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THE DYNAMIC LANDSCAPE OF VIRTUAL SPACE EXPLORED THROUGH A MULTIDISCIPLINARY KALEIDOSCOPE

C.-I. REZEANU[1] C. COMAN[2]

Abstract: *A social life disconnected from space it`s difficult to conceive. However, in sociology, the concept of space is still underdeveloped, missing from theories, dictionaries, or encyclopaedias. For more than a century, sociologists have assumed space as a passive scene for social actions, and implied as material, static, continuous and linearly travelled. In the new context of information society, economic globalisation, and postmodern hyper-reality, scholars question the conventional definitions of space. We believe sociologists will arrive at a more nuanced understanding of space, by taking an interdisciplinary approach, and focusing on how space is lived. We use virtual space as a proxy for understanding how complex space can be, and frame it through the concept of "cultural landscape" to capture its relational, dynamic, and socially constructed dimensions. Our aim is to illustrate the dynamism, versatility, and fluidity of virtual space by moving from one discipline and theoretical perspective to the other and interpreting the newly configured landscapes. We show that virtual space is a discontinuous imaginary process, organised in networks with multiple layers, experienced as a journey into a narrative text or as a "consensual hallucination", where the evanescence of the body and the anonymity of the self boost the quest for authenticity, self-discovery, self-disclosure and intimacy. Nonetheless, virtual space, due to its potential to equalise statuses, minimise authority and multiply the audiences of messages, is becoming the enabler of Habermasian communicative rationality, rousing moral consciousness and triggering civic actions.*

Key words: *relational sociology, spatial turn, communicative rationality, cultural landscape, virtual communication.*

1. Premises

One cannot conceive the social phenomena and processes outside of their spatial dimension. Yet, in sociology, there is no agreement of a definition for the concept of space. In the last decades, the "spatial turn" of social sciences has envisioned space as a social product, influencing and being influenced by social interactions (Löw, 2016). In one of the most cited recent sociological articles (with over 1300 citations), Gieryn (2000) pledges for "a space for place in sociology". The author advocates surpassing the conventional survey

[1] University of Bucharest, rezeanucatalina@gmail.com
[2] Transilvania University of Braşov, claudiu.coman@unitbv.ro

tactic of introducing only some geographical variables in social studies and making comparative analyses of the different spatial instances of social processes. Instead, he recommends studying how multiple dimensions of space (geographical location, material space and symbolic space), involved in interactions, influence or are influenced by social structures. Similarly, in her recent book, Löw (2016) makes an essential sociological contribution by offering an alternative to the problem of overcoming the limited space approach focused only on its material dimension and understood as a "container" of actions. She approaches space not as a simple duality separating material from social but as a synthesis between physical dimension and symbolic dimension mediated by the body (human actions and practices). The author defines space as "a relational arrangement of social goods and living beings at places" (Löw, 2016, p. xiv), and place as "a location, a position that can be specially named, generally geographically marked" (Löw, 2016, p. 168), playing an active role in social practices and identification tactics.

The sociological conceptualization of space could be nuanced by considering the spatial theories from other disciplines of social sciences. Social geographers made another essential contribution by introducing the concept of "cultural landscape" (Sauer, 1925) to define the product of complex interactions between people and environment. Cultural landscape reveals how particular social groups live the space, because groups express through space their world vision and how they would like others to be regarded by others (Cosgrove, 1998). Anthropologists differentiate among: (1) "landscape" as the visible part of human environment; (2) "cultural landscape" as the environment influenced by human activity; and (3) "memory landscape" as "spaces which are open and hybrid and are permanently modified by the investment of significance" (Fischer, 2012, p. 331-332). From a different perspective, Appadurai (1990), by focusing on the cultural dimension of globalization, theorises landscapes as manifestations of the global cultural flux. He distinguishes five types of dynamic landscapes produced by globalization: "ethnoscapes", "ideoscapes", "mediascapes", "finanscapes", and "technoscapes". The author's conclusion is the disjunction between these landscapes, implying that, presently, these fluxes no longer overlap. Therefore, introducing the concept of "landscape" into sociological studies would mean putting the accent on how space is experienced (lived space) and its dynamic features.

