John Potts, *The New Time and Space*

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REFERENCES

John Potts, Professor of Media at Macquarie University, Australia, is no newcomer to the domain of media studies. Some of his outstanding publications, like Radio in Australia (New South Wales University Press, 1989), Culture and Technology (with Andrew Murphie, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) and Technologies of Magic (co-edited with Edward Scheer, Sydney: Power Publications, 2011), have established his credentials and revealed the versatility of his knowledge in the field. The New Time and Space, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2015, continues to show the topicality of his research interests, which focus on the interaction between culture and technology. More concretely, John Potts's latest book analyses how mobile phones, networked communications and freely accessible information “have contributed to a shift in the way we experience time and space” (1). Acknowledging his debt to the German tradition of media theory, which emphasises the properties of the machines themselves rather than the “social shaping of technology” (2) that is more characteristic of the Anglo-American strand, Potts quotes Nietzsche as saying, as early as 1882, that “our writing tools are also working on our thoughts.” The crucial thesis of The New Time and Space is therefore not so much that “the medium is the message”, as was famously stated by Marshall McLuhan half a century ago, as that the technology of the medium affects the cognitive functions of its users.

The introduction spells out the author’s project, whose forte as will be confirmed by the reading of the book is the historical perspective brought to the exploration of the changing status of privacy over the last two decades or so. Chapter one provides a brief history of time and space, from the mythology of the earliest societies to the linear time as theorised by Judeo-Christian thought, through the conception of time and space according to the philosophy of Ancient Greece, whereby true being resides in the timeless Forms while the mortal world of change proceeds in a series of cycles. In contrast, Judeo-Christian thought posits the creation and existence of a “one-way time”, a time that is not reversible and consequently future-oriented. The invention of clocks made time quantifiable, regulated, and clocks became “the symbol of the universe itself: ticking away reliably, and predictably, everywhere the same, according to universal laws” (27). In the early twentieth century, Einstein’s general theory of relativity showed that space and time are joined and connected to matter and gravity; in “spacetime”, contrary to Newton's classical view of time and space as absolute, time and space can change, move and distort. This early chapter cannot be read independently from chapter five, in which the author elaborates at great length upon contemporary Western society's fixation on the present. Commercial culture fosters a love of the present and the near-future, just as in Web 2.0 the past is disposable and immaterial. As chapter three aptly demonstrates,
network time and space, however, did not really emerge until the mid-1990s, when commercial traffic was permitted on the internet and when both the net browser Netscape was marketed in 1993 and Amazon was founded in 1994 as an online store. Email and other forms of online communication have encouraged the dissolution of the work-leisure distinction, as users are 'on-call' and available at all times. Through mobile networked communication geographical space has been, since the half-decade 2004-2009, ceaselessly encroached upon by the virtual, while time has been turned into a "montage of fractures" (51) made up of multi-tasking and constant interruptions. Potts’s argument is therefore consistent with his introductory tribute to the German tradition of media theory, which emphasises that the use of technology directly impacts upon our cognitive functions. The combined technologies of the internet and GPS have been conducive to a reshaping of our own spatial abilities electronic mapping entails a user-generated element, placing the user as origin and centre of the journey through space. The new twenty-first-century sociability is indeed a far cry from the eighteenth-century coffee-house that was hailed as a site of rational and informed discussion. In comparison, today's internet cafés are fairly solipsistic spaces in which exchange is both silent and telematic. As a result, most mobile users are perpetually tethered to their machines and marked absent to physical space, or physically present in one space but busy texting away hence Sherry Turkle’s arresting phrase in her 2011 study Alone Together: "No one is where they are" (64).

About half of The New Time and Space focuses on the various strategies deployed by twenty-first-century artists in order to address the reconfigurations of time and space imposed by globalisation in the digital age. For instance, many works of art lay the stress on translation, involving the passage of signs from one cultural environment to another. In one case (Panorama, Mid-Atlantic, 1993, by American artist Allan Sekula), the function of a ship with its cargo poised mid-Atlantic is to demystify the modern secular magic of the global commodity, insisting as it does on the 'making-visible' of the underlying forces of society (81). Other artists represent camps and all their avatars (waiting areas at airports, detention camps for refugees...) as the epitome of displacement in the contemporary world.

John Potts’s other forte in this study lies in his command of the concept of privacy and its evolution over the last thousand years or so. In the last four chapters, Potts narrates the passage from ancient and medieval societies in which privacy did not exist except as a form of exclusion or punishment to bourgeois societies in which the dividing line between public space and private home became more and more clear-cut. One thing leading to another, the paradoxical concept of “public intimacy” (124) came into being in the course of the twentieth century. The democratisation of the camera as a technological tool contributed to the emergence of a culture dependent on exposure. By the early twenty-first century, private life ceased to be a value to be protected, but a phenomenon to be willingly displayed with a view to attaining media exposure. The display of profile photos on the web, especially on Facebook, has contributed to the creation of “the second self”, whereby individuals may construct an improved, idealised self, composed of responses to reactions from others on the net.

This sketchy summary of The New Time and Space will inevitably fail to do full justice to the density of information and scientific expertise of John Potts, who in only 157 pages (not counting the notes) provides an impressive panorama of early twenty-first-century communication technology. Deliberately avoiding a 'conclusion', this open-ended
analysis emphasises that media studies are not only a fast-evolving field, but that technology may blur the dividing lines between time, space, (voluntary) exposure and performance. Potts nevertheless refrains from depicting our present world as a doomed one, full of potentially dystopian signs. He never looks back nostalgically to once “happier” days. The major difference between the early twenty-first century and the proponents of progress who lived a hundred years ago is that faith in the future is no longer synonymous with a blind confidence in industrial progress it is to go hand in hand with clean and environment-friendly objects like e-books and online newspapers. Our time is a montage of fractures in which interruption and distraction are the norm, but most present-day artists have found ways of transcending this new reality through a highly creative, thought-provoking use of sampling and video art.

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