Flannery
Botanising the interface
James Donald

In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manevich defines the interface as 'a code that carries cultural messages in a variety of media', and the computer interface in particular as an articulation of the line between the human and its technological creations that allows access to 'navigable spaces'.[i] When I read this definition, drawing together as it does questions about the human, media technologies, and space, it prompted me to think about how to relate the implications of new media (for want of a better term) for my earlier research into urban space and the experiential and imaginative spaces created by the media, old and new. Might there be illuminating parallels, for example, between Walter Benjamin's account of nineteenth-century Parisian *flânerie* and the way we surf cyberspace at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

When I first asked the question in public, a colleague's fortuitous mishearing of *flânerie* as 'flannery' made me think of a passage from the Irish comic novelist Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (written in the late 1930s but not published until the late '60s). It presents the (anti-)hero's exegesis of an obscure scholar's meditations on my themes of space, technology and the embodied person.

> Of all the many striking statements made by de Selby, I do not think that any of them can rival his assertion that 'a journey is an hallucination'. The phrase may be found in the *Country Album* [n. Page 822] ... His theory, insofar as I can understand it, seems to discount the testimony of human experience and is at variance with everything I have learnt myself on many a country walk. Human existence de Selby has defined as 'a succession of static experiences each infinitely brief', a conception which he is thought to have arrived at from examining some old cinematograph films which belonged probably to his nephew. *[n. See below – JD]* From this premise he discounts the reality or truth of any progression or serialism in life, denies that time can pass as such in the accepted sense and attributes to hallucinations the commonly experienced sensation of progression as, for instance, in journeying from one place to another or even 'living'. If one is resting at A, he explains, and desires to rest in a distant place B, one can only do so by resting for infinitely brief intervals in innumerable intermediate places. Thus there is no difference essentially between what happens when one is resting at A before the start of the 'journey' and what happens when one is 'en route', i.e., resting in one or other of the intermediate places. He treats of these 'intermediate places' in a lengthy footnote. They are not, he warns us, to be taken as arbitrarily-determined points on the A-B axis so many inches or feet apart. They are rather to be regarded as points infinitely near each other yet sufficiently far apart to admit of the insertion between them of a series of other 'intermediate' places, between each of which must be imagined a series of other resting-places – not, of course, strictly adjacent but arranged so as to admit of the application of this principle indefinitely. The illusion of progression he attributes to the inability of the human brain – 'as at present developed' – to appreciate the reality of these separate 'rests', preferring to group many millions of them together and calling the result motion, an entirely indefensible and impossible procedure since even two separate positions cannot obtain simultaneously of the same body. Thus motion is also an illusion. He mentions that almost any photograph is conclusive proof of his teachings.

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Whatever about the soundness of de Selby's theories, there is ample evidence that they were honestly held and that several attempts were made to put them into practice. During his stay in England, he happened at one time to be living in Bath and found it necessary to go from there to Folkestone on pressing business. [n. See Hatchjaw's *De Selby's Life and Times*.] His method of doing so was far from conventional. Instead of going to the railway station and inquiring about trains, he shut himself up in a room in his lodgings with a supply of picture postcards of the areas which would be traversed on such a journey, together with an elaborate arrangement of clocks and barometric instruments and a device for regulating the gaslight in conformity with the changing light of the outside day. What happened in the room or how precisely the clocks and other machines were manipulated will never be known. It seems that he emerged after a lapse of seven hours convinced that he was in Folkestone and possibly that he had evolved a formula for travellers which would be extremely distasteful to railway and shipping companies. There is no record of the extent of his disillusionment when he found himself still in the familiar surroundings of Bath but one authority [n. Bassett: *Lux Mundi: A Memoir of de Selby*] relates that he claimed without turning a hair to have been to Folkestone and back again. Reference is made to a man (unnamed) declaring to have actually seen the savant coming out of a Folkestone bank on the material date.
Like most of de Selby's theories, the ultimate outcome is inconclusive.[ii]

The relevance to my argument is that De Selby's experiment, locking himself away with an archive of postcards and fiddling with time, temperature and lighting, reveals him to be a theorist of virtuality and a creator of immersive media installations *avant la lettre*. Wanting to shift from Bath and Folkestone, he conjures up a 'navigable space' through an interface that is both mechanical (clocks, barometers and gas lamps) and culturally coded (the representations in the photographs). The failure of de Selby's experiment is particularly important, as its surreal absurdities help to lay the ground for a more plausible approach to the links between technology, space and the embodied person.