We live in the informational society and this historical context influences the relationship between the microsocial and macrosocial realms. The explosion of Internet usage has amplified the spatial connectivity of spread out geographical regions and has configured a new virtual space of interaction. If, in the industrial period, the capital and labour were essential resources for social change, in the post-industrial era, information and knowledge took over this role (Bell, 1973 *apud* Dillman, 2000) and the unpredictable development of informational technology amplified it. These rapid changes have determined scholars to problematize to what extent the growth of dependence in human societies on informational technologies impacts macrosocial systems, microsocial behaviour, and mezzosocial mechanisms of interactions. They highlighted various consequences of this transfiguration: the internationalisation of work and education, the development of participatory democracies, the overcoming of the boundaries of traditional communities through the emergence of transnational identities, the reduction of the importance of local spaces, and the emergence of creative classes (Dillman, 2000).

This paper builds on Löw`s (2016) ideas about space as a theoretically underdeveloped concept, rarely introduced in sociological theory, and about the opportunity of studying how virtual space reveals this complexity, helping sociologists transcend the conventional

reductionist perspective on space as a material container of social action. This inquiry takes hints from some of our previously published or unpublished works: the Bachelor`s thesis "Virtual Communication: between empowerment and dehumanisation", the Master`s thesis "The Blog: personal branding, impression management and narrative construction of self in the virtual space", the PhD dissertation "Couple living space in metropolitan area of Brașov", and the book "Public Sphere and Political Image". It is a re-reading of our past ideas in the light of contemporary transformations of space and the social sciences` body of knowledge about space. The aim of the article is to reflect on the nature of contemporary space for social theory, by focusing on virtual space, interpreted as landscape and analysed from some different theoretical discourses from social sciences disciplines. By using the metaphor of kaleidoscope for social science disciplines and theoretical orientations, we illustrate how the versatility of virtual space is revealed by moving from one angle to the other and interpreting the newly configured landscapes. We acknowledge that our brief exploration is neither exhaustive nor systematic. We try to launch some insights in the contemporary sociological conversation about the implications of focusing on the complexity, dynamism, and fluidity of space.

2. Virtual Space in its Contexts

The rise and spread of the Internet network were unexpected and difficult to predict. It begins with computer mediated communication. The emergence of virtual space lies in human mind`s capacity to create imaginary worlds and territories and the capacity of information and communication technology to stimulate new perceptions of reality. The virtual environment has appeared as an alternative to natural environment and Internet communication, through forums and virtual communities have shown how virtual communication overcomes the human boundaries in time, space, and identity. By the end of the 1960s, the psychedelic counterculture arose as a denial of the authorities` right to confine social life. It influenced how technology changed from a control apparatus into a "new nervous system for a free society", via an individualistic ethos preaching that "society frees itself only if it frees the minds of the people" (Matei, 2005). Presently, 49.2% of the world population has access to the Internet, 76.6% in Europe, and 56.3% in Romania (IWS, 2017). On a long-term, the future seems to head towards diversifying and intricating technological instruments, favouring the "Internet of Things" and "Big Data". The present is preparing a future of technological connection outspreading from computers and mobile devices to household equipment ("smart homes"), cars ("smart cars"), local, national and global infrastructure ("smart cities", "e-governance", "digital economies").

2.1. Virtual Communication and Virtual Identity in the Context of Late Modernity or Postmodernity

Late modernization brings a series of changes triggering identity dilemmas. Giddens (1991) theorises that there are three major mutations in the contemporary period: (1) time and space are reorganised - being separated from each other; (2) social relationships are more abstract and reflexive - social life is liberating from pre-established practices through the continuous analysis of social activities in light of scientific knowledge of the experts; (3) self-fulfilment values are becoming salient - narcissism grows, pure relationships emerge, and the awareness of uncertainties and risks increases. Thus, the person is

confronted with four key dilemmas: (a) self-fragmentation versus self-unifying - the convolution of social life stimulating only particular facets of the self versus the multiplication of options, the prominence of creativity and pressure for coherent self-identity work; (b) the lack of control over one's life versus the control over one's life – the alienation and the feeling of helplessness in the face of a complex universe versus the access to multiple opportunities for self-accomplishment; (c) the authority versus the uncertainty - the traditional unique recipes of a good life versus the emergence of competing alternative lifestyles increase axiological confusion; (d) the personalization versus the standardized consumption - the consumer society is a source of diversity of choice and identity display, but also a uniformity tool.

