the commercial sector, created the unstable structure of the Internet, which still produces changes in the architecture of reality:

> In an astonishing way, the industry will witness the proliferation of new and abundant immaterial goods, and, not having appropriate mechanisms for their management and accumulation, it will split into those who want to make a new television out of the Internet and those who want to make Web 2.0. Political power will have to struggle with a new (cyber) space, open and flexible, ungovernable by any central authority, whose internal laws it doesn't understand; it will see the emergence of a new private-public sphere and tremble. And the social movements will be perplexed by the abstraction of cyberspace and the ambiguity of hackers' aims, who fight in their own way: without nostalgia towards a political community; making shared knowledge a guarantor of freedom; building a community based on individualism and horizontal equality based on meritocracy [...].[16]

[14] Short for Advanced Research Projects Agency, which funded it.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Margarita Padilla, op. cit.

One could assume that such a plural and agonistic[17] political space would stand as the exact opposite to neoliberal pluralism. However, I find it important to emphasize that we should not fall into the trap of romanticizing the Internet as the "most-democratic" of media. In order to construct cyberspace as a potentially revolutionary space that redefines existing power relations, we need to be aware of the modes of production, funding, and numerous forms of censorship and control that are actively performed in cyberspace. Soon enough, the commercial sector recognized the potential of the new Internet technology and power structures recognized it as a space for governmentality and performance of power. In 1992, the US government officially allowed the commercial use of the Internet. Since then, the commercialization of the Internet has completely changed the landscape of global trade and economy. Global networking has provided unforeseen possibilities for creating new markets, new products, and new modes of production and exploitation. In this regard, the internet may seem as a metaphor and realization of globalization, imperialization, and the final instance of the society of the spectacle.

In this regard, let us look at the relatively recent example of *Wikileaks,*[18] the activist nonprofit media organization. Combining high-tech technology, investigative journalism, and ethical principles that demand transparency, freedom of speech, and whistleblowing, as well as the right of the public to know the truth (meaning accurate information), Wikileaks has created a complex online network for gathering and publishing (classified) information, otherwise unavailable in mainstream media. In 2010, when Wikileaks released thousands of classified documents, including cables form various governments, as well as the infamous "Iraq War Logs" and "Afghan War Diaries", it made an enormous impact on global political affairs, which is still felt today.[19] The reaction of the US authorities was to accuse Wikileaks founder Julian Assange for espionage and there were public demands that he and his collaborators should be treated as terrorists. Wikileaks was also accused of stealing documents belonging to the US government, which is an especially important issue because it introduces the question of ownership in the field of information that is vitally important for a large number of people and directly or indirectly for the world as a whole. Moreover, Chelsea Manning, a former Private in the US Army and the whistleblower who released the "Iraq War Logs" and "Afghan War Diaries", has been prosecuted and sentenced to 35 years in prison.

The Internet, which was at first idealized as the "most democratic of media", a communication platform for a free flow of information, is today largely compromised precisely in these domains. The facts of mass global surveillance made public by Edward Snowden, a former NSA employee, came as the most prominent proof of the current situation and a concrete call for fighting it. On the other hand, although under pressure from world governments numerous web servers had to cancel their collaboration with Wikileaks, it was still possible to find new spaces to host it, that is, new knots in the web that enabled it to continue to function globally. The example of Wikileaks shows us that the Internet is a space where it is still possible to act against the system by its own means (strategies that failed in non-cyberspace long ago, having been appropriated by the system, which produces its own critique providing an illusion of plurality). As summarized by Padilla, describing the way Wikileaks functions:

[17] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Abingdon–New York, Routledge, 2005.

[18] http://wikileaks.org/About.html.

[19] https://www.wikileaks.org/irq/

> Its goal is to deepen the freedom of expression. Its programme is liberal: it is not the ideas that matter, but the freedom to express them (even though WikiLeaks itself does not express any ideas). Its apparatus is mainstream (Amazon, PayPal, Visa, MasterCard, Swiss banks, etc.). Its allies are big media groups (*The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *El País*, and *Der Spiegel*).[20]

In other words, it functions within the system and yet, it is destructive for it, due to its paradoxical structures. I find it important to emphasize that working against the system by its own means in this case does not mean some kind of "justified usage" of those means. On the contrary, I would argue that working against an oppressive system functions on a much more profound level: by inscribing meaning into the gap that exists at its foundation, it is possible to keep deepening the possibilities in liminal spaces.

Conclusion

The Internet is at the same time the product and the means of production, a place and a means of resistance. Just like performance studies, it is inherently liminal. In the gap that is always inscribed anew in the very architecture of the medium, the Internet becomes and remains a place of social struggles. The politics of cyberspace that is performed in its liminal architecture is recursive in its nature, subject to permanent change, construction, and deconstruction. Cyberspace as a political space is generated in the difference, the gap in which it emerges, providing the possibility of forming a new performative subject. This means that performing in digital space provides the possibility of a different articulation of existing power relations.

[20] Margarita Padilla, op. cit.