De Selby's logic can be traced back to the famous paradox of Zeno's arrow.[iii] Zeno provocatively asserted that it should be logically impossible for an arrow ever to reach its target because its flight must pass through 'a sequence of points or positions that the arrow occupies one after the other'[iv] (just as de Selby defines duration as 'a succession of static experiences each infinitely brief'.) If movement is made up of discrete points, says Zeno, then there must also be an infinite number of intervening points between them. (De Selby sees a journey as 'resting for infinitely brief intervals in innumerable intermediate places.') How then, asks Zeno, can the arrow get from one point to the next, given that it can never get to the end of the infinity of intervening points? If the Zeno/de Selby account of movement is right, then the flight path or the train journey implodes, and the arrow or the traveller is swallowed up in the infinite cracks between points, or positions.

A footnote explaining how his nephew's films inspired de Selby's understanding of space indicates the root of the problem.

These are evidently the same films which he mentions in *Golden Hours* (p 155) as having 'a strong repetitive element' and as being 'tedious'. Apparently he had examined them patiently picture by picture and imagined that they would be screened in the same way, failing at that time to grasp the principle of the cinematograph.

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The 'principle of the cinematograph' is that a particular type of database (the information recorded on the strip of still images) does, when projected, produce the illusion of movement and so the possibility of narrative. A movie, however, is not the model of nature. De Selby would have done well to read Henri Bergson's discussion of Zeno's paradox.[v] In the physical world, Bergson insists, the motion of an arrow cannot be broken down into constituent points or positions. 'That continuity of movement is of an order of reality other than the measurable, divisible space it can be confirmed as having crossed. It doesn't stop until it stops: when it hits the target.'[vi] The flight of the arrow can no more be immobilised in an infinity of possible endpoints than the narrative of the journey from Bath to Folkestone can be reduced to de Selby's picture postcards. Or rather, for Bergson, that freezing of space and movement is possible only retrospectively, as an intellectual exercise. It is a way of thinking that stops the world in thought. It makes movement and process secondary to what is fixed, instead of seeing positionality or identity as 'an emergent quality of movement'.[vii]

De Selby's experiment in virtual travel also fails because he puts too much faith in the kinetic power of technology. Nineteenth-century technologies like photography were able to make distant places present (just as trains made mass tourism possible), and this experience of being both here and there at the same time helped to establish disorientation as a cultural norm.[viii] But de Selby confuses a new imaginative reality with an older, more pedestrian geography of getting our bodies from here to there. Compare de Selby's hallucinatory journey with another from an earlier novel. In J-K Huysmans's 1884 *A Rebours*, the neurotic hero des Esseintes impetuously decides to leave a rainy Paris to visit London after reading too much Dickens. He packs his trunk and buys a train ticket. Eventually, though, after suffering weather foul enough for England, after observing English tourists in a Paris bar, after eating an English meal, and after reading a guidebook to London, he changes his mind. 'I've been steeped in English life ever since I left home,' he says to himself, 'and it would be madness to risk spoiling such unforgettable experiences by a clumsy change of locality.'[ix]

The serious question raised by Flann O'Brien's comedy – what navigable spaces have actually (rather than counterfactually) been created through media interfaces, new and old? – is elegantly encapsulated by yet another novelist, Italo Calvino. He recalls how, in his childhood, cinema 'satisfied *a need for disorientation,* for the projection of my attention into a different space, a need which I believe corresponds to a primary function of our assuming our place in the world.'[x] At first sight, Calvino's comment seems counterintuitive. How can disorientation lead to identity and agency?

The philosopher Gianni Vattimo comments on a view of art shared by Benjamin and Heidegger.