Baudrillard (1994, 1991) postulates the death of reality. He asserts, in postmodernity, the overwhelming abstractions and multiplicity of meanings transform the entire reality into a virtual one, called hyper-reality. In this context, the world builds itself on models or simulations that have no correspondent to the physical reality, but only to its own reality (a world of signs that take each other as reference). In this universe called "simulacra", the Kantian ways to reach truth - time, space, and causality - are no longer necessary, their place is taken by the perceived object, which prevails over the known subject the same way the map prevails over the territory and the system of signs prevails over its ontological references.

The postmodern relationship of the self with the other can ease the understanding of the idiosyncrasies of virtual communication. Gullome and Baudrillard (2002) assume that, in a world of material abundance, authentic communication with "the other" becomes a challenge and a rarity. As a primary characteristic, in search of otherness, the self tends to deform reality, filling it with the imaginary, which means that alterity is more likely constructed than found. The construction of otherness is not an issue of distance, but more of passing a new border, which can be completely imaginary and invisible. A second characteristic is that knowing the other always presumes the existence of a core of lack of communicability, implying that if everything is common or shared between two beings, the communication would no longer be needed. In the words of the authors, any communication relies on its contrary or on the disjunction between the participants, and virtual environment facilitates this process. A third characteristic of postmodern communication is the increase of anonymity, understood as a rupture, not only of the feeling of self but of social context and the entire sense of reality. This rupture frees imagination and encourages the confessions of phantoms, as a way of distancing from oneself to construct and reconstruct identity. Being anonymised, the self is deprived of all instances of external control, having the option to oscillate between dishonesty and truth by mixing reality with fiction. Also, hiding one's self can strengthen the bonds with the other`s selves, due to experiencing an apparent absence of oneself which could lead, in authors` view, to unexpected findings of truth about the authenticity of self and/or otherness.

Gullome and Badurillard (2002) unify these characteristics in the concept of "spectral communication". In this type of communication, the corporeal presence is discrete, evanescent and rouses the fear of transgression, fragmentation or identity loss, while the lack of interdiction increases self-display. In spectral communication, freeing oneself from the processes of identification can lead to the decomposition of the self in multiple facets that creates the possibility of selective articulations with the other, through spread out components. The communicators accept this splitting of the self between the outside and the intimate worlds because virtual identity helps them experience the diversity and

complexity of who they are and who the others might be. Briefly, in spectral communication, by transgressing the boundaries between real and imaginary, self-fragmentation and anonymity help constructing an authentic intimacy with self and alterity.

The experience of virtual communication implies looking for the other, the one we know we cannot find, as an escape exercise from the limits of our own mind. Generally, virtual communication could be compared to a trip, through which, by passing through the other, you leave yourself behind. Particularly, the virtual experience can have a powerful textual part, its feeling being similar to literary experience, of communication between the self of the reader and the otherness of the author. At the same time, the experience of the virtual space and virtual communication are ways of coming back to the self, self-knowledge and self-transformation. This comparison can be better understood through the ideas formulated by Sherry (1995), in what was going to become one of the reference books on the theme of virtual space. Adopting a psychological perspective, the author starts from the premise that the postmodern self is multiple, fluid and heterogeneous and is looking for an opening towards other worlds, like the virtual one, where the user builds complementary identities to the real I, or extensions of itself. According to the model, all the hidden facets of the forced socialized-self get released in the virtual world, as the anonymity offers the users protection and possibility of transforming, of playing with the unknown and unexplored facets of their personality. Hence, the “imaginary” space (online experiences) allows users to extend what is conventionally named the “real” self and the “real” identity (offline experiences), by constantly searching, articulating and challenging their unknown components and testing new combinations.

