

Informatic Spatiality, Electronic Agency, Cybernetic Structure, and the New People Power: Occupy Movements at Play in Network Systems

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Introduction: The Year 2011

It has barely just past, but 2011 already is petrified solidly in print by Time magazine as “The Year of the Protester.” In keeping with its active policing of symbolic and social order by “putting a face” on “the force of the year” who typically is a known person, the magazine’s cover image of “the Protester” is at the same time ambiguous and distinctive. An androgynous, hooded, veiled, long-necked visage with arched brows and piercing eyes, Time’s depiction of “the Protester” recounts how he and/or she roamed from “the Arab Spring to Athens from Occupy Wall Street to Moscow.” Resurrecting this street-fighting historical agent of social change from the deep sleep induced by Time’s own eager embrace of Fukuyama’s “End of History” thesis during the Clinton years, the magazine’s editors spin up here their own just-in-time sociology. That is, the years from 1991 to 2011 are now another now closed chapter in time: “credit was easy, complacency and apathy were rife, and street protests looked like emotional sideshows—obsolete, quaint, the equivalent of cavalry to mid-20th-century war . . . massive and effective street protest; was a global oxymoron until—suddenly, shockingly—starting exactly a year ago, it became the defining trope of our times. And the protester once again became a maker of history” (Time, December 14, 2011).

Most importantly, however, Time asserts the revolutions of 2011 were marked distinctively by “their use of the Internet and social media . . . In the Middle East and North Africa, in Spain and Greece and New York, social media and smart phones did not replace face-to-face bonds and organization but helped to enable and turbocharge them . . . New Media and blogger are now quasi synonyms for protest and protester” (Time, December 14, 2011). In other words, an “occupation” of many cyberspaces out on the Net’s systems of digital communication by “the Protester” preceded, and made possible, the protesters’ occupations of 2011 – from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park.

Such instant sociological analysis, however, with its easy celebration, or lazy dread, of liberatory ebullience in the streets, freedom-seeking through Facebook or crowd-sourced instant reportage of brutal state repression with mobile phone videos, misses the meaning of these movements, even as the mass media struggle to document their size, scope, and significance. From Tahrir Square in Cairo to battles for Benghazi, Libya, from summer riots in London to occupying Wall Street in New York City, from anarchy in Athens to angry voters in Moscow’s Red Square, Time’s need to find a 1789, an 1848, a 1917, or a 1968 amid 2011, in fact, ends up ultimately trashing the protesters’ aspirations for liberation. Due to the protesters’ alleged lack of clear demands, decisive agenda or heroic role-models (arguably one could find a plethora of each for every uprising), Time frets when will the protesters effectively focus their energies? The “Year of the Protester” proves to instead be – under Time’s benevolent but bored tolerance – simply a journalist’s hook for documenting many big protests of the year, which then tries to quilt together innumerable revolutions that do not even have the colors, fabrics or ideologies – touted in many other uprisings since

1989 – as their brands, logos or tags.

While they are in many ways as unplanned and spontaneous, as the capital markets are now overplanned and scheduled, the various Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movements in the U.S.A. do emulate the “horizontal” ties of many-to-many, P2P, or open source network relations against the “vertical” hierarchies of one-to-most, leader-follower or closed source bureaucratic systems. Inspired in part by David Graeber’s anarchistic readings (Graeber 2011; 2007; and 2001) of communal order from Betafo in Madagascar and the social construction of monetized debt since the times of Neolithic city-states, OWS networks have been pushing anarchic affinity to demonetize, definancialize and delimit the scope of both paralyzing debt and growing financialization so deeply embedded today in America’s social inequalities (Lowenstein 2011: 69-73).

Ironically, however, the cybernetic structures pulled together by the Protester’s use of social media, smart phone and street-level blogging as new political tools typify the brittle and mutable bonds of advanced informational society, which online stock exchanges and dark pool capitalists have also adopted as their own. In such environments, as Lyotard notes, no single self amounts to much; but, at the same time,

no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young and old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at “nodal points” of specific communication circuits, however, tiny these may be (Lyotard 1984: 15).

The collaborative/communicative clusters of such mobile cybernetic social formations, then, occupy fluid zones of unstable relationality between fleeting communication and enduring institution at the nodal points of neoliberal individuality.