> In each case, aesthetic experience appears to be an estrangement, which then requires recomposition and readjustment. However, the aim of this is not to reach a final recomposed state. Instead, aesthetic experience is *directed towards keeping this disorientation alive*.[xi]

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For both, echoing Bergson on movement and position, the state of disorientation is 'constitutive and not provisional'.[xii] Agency is more about a process of becoming in a field of sociality, than it is about the social determination of who we are and how we act.[xiii] So where and how do subjects come into being, and what is the (fluid) form of their subjectivity? Here is the young Calvino sitting in a movie theatre – a boy who also lives with his family and goes to school – his attention absorbed by the images, the sounds, and the story on the screen. The space and technology of cinema, like the physical spaces and timetables of home and school, act on his body to teach him routines of conduct. They define his freedom of action. In the imaginary world of the films, he enters at the same time a *different space*, a representational and fantasmatic space. This is then how he becomes a subject: in mediated space, in the experience of disorientation.

Calvino's insight provides my hypothesis: that this experience of disorientation can help us to understand the history and consequences of technologically mediated spaces.

Flânerie and cinema

The *flâneur* is better understood as a methodological device than as the reconstruction of a historical form of consciousness. Benjamin deploys it to investigate a certain technique of observation and imagination, a cultural code, for processing, and so coping with, the inchoate mass of information that constituted the reality of the late nineteenth-century metropolis. In 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903), Benjamin's teacher Georg Simmel describes how the objectified culture of the modern city threatens to crush individual subjectivity.

> The individual has become a mere cog in an enormous organisation of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of a purely objective life. It needs merely to be pointed out that the metropolis is the genuine arena of this culture which outgrows all personal life. Here in buildings and educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technology, in the formations of community life, and in the visible institutions of the state, is offered such an overwhelming fullness of crystallized and impersonalised spirit that the personality, so to speak, cannot maintain itself under its impact.[xiv]

How does that informationally and technologically overloaded outside of the metropolis become the (more or less) manageable inside of subjectivity? Are action and being still possible in an abstracted and depersonalised world? Simmel suggests that the survival strategy of metropolitan citizens at the turn of the twentieth century matched a *blasé* exterior with an aesthetic of self-creation. In his answer, Benjamin back-projects the figure of the *flâneur* – and specifically Baudelaire in Paris – to reveal the disciplines of *flânerie*. Step one is to adopt a distanced and somewhat disembodied spectatorial attitude.

> To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world. The spectator is a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito.[xv]

Step two is to domesticate external reality by processing it as image and narrative.

> The crowd was the veil from behind which the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned the *flâneur*. In it, the city was now landscape, now a room.[xvi]

If done properly, the third and final step of *flânerie* is to produce knowledge and so control.

> In the *flâneur*, the joy of watching is triumphant. It can concentrate on observation; the result is the amateur detective. Or it can stagnate in the gaper; then the *flâneur* has turned into a *badaud* [stargazer; a mere idler].[xvii]

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Flânerie as an interface enables Benjamin to conceptualise the existential problem to which the technology of cinema was a solution. In 1903, Simmel describes the everyday experience of being bombarded by 'the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions.'[xviii] For Benjamin this tendency to turn reality into a spectacle and the subject into a spectator created the *need* for cinema. In the big city, interiority became like a movie, and in cinema 'perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle'. *Flânerie*'s street mix of movement, observation and imagination migrates to the cinematic apparatus of camera-eye, screen and moviegoer. Allied to this new interface, Benjamin's 'new law' of montage allowed a manipulation of time and distance that produced a new geography for the cinema spectator.[xix]

As Calvino's recollections suggest, the novelty of cinema's 'navigable spaces' lay in the experience of being both here and there, in the theatre but at the same time in the fantasmatic space of the movie. For Benjamin, this was film's liberating power.

> Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and our furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling.[xx]

The ability to conjure up distant places and open up new realms of experience lay in the codes of the interface as much as the content of the representation. In 1923 the Soviet director Dziga Vertov proclaimed the power of the camera-eye to disrupt and disorient routine habits of perception and understanding.

> I am kino-eye. I am a builder. I have placed you, whom I've created today, in an extraordinary room which did not exist until just now when I also created it. … I, a machine, am showing you a world, the like of which only I can see. … My road leads toward the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher, in a new way, a world unknown to you.[xxi]

Vertov dreamt of a new world and a new cinema cleansed of the sustaining fictions of the old (or new) order: a road not taken. But even for Calvino the aesthetics and the geography of cinema are coterminous: the medium sets in place an architecture of perception, attention and sociality. These are the spaces and technologies through which we 'make world'.