3. Virtual Space in its Manifestations

In the domain of cultural geography, Mizrach (1996) identifies virtual space with “cyberspace” or “non-space”, framed as a cultural landscape. This kind of landscape produces "consensual hallucinations" and creates immersive experiences in a computer generated world. The author shows that virtual space is a cultural landscape because it is built from the meanings and the values of those that have conceived or use it and because it is perceived and lived gradually as a landscape. Thus, virtual landscape can be mapped through cultural characteristics such as: world representations and world views, ways of navigation, level of interactivity, approximation rate to offline reality (how the actions from the virtual space are of similar consequences to the ones outside it).

From a psychological perspective, Sherry (1995) argues that living the virtual space simultaneously amplifies the affective and the cognitive side of the self. The author shows that virtual space facilitates an entanglement of words and emotions, the lack of physical space being compensated through feelings` enhancement. From the author`s viewpoint, navigating the virtual network is a profoundly cognitive act, as the users jump from a window to the other by passing through one region of the mind to the other. In the words of the author, online reality reconstructs the offline reality ideally and ideationally, by strengthening it and reducing its necessary valence to survive at a conceptual level. On the other hand, the author examines how virtual space stimulates the cognitive side of the self, because in a virtual environment, nobody can survive based on pre-established concepts, being constrained to create new ones to identify the new experiences. More specifically, in the experience of the virtual space, adaptation and modelling are the conditions of staying alive, the users being asked to choose and know what they want. We

conclude in accordance with the author that, in the virtual space, the passiveness of the reading experience is not allowed, the users being asked permanently to master the information, to defragment it, and to reconstruct it in new contexts.

Applying a relational perspective, Löw (2016) analyzes the role of the early experience of virtual space during the children`s primary socialisation in their future conceptualisation of space. By interacting with the virtual environment, children could understand that the space is not only an experience that envelopes them uniformly but it can also present discontinuities. The author shows that the simulated reality in video games helps children to learn to conceive space starting from their corporeal experience, mediated by the computer, and guided by their imagination. Because more and more users experience virtual space during early childhood, later in life, they might come more easily to the conclusion that space is more of a mental and emotional experience, rather than a material support for their actions. Similarly, the author suggests that learning from early childhood to navigate the Internet network of sites with a hypertext structure helps users represent space not only as a visual, static and surrounding landscape but also as a discontinuous complex structure of layers of information that intersect in a network configuration, which is travelled not linearly but in jumps.

3.1. The Characteristics of Virtual Communication

From a critical and pragmatic view, Habermas (2000) evidenced the hegemony of instrumental rationality in modern society. Assuming a present dominated by the scientific and technological rhetoric, he proposes the communicative rationality as an alternative to instrumental rationality. The author tries to unify scientific facts and ethic values by recuperating the rationality of symbolic interactions and by diminishing the differences of power between talkers (*apud* Billings & Jennings, 2000, p. 539-546). Habermas postulates that the “worldsystem” (the market logic of profit and bureaucracy as the basis for actions' coordination) is tempting to colonise the “lifeworld” (the culture as source of significance, solidarity, and identity, and as the basis for reaching consensus), which generates anomie on a macro-social plan and alienation on a micro-social one. The theory of communicative action illustrates the “linguistic turn” in social sciences, suggesting that people can coordinate their actions at the language level, if they adopt a pragmatic attitude of mutual understanding based on acceptable justifications. Applying communicative rationality to the virtual space, the Internet users can reach consensus and cooperate, only if they manage to find repertories of shared meaning based on which their given justifications are acceptable, and if they follow ethical discourse rules.