Despite the digital divide, the density, mobility and rapidity of Internet connectivity in many locales have created the opportunity for free-floating individuals to coalesce into more decisive points of power and critical nodes of knowledge at the interface of virtual and actual spaces (Luke 2000: 3-23). Rather than people flocking to a handful of centralized net portals, more ubiquitous computing, smart devices and embedded intelligence enable persons to become members of amorphous but active collectives. Still, all individuals then can operate as multimodal portraits to networked connectivity through cybernetic platforms hosted by Twitter, CNN, Google, BBC, Yahoo, Al-Jazeera or Facebook. The ramifications of these subtle shifts from “the personal is the political” to “the person can be a portal” to “the portal is the political” flow under the yet to be completely determined horizons of symbolic, social and semiotic consciousness, which Time’s figure of “the Protester” struggles to characterize in its depiction and nomination of the members of such militant multitudes as their “Person of the Year.”

A quarter century ago, the ambivalent influences of informationalization began a retrofitting of “huge masses of abstract or undifferentiated labor to the ethereal information machines which supplant industrial production” (Guattari & Negri 1985: 34). There are many tendencies unfolding here. Through the revolutionary rhetoric and activity of informational firms in the 1970s and 1980s, the deep architecture and sociotechnical engineering for virtuality has deterritorialized, disintegrated and degraded many practices of most people’s once very grounded, localized and enriching labor and leisure all-at-once. Activism beyond borders becomes both possible and more common (Keck and Sikkink 1998). By fusing the workplace and homeplace – telecommuting, 24x7 on-call duties, whole libraries on electronic readers, paid labor as unpaid labor’s aftermath – the integration of programmed lifestyle practices into the sociologies of “friendedness” on Facebook or other social media site as ideal social individuality has deterritorialized everyday living in a manner that “signifies work and life are no longer separate; society is collapsed into the logic and processes of capitalist development” (Guattari & Negri 1985: 34). Given these mercantile predispositions, it also is no surprise that contemporary rhetoric labels them as fractions: the 99 percent and the 1 percent.

Usually it is presented as a positive retraining via “life-long learning,” or a useful redirecting of work into flex-time hours, but informational society has made more clear how “modern work was creating a global, infernal disciplinary apparatus, in which the constraints were invisible: educational and information constraints which placed the worker at all times under the sway of capital” (Guattari & Negri 1985: 34). The migration of management, logistics and then labor itself into virtual spaces is captured in code: through hypertextual marked up languages in the World Wide Web and other code systems, Wall Street and Main Street as informatics spatial systems began their own occupations of the noninformatic lifeworld. Indeed, “as the production process remade society in its own image, that high degree of abstraction was transferred to social life” (Guattari & Negri 1985: 34).

As the virtualities of My Space, and then Facebook or Google + become a virtual point of personal production

and preproduction, the concrete actualities of “my own space” dissipates. Guattari argues, “there always exists a time in the ordination of social space when the dimension of the face intervenes to delimit what is legitimate from what is not” (2011: 75). This force of “faciality,” in turn, often generates/operates/activates a series of apparatuses for steering perception, behavior and cognition via Time-like “facialized consciousness.” Everybody then can “become” somebody, and transmit his/her face, voice, text, image worldwide over the networks of YouTube, eBay, Google + or Facebook – all of which simultaneously capacitate, circulate and contour the mutable facialities of agency in cybernetic structures. New freedoms are possible, but they have both a bright and dark side (Morozov 2011) whose fullest potential for cultural, economic or political liberation is still yet to be proven.

II. Informatic Practices and Spatiality

Informatic technologies do not operate autonomously or discretely. They are extremely material, and not ethereally immaterial, in their composition. Hence, the systems of contemporary informatics, as they intermesh with the circuits of commodity production/consumption, should move one to track how fully cyberspaces amalgamate both: “(1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things,” and, “(2) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thought, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1988: 18). These conjoined technologies of production and the self fuse in “the new media” sustaining virtual environments. Nonetheless, global service workers in the worldwide banking, finance, insurance and real estate businesses are pushing such human units of production to their failure point in the grids of 24x7 labor. These pressures give the spatiality of global exchange much of its “winner take all” quality in what OWS groups see as today’s war of the 99 percent with the 1 percent.