Television and telephony
Flann O'Brien wrote *The Third Policeman* during the early experimental years of television. Maybe he even had the new medium in mind. Certainly television – seeing at a distance, and so virtual presence – was widely understood in terms of a new geography. In the mid-1930s, Rudolf Arnheim writes:

> So television as a means of spiritual intercourse, proves to be a relative of the car and the aeroplane. … [L]ike the machines of locomotion that the last century gave us, it alters our relation to reality itself, teaches us to know it better, and lets us sense the multiplicity of what is happening everywhere at one moment.[xxii]

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'Television provides a maximum extension of the perceived environment with a minimum of effort,' wrote Charles Siepmann in his 1950 book *Radio, Television and Society*. 'It is bringing the world to people's door.'[xxiii] The conception of the television audience as domestic reflects commercial and political decisions rather than anything inherent in broadcasting technology. The commercial logic was initially to sell domestic radio and television sets to consumers, and later to sell access to domestic audiences to advertisers. Public service broadcasting was a centralising national response to the perceived cultural threat of that market, to the atomising tendencies of mass society, and to television's creation of a dispersed and atomised audience. At the point of reception, television inherited an architectonics of attention from radio: less intense and more distracted than cinema, more geared to the rhythms and routines of domestic life, and subject to negotiation between household members.

The domestic deployment of television was part of a new suburban geography based on a trade-off between atomization and access. Increasingly dispersed populations were linked in part through television but, just as importantly, by the telephone (and, of course, the car and public transport.) Television provides instant ('live') access to public information from anywhere around the globe. Telephony allows real-time communication with anyone, anywhere, who has access to the equipment and the network. Common to the technologies of television and telephone is therefore a combination of universality and locatedness. They are both 'global' in their reach and infinitesimally 'local' at the point of reception and use.[xxiv] Whereas cinema offered the experience of being at once physically here and imaginatively there, the interfaces of television and telephone together allowed the 'virtual' presence here of distant people and events. Both are 'space-binding'.[xxv] The telephone collapses the distance between migrants and family or friends 'at home'. Television brings the ghostly presence of studio or sports stadium, of battlefield or disaster area, or, to use John Reith's favourite image, the King speaking to his subjects by the family hearth.

The consequence was a realignment of public and private, a fuzzying of inside and outside, a new permeability to the domestic. The home became less a container and more a membrane, a broad-meshed filter of sounds, words and visions: a node in multi-dimensional networks of information and communication. [xxvi] As one of these networks, television allowed both new forms of domestic meaning-making and an unprecedented style of community. Its key characteristic, however, is less that it was destined for a domestic location than that it is flexible enough to blend seamlessly into the social dynamics of *any* environment. The secret of television, Anna McCarthy argues, is its adaptability. As a technology, it is *site specific*.[xxvii] Television's increasingly ubiquitous presence in shopping malls, restaurants, pubs, stores, gyms, doctor's waiting-rooms, airport lounges, planes and trains is then both cause and symptom of a transformation in the nature of those 'public' spaces as profound as any changes to the 'private' space of the home. Even that public/private distinction becomes almost too ambiguous to sustain. These public spaces are mostly privately owned, monitored by private security forces, and closely policed in terms of access and conduct. Still, as Anna McCarthy impatiently observes, there is little point in whingeing that television contaminates the publicness of urban space by 'privatising' it. If cities are becoming ever more like television, she implies, get used to it. This is where we live.[xxviii]

Those who can't get used to it worry that we shall end up with no sense of place, lost souls adrift in a geography of non-places.[xxix] Social space has become both uncanny and chaotic: over-populated with the ghostly presence of other places and other people, and thick with images, sounds, words, messages, and stories. And yet Vattimo claims that it is in this Babel that 'our hopes for emancipation lie.' In this mediated world, to be free no longer means lucid self-transparency or the community of shared identity. Again Vattimo echoes Calvino. In our post-television geography, freedom is experienced as 'a continual oscillation between belonging and disorientation.' [xxx]

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Internet and installation

One view of the Internet is that it simply deepens this culture of disorientation, further embeds both spatially and subjectively the deracinated, placeless geography produced by metropolis and media, and so erodes any hope of meaningful human community. A provocative version of this argument is offered by Hubert Dreyfus in his book *On the Internet*. Dismissing any earnest worry that the Internet threatens the quality of public life, Dreyfus engagingly follows Kierkegaard in insisting that the creation and power of the public is itself the source of our woes.[xxxi] Rather than being undermined by the media, publicness is actually their creation. Publicness emerges with the press.