From a psychological approach, the particularities of the virtual space enable a more intense and authentic communication. Centring on the sources of the online messages, Suler (2004) identified the “online disinhibition effect” produced by the following mechanisms: (1) minimisation of authority (“We're all equal”); (2) invisibility (“Nobody can see me”); (3) asynchronicity (“See you later”); (4) solipsistic introjection (“It's all in my head”); (5) dissociative imagination (“It's just a game”): (6) dissociative anonymity (“You don't know me”). The author concludes that virtual space is a psychological extension of the internal world of the user, which can simulate the processes of projection, expression and transfer - processes which can alter the sensory experience and can induce a state of dreaming. Later, centring on the technological potential of the communication environment, Suler (2012) synthesised 10 features of the virtual space: (1) “Temporal flexibility” - communication can

be desynchronized (through e-mail, news groups), unlike face to face interactions where time goes by fast, in the virtual world, users can choose their own time of response and can take as much time as they want to elaborate the most appropriate responses; (2) "Social multiplicity" - the Internet can connect any message emitter with a constantly multiplying number receptors, which may be targeted with different instruments for search engine optimisation; (3) "Reduced sensations"- today's audio-video instruments that support virtual communication limit physical interaction which is specific to face-to-face communication (hugs, handshakes, etc.); (4) "Primacy of textual communication" - by writing their own thoughts and reading the other's thoughts, online communicators apply a different cognitive style from the one used for offline talking and listening, allowing them to be more expressive, subtle or organized; (5) "Identity flexibility" - hidden behind the screen and protected by anonymity, online users are empowered to act more authentically, to present only specific facets of their identity or to configure completely new imaginary identities; (6) "Altered perceptions" - technological equipment mediating online communication can generate altered states of consciousness, similar to a dream (mental melding with the other, surreal feelings of omnipotence to create objects and characters); (7) "Equalised status" – "the democracy of the Internet" creates the potential of equal chances for expressing one's opinions, identities, and abilities; (8) "Transcended space" - virtual space surpasses the limits of geographical space bringing together users whose sociocultural differences are conventionally hard to pass; (9) "Recordability" – all interactions and their effects are archived, allowing users to verify and reinterpret them after accumulating new information; (10) "Media disruption" - or "the black hole experiences of cyberspace", - the user's dependence on the proper work of technological instruments, which can be disrupted by hardware and software malfunctions or by Internet disconnects, helping users to acknowledge their lack of control because virtual environment is unpredictable.

3.2. The Characteristics of Virtual Civism

The revolution of informational and communicational technology has marked the passing to a new way of configuring reality. The widespread access to the Internet and mobile devices (phones, tablets) has enabled instant and affordable connection, transforming the world into a mobile "global village", permanently connected. We cannot clearly predict the future of this reality overflowing with virtual elements, but we expect a larger influence of online communication in more and more dimensions of the socio-politico-economic realm.

The unprecedented and unlimited development of "social media" had triggered a major paradigm shift. In the context of the "Arab spring", Facebook and Twitter, the two dominant global social platforms, have become the key examples of "virtual empowerment", proving the potential of the Internet to mobilise citizens for large social movements that changed history. The revolutions from the Arab world are helping us understand that the realm of communication "as we knew it" is irreversibly changing. The important role that social media platforms have played in the US presidential elections in the last decade, gave us the first signs of this transformation. Other examples come from Romanian context, where, in the beginning of 2017, the unprecedented reaction of the civic society to the sudden changes in the code of law was built on social media and evolved into ample protests nationwide. In the beginning, political analysts were sceptical about the chance of success of Internet electoral or civic campaigns, pointing to the reduced number of users that online messages could reach. They treated Internet communication as static,

similar to traditional ways of mass-communication, ignoring the dynamic and conversational potential to amplify the propagation of the message towards online users. Today, specialists agree to the significance of virtual dimension of civic and political communication.

Social activism was strongly influenced by the rise and development of virtual space. A proof in this sense are the recent changes brought by the modernization of administrative and political processes, by the spread of the electronic vote, online petitions, online electoral campaigns, and by the revolutions and protests organized on social media platforms. Applying a Habermasian perspective, virtual space becomes an empowering tool to reconfigure and make the public sphere more accessible in general and participatory democracy in particular. This does not mean that virtual civism is the panacea to overcome the barriers of local democracy culture, but these processes continue to depend on the socio-historical paths of civic implication and participation. Still, we appreciate that reforming the public administration through implementing E-government platforms and developing online tools to support institutional transparency are a favourable condition for a modern and postmodern civic culture, which will become more and more influential in the future.