Robust face-to-face interactions between human beings, once more enmeshed in network power, can become more than online events between digital beings (Carter 1998). Hence, physical systems with well-proven redundancies, engineered disconnects, tested safeguards and fixed practices are supplanted by brittle clusters of unstable code in fragile virtual organizations with more total integration; locatable material sites in real space under identifiable, albeit perhaps not effective, governmental control – banks, stock exchanges, libraries, schools, public records, social centers – are displaced by mutable cyberspatial sites to “download content” or receive “user services” under much less or very little governmental oversight (Luke 1996). Today the World Wide Web, and all of the networks of networks of the Internet that operate beside, behind or beneath it in the dark or light domains of the Net, are constituting elaborate e-structures whose e-haviors – particularly those rooted in e-commerce – are acquiring a sui generis metanational quiddity in e-materiality. The e-material world is not immaterial or dematerialized, but its foundations, forms and flows are harder to trace by just anyone (Turkle 2011). Nonetheless, the social individualities of these domains’ e-haviors are recontouring behaviors off-line.

When online in networks, one becomes as Lyotard foresaw “a post through which various kinds of messages pass,” and, as such, “no one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent” (Lyotard 1984: 15), as the protester’s activities exemplify. Informatic spatiality as a zone of resistance forms with such new language games, and their grammars and narratives increasingly legitimize within the larger acceptance of informationalization as a basis for many social relations from first job interviews to teleconference weddings to webcast funerals. No one forces the willing users of informatic technologies to employ e-readers, wireless mobile devices, cloud computing, online learning, remote desktops, open sources or digital money. The forms of these shared interactions are not the entirety of social relations, but their uses are encouraged, in part, to combat collective entropy, create novel associations, increase overall performativity and exemplify the promise of connectivity as people go mobile and on-line. In turn, despite the robust utility of older technologies and behaviors – from codex books, face-to-face banking, brick-and-mortar stores and in-person services, many of the material things for, and physical sites of, F2F work, are being eclipsed, if not ignored or even junked, by the cybercollective swarming together and apart through the flows of informatic spatiality.

Even though everyone with Internet access or a wireless mobile device currently can be caught up, as bodies and souls, within some sort of either failing or functional face-to-face political system, their civic capabilities for

exercising certain specific practices of governance tied to rule-making, rule-applying or rule-adjudication offline usually do not map over to the subpolitical domains of online technics. Democracy offline can be the inertial historic momentum of older institutions bringing bureaucratic services only to some, the engine of collective inaction mostly for many others or, worse, a designated audience for mainly endless spectacles of quasi-theatrical scandal to all in this or that territorial domain. For a generation, many social theorists have claimed that any new decisive revolutions will be made globally and locally thanks to the machinations of telematic global forces, like Verizon, Microsoft, Apple or IBM, as Beck maintains, “under the cloak of normality” (1992: 186). “In contemporary discussions,” as Beck also suggests, “the ‘alternative society’ is no longer expected to come from parliamentary debates on new laws, but rather from the application of microelectronics, genetic technology, and information media” (1992: 223). Network power and cybernetic structure delimit both the scope such informatic spatiality and the sites of electronic agency (Abbate 1999), but now the alternative society and its members are being cast as “the protesters” of 2011.

In the networks of power shaping the spatialities of work and leisure, flexibilization rules. Thanks to mobile wireless devices – phones, tablets, ultrabooks – and network connectivity, workers and consumers essentially become as modular, fragmented, or cellular quanta of time or activity as their devices allow. At the outer limit of informatic spatiality, workers are paid for temporary, partial, on-demand services at rates below a living wage needed to subsist well in many given place. Similarly, consumers increasing pay for incomplete, fleeting, on-demand goods at prices falling in the foam of continuous competition. Mobile phones match the tasks of modular labor, cellular consumerism and just-in-time markets in mutable zones of service, sites of work or settings of prosumerism (fusing consumption and production in algorithmic practices), destroying the last limits in many lifeworlds against system performativity. Cyberspace and internet time promise near limitless productivity of connected, embedded, and accelerated intelligence as the goods and services of cybernetic structure and electronic agency colonize everyday lifeworlds. Yet, the quality and quantity of those goods also often rise and fall without rhyme or reason as souped-up market transactions in milliseconds enable speculators to gamble for profits in real-time on-line.