In a review article in 1846, Kierkegaard reflects on 'the present age'. Far from enriching communal and subjective life, the existence of the public diminishes them by leaching them of any particular identities or passionate commitments. Because it embodies universalist values, the public 'eats up all the relative and concrete in individuality.'[xxxii]

> The public is not a people, a generation, one's era, nor a religious community, a society, nor such and such particular people, for all these are what they are only by virtue of what is concrete. No, not a single one of those who belong to the public has an essential engagement in anything.[xxxiii]

The problem, as Dreyfus sees it, is that because the press and then broadcasting and now the Internet make 'every sort of information immediately available to anyone', they produce 'a desituated, detached spectator' – an informational *flâneur* whom Benjamin might see as a hero for modern times.[xxxiv] This anxiety about rootlessness and detachment is linked to Dreyfus's phenomenological critique of a tendency to experience things only in mediated form, at a distance, rather than directly through the body. In his judgment, relating to *the world* through teletechnology corrupts our overall sense of reality, and telepresence diminishes our everyday experience of being in the presence of things and people.

When Kirkegaard describes the public as a *phantom*,[xxxv] I actually agree with him, although without drawing the same gloomy conclusions as he and Dreyfus do. The social relations and operative spaces sustained by media technologies, and before them the metropolis, are ghostly in the sense that they enable us – require us – to live and act in a world of meanings, representations, and images; a space of coded information given spectral form through media technologies. In response to Dreyfus, I can only say that it is absurd to believe that our everyday experience of things and people, of space and distance – our sense of reality – can be anything other than fundamentally shaped by these technologies and codes. In the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin writes: 'The sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.'[xxxvi] He is talking about the way the technology and artifice of film production conjure up 'the equipment-free aspect of reality'. At one level, he simply means that the audience does not see what makes the apparent reality of cinema space possible. The implication, however, is that Dreyfus's utopian longing for an alternative, unmediated reality is itself an historically contingent fantasy-reaction to the very technological culture he denounces.[xxxvii]

Dreyfus quotes Kierkegaard's warning that the present age 'transforms the task itself into an unreal feat of artifice, and reality into a theatre', and he worries that the Internet tempts us 'to live in a world of stimulating images and simulated commitments and thus to lead a simulated life'. [xxxviii] Again, I line up alongside Benjamin and Calvino and say: yes, that is indeed our reality. And I would also say that the existential alternative to Kierkegaard's leap of religious faith is to find pragmatic ways to navigate what he denounces as *the dizziness of abstract infinity,*[xxxix] which I would rephrase as the experiential geography of crystallised culture and media technologies. The utility of *disorientation* (or dizziness) in this journey lies in a certain subjective indeterminacy: in other words, the freedom to navigate this matrix of perception, attention, movement and belonging.

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What might the exercise of that freedom look like? Jeffrey Shaw is an artist who experiments with the potential of different interface apparatuses in navigating the immersive environments he creates using computer-based technologies. In contrast to Dreyfus, for Shaw the question is not disembodiment, but possible new forms of embodiment.

> The contemporary body in space is no longer the classical model. Ours is a vertiginous location – suspended upside down (Baselitz), launched into space (Yves Klein), declared as obsolete (Stelarc) and now seemingly superhumanly re-embodied in cyberspace and suprahumanly re-united in net space.[xl]

Formed in the milieu of radical cinema and performance art in the 1960s, Shaw retains a Situationist's view of the softness and fluidity of experience and expanded cinema's agenda of disrupting the usual relations of cinematic spectatorship. He starts from the specificity of the site of reception, and the way it acts on the viewer's body, and then creates environments which are negotiated through perceptual disorientation and physical movement. In *The Legible City* (1988-91), Shaw uses computer-generated three-dimensional letters to form words and sentences to create 'buildings' and streets based on the layout of Manhattan, Amsterdam and Karlsruhe. The visitor sets off on hallucinatory journeys through this navigable space by operating an interface apparatus in the form of a stationary bicycle. A small screen in front of the bicycle shows a map of each city, enabling the rider to choose whether to ride through Manhattan or Amsterdam or Karlsruhe and to track their progress. The handlebars and pedals of the bicycle are linked to a computer that allows control of direction and speed.