4. From Space of Flows to Relational Orderings of Things

The last century was tributary to the neomarxist macro-social approach of space, called political economy of space. Exponent of this perspective, Castells (1998) starts from the premise that space is not the mirror of society, but society itself. The mechanisms of social development influence the spatial shape of society ("social production of space"), while people, through social practices, can also produce and reproduce space. The author argues that we live in a global informational economy based on virtual communication networks and fluxes ("space of flows"), where the importance of local space is diminishing ("space of places"). In other words, globalization has created a new society of global network, where the traditional local space of human establishments is being replaced by a space of multiple fluxes of capital, information, interactions, symbols and technologies. Space of flows represents "the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows", where flows are understood as "purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society" (Castells, 1996, p.442). The author concludes that space is showing its dynamism, becoming inseparable of time, being associated with movement, flow and circulation. Also, time is compressing, everything happening instantly, mediated by informational technology (*apud* Zieleniec, 2007, p. 177-178).

From a micro-social perspective, Setha Löw (1996) proposes the concept of "social construction of space", as an alternative to the concept of "social production of space" to emphasize the phenomenological and symbolic dimensions of space. In her view, the social construction of space represents "the actual transformation of space - through people's social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting - into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning" (Löw, 1996, p. 862); while the social production of space includes "all those factors - social, economic, ideological and technological - the intended goal of which is the physical creation of the material setting" (Löw, 1996, p. 861). More recently, Martina Löw has synthesized a unique model of defining and interpreting space from a relational perspective, understood as "a relational arrangement of living beings and social goods at places" (Löw, 2016, p. 232). In this

model, space is dual: constituted in cognitive processes and manifesting in social structures; people as agents constitute space, and their actions depend on the spatial context where they manifest. Hence, space is not only static because it can also be conceived as a relation constantly produced, constructed, deconstructed, and reproduced in social relationships and local settings.

5. Concluding Remarks

Changing like in a kaleidoscope, the perspectives of interpretations of virtual space, one can discover and experience its dynamism, fluidity and versatility. The theories of postmodern self suggest that virtual space amplifies people's tendency to discover their own identity through searching for otherness. If the poststructuralist theorisation of hyper-reality shows at microsocial level the postmodern irrationality of the "simulation and simulacra", oppositely, the conceptualization of "space of flows" from the globalization period reveals the politico-economical rationality from the macrosical level which dominates the individual. The critical perspective emphasizes technological dominance, which leads to the colonization of the "lifeworld" by the "systemworld", the alternative to people`s alienation being the rationality of communicative action (based on ethical rules of understanding and argumentation). The constructivist approach of space is built on its relational character and postulates the continuous construction of its meanings through symbolic interactions. These differences and similarities among interpretations of virtual space, generated by changing the perspective, suggest space is dynamic and its fluidity could be revealed by not ignoring its "lived" dimension and the cultural landscape configured by it of configuring it.

From the perspectives presented, this article advocates for a relational approach. In the choice of this orientation, we have based our arguments on Dépelteau`s (2008) interpretations, endorsing the analysis of social relations in their dynamism, which, once stabilised and routinised, creates social structure. This approach assumes that both agency and structure are pure abstractions, and structure can be empirically studied as an effect of transactions between different socially interdependent actors. The author reminds us that the person alone cannot change social structures, but only through an emergent effect, resulted from social transactions that take place in certain spatial and temporal contexts. In every setting, people belong to a constellation of other relationships, and the power belongs neither to the individuals, nor to the structures, but is an effect of social interactions within and between them. Likewise, the characteristics of space derive from the definition of the situation, they are not univocally produced by the social structure but constructed in the relationships people engage in, where the properties of space are contextually recognized and recreated. Therefore, we recommend orienting future sociological studies towards conceptualising space as a dynamic process, conceived as a fluid relational arrangement and lived as a shared landscape, continuously modelling interactions and being modelled inside social relationships from particular cultural settings.

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