Informatic spatiality transposes behaviors into bits, and bits flowing as behaviors generate informatic spatiality. Subjects acting as bits can reach out, touch someone, write to everyone, video anyone, organize something, and then reconstitute those everyday activities through both embodied human acts and remotely piloted non-human artifacts (Luke 1995: 91-107). These changes make cyberwarfare, digital identity theft, cyberbullying, electronic industrial espionage, cybercrime, digital infrastructure sabotage and cybersurveillance all inevitable. Because of these virtual clusters of operational performativity, one should no longer talk about the Net “and” politics. Instead, the Net is politics (Luke 1996: 109-133). Despite those who defend the often-liberating possibilities of cybernetic structures, their codes are essentially grids for types of guided positive freedoms that become possible only within, and because of, information and communication technologies (ICTs). Not long ago, a rich human life was the one freest from toil and travail for hours, days or weeks. Today, the affluence of the one percent rests upon glorifying work done 24x7x52 in the relentless pursuit of profit perfection.

Informational society’s cybernetic structure and electronic agency, as Lefebvre suggests, directs attention to “spatial practice,” because such activity materially “secretes that society’s space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction” (1991: 38). In today’s integrated world capitalist order, the spatial practice of network power “embodies a close association, within perceived space, between daily reality (daily routine) and urban reality (the routes and networks that which link up the spaces set aside for work, ‘private’ life and leisure” in the mental and material realms of life” (1991: 38). These materialities are simultaneously foundational and superstructural. Since their perceived spatial practices also express “representations of space,” which are the dominant order of society and production, one finds “conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers. . . all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived” (1991: 38) going live as code. Finally, informatic spatiality delves into “representational spaces,” or “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and users. . . this is the dominated--and hence passively experienced--space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (1991: 39). The behaviors of Occupy Wall Street, and other nomadic camps of “the Protester,” track the e-havior of the protesters swarming social spatiality on the Net.

With such cyberstructures generating more of the basic registers of everyday spatiality, the protester has leveraged this interplay of practice, thought and activity. While its codes may offer nothing but an ever-changing flux of sign value, they still matter. Such meanings are “complicitous and always opaque,” but they also are “the best means for the global social order to extend its immanent and permanent rule to all individuals” (Baudrillard 1996: 196). Growing amidst every city and town is there a new evolving public sphere, or an i-habitat, fabricated from

cybernetic structures and filled with the rushing flow of electronic agents? Virilio asserts there is,

in fact, there now exists a media nebula whose reality goes well beyond the frontiers of the ghettos, the limits of metropolitan agglomerations. The megalopolis is not Mexico City or Cairo or Calcutta, with their tens of millions of inhabitants, but this sudden temporal convergence that unites actors and viewers from the remotest regions, the most disparate nations, the moment a significant event occurs here or there (Virilio 2000: 69)

Globalism can appear as a strike from above to serve those way ahead or far outside, but it also is felt as another side of globality as those below, inside and behind converge in the shared i-habitational spaces of networked power.

Despite the Protester's acts of autonomy, the micropolitics of subjectivity creation appear to be driven by "the functions of opening and reclosing signifying assemblages" (Guattari 2011: 79), which now are more frequently now cybernetic structures, electronic agents, network powers. Informatic spatiality simulates systemic stability as operational perfection as a universal resonator to unify the diverse, heterogeneous, localist tendencies of subjects worldwide in some common web of evaluative paradigmatic relations, like the image-driven "friending" work of social media. Giving the Protester "a face," then, is important.

Informatic spatiality, nevertheless, is all about performativity. It tends to install "its systems of neutralization and equivalence of faciality-occurrences against individuals insofar as they prove to have faciality traits comparable with the capitalistic economy of flows. There are certain heads lost that do not pass in the system. It is necessary to hide them, cut them off, make them over, or better yet transform them from the inside" (Guattari 2011: 79). Hence, the networked powers invested in informatic spatialities can deny service, end existing connectivity, issue endless upgrades, or simply recognize as paradigmatic what otherwise would be irrelevant background noise. Headlining the activist antics of "the Protester" in Time, or celebrating the many anonymous Guy Fawkes-masked members of militant multitudes from innumerable OWS-groups, then, pivots upon a moment of seeming mass autonomy. In the global mass media, from the apparent Arab Springs to the allegedly Occupied Wall Streets, pre-programmed modes of electronic agency actually appear to spread faster and the planned cybernetic structures sustaining them definitely dig deeper into everyday lifeworlds to stabilize these evolving new worldwide webs of power.

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