'A city is simultaneously a tangible arrangement of forms and an immaterial pattern of experiences,' says Shaw. 'Its architecture is a morphology of language, its ground plan a psycho-geographic network and its streets a labyrinth of narrative pathways.'[xli] And yet the question posed by interacting with the work is surely this: is navigating urban space *really* like riding a bicycle through text? Do we experience movement around the city as what Shaw calls 'a journey of reading'? Although we obviously make sense of the city, we do not do so in the same way as we decode words on a page.[xlii] The way we *read* that city is less semiotic and interpretative than it is pragmatic and performative.

Maybe that is why Shaw shifted from the analogy of reading to a more pragmatic treatment of the body in space in his work *Place – a user's manual* (1995). Shaw here creates an environment in which each interaction becomes a unique performative event that *takes place*, even if it leaves no lasting trace. The viewer confronts a space containing eleven cylinders, within each of which a photographed panoramic landscape is displayed. Just looking is not an option. By manipulating the interface apparatus – in this case, a video camera – the visitor/traveller/participant becomes responsible for *producing* the space. This offers a degree of freedom in comparison with, for example, the movie spectator in the cinema.   But it is not freedom in the Cartesian sense of liberating the mind from the body and the world of matter. However elegant the interface, the impossibility of controlling all the consequences of one's movements underlines the complexity and resistance of the technology.[xliii]

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Against Dreyfus, Shaw's use of interactive technologies produces, if anything, a heightened awareness of the body, rather than any sense of disembodiment. Dreyfus might respond that he is not talking about interactive art, but about people using the Internet at home or in the office. 'We can keep up on the latest events in the universe, shop, do research, communicate with our family, friends, and colleagues, meet new people, play games, and control remote robots all without leaving our rooms,' he writes, partly in his own voice, partly mimicking Net enthusiasts. 'When we are engaged in such activities, our bodies seem irrelevant and our minds seem to be present wherever our interest takes us.'[xliv] Again, I don't think that is true. My experience of the Internet veers between attentiveness and distraction. Far from escaping my body, I slurp coffee and fidget with irritation and boredom, I thump the desk in frustration at the machine, and then, when I do come across something worthwhile, I find myself hunched forward, shoulders tense, staring too closely at the screen.[xlv] The computer interface with the Net, just as much as Shaw's installations, underscores the finitude of the human body as well as our capacity to travel adventurously, aimlessly or obsessively in these spaces.

What is new about Shaw's installations, in comparison with the Net (or cinema or television), is that they make room for embodied performance as well as imaginary projection, although here movement, perception, cognition, and hallucination begin to merge into a single experience. As the performance artist Stelarc says of his own works, 'Electronic space becomes a medium of action rather than information.'[xlvi]

The question of disembodiment matters for Dreyfus because it is linked to the possibility and quality of community. Here too Jeffrey Shaw's recent work *Place/Urbanity* might be read against Dreyfus, and specifically against his structuring fantasy of face-to-face, body-to-body communication as the key to the future-perfect community. Shaw has again constructed immersive cylinders which the visitor enters and moves around in. This time the panoramas feature full-action video sequences of fifteen locations in Melbourne, negotiated via an interface in the form of an underwater camera. In each, an 'ethnic' comedian hangs upside down, waist to head, from the top of the cylinder (the Baselitz reference). When the viewer comes into their ambit, the comic starts telling a joke about their 'community'.

The deeper, unspoken joke is once more about the oscillation between disorientation and belonging, about movement and identity. To cut a long philosophical story short, navigating Shaw's hallucinatory Melbourne stages the possibility of urban community as a question: not Dreyfus's everyday experience of being in the presence of things and people, certainly not common identity, but Jean-Luc Nancy's question about communication between finite existences sharing the real-imagined space of the city.

> How can we be receptive to the *meaning* of our multiple, dispersed, mortally fragmented existences, which nonetheless only make sense by existing in common? In other words, perhaps: how do we communicate? … It is not a question of establishing rules for communication, it is a question of understanding before all else that in 'communication' what takes place is an *exposition*: finite existence exposed to finite existence, co-appearing before it and with it.[xlvii]

Where does that exposition take place? Where do we make world, make ourselves, make community? It must be where we act as embodied agents but at the same time occupy Calvino's different space, the space of culturally coded information: concretely, in the *flâneur*'s detached observation of the crowd, in the fantasy-spaces of cinema, in the message-saturated space of the home, in the dizzying abstraction of information and communication networks. To get the measure of what it means to live and act in this world Vattimo quotes Nietzsche from *The Gay Science*: to be free means 'continuing to dream knowing one is dreaming.'[xlviii]

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This is not dreaming in the sense of delusion, escapism or wish-fulfilment, and certainly it has nothing to do with disembodiment. It does have to do with disorientation, though. It is dreaming as a creative act, as a way of engaging with the world by being out-of-joint with the world. It is dreaming as the exercise of imagination – the mode of thought that Brian Massumi considers 'most precisely suited to the differentiating vagueness of the virtual.' Imagination he also equates with intuition, the 'mutual envelopment of thought and sensation' that we have tracked in our hallucinatory journey from *flânerie* to surfing. [xlix]

Coda

In this article, I have explored a question that defines a boundary between philosophy and media sociology. It is a question about *space*, about the nature of the space that makes agency and community possible. As a philosopher, Nancy asks what it is that makes community or sociality – 'we' – possible. As a philosopher, naturally, he wants a philosophical answer. 'Community is made or is formed by the retreat or by the *subtraction* of something', he says, attempting to pare away all historical and culturally contingent factors, getting beyond the actuality of communities to the possibility of community. This is a space that has to be *left free*, not in the sense of a space without content, but in the sense of a space of pure potentiality, a space where being is exposed to being – Nancy's precondition for community and the self. [l]

Not being a philosopher, I cannot help but clutter up this purely philosophical thinking with the historical and cultural actuality of social and communal spaces. Whatever the philosophical preconditions, we encounter the field of sociality as an historically specific *regime* or *network* or *architecture* of technologies, codes and discourses. To invoke 'regime' is of course to nod to Foucault's methods for mapping sites, both discursive and nondiscursive, where the human subject may emerge to be recognized or excluded. 'Network' likewise acknowledges the work of Friedrich Kittler on 'the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and produce relevant data'; in other words, the deployment of media technologies in creating and foreclosing the possibility of certain types of speech for certain types of people. [li]

I make no claims to originality for my preferred concept of *architecture* as a way of drawing together such approaches. I like it because it is a term that has migrated from the built environment to computers and media, and also because it carries the connotation that social and experiential space, like physical space, is never empty, never pure, but is already shaped by what has been intentionally created before. Architecture too has both a fictional and a political edge to it. Designing space is a human intervention that seeks to create the conditions for a certain type of life in the future, a life that can only be imagined from the present and which necessarily fails to predict the actual uses that those of us who come after will make of the space. There is no natural or inevitable fit between any architecture, whether physical or virtual, and the human subjects who create themselves in made space. That is why the human agency in any architecturally mediated space – city, film and television, Internet and installations – will, like Calvino's cinematic experience of becoming a subject, be experienced as movement and disorientation rather than as the fixing of recognition or self-identification.

I have tried to show how starting with the question of the interface opens up an approach to urbanity and the media that shifts the focus of attention away from social determination and positioning, and towards the way that space makes freedom and community possible, at least in their messy and historically compromised actuality. That is why, methodologically, I have focused not on texts, meaning and 'the discursive positioning of subjects', but on the links between the navigable spaces of media interfaces, the organisation and accessibility of information, and the conditions of possibility of agency.

I began this article with a reference to one of the great comic novels of the twentieth century. As a final evocation of the type of spatial, social and experiential reality that I have attempted to describe, I'll end with one of the first ghost stories of the twenty-first century: Don De Lillo's *The Body Artist*.   Among other things, the novel explores how we become ourselves and relate to others in complex and layered ways: through unwieldy language, through the physical insistence of our bodies, through phantoms, but also through the spectral presence of distant places and people made possible by the media. At one point, the protagonist – the body artist of the title, a woman whose art is quite literally to re-embody herself – returns to a lonely house in the New England countryside after the suicide of her older husband, a film director who, long ago, had been briefly fashionable. Here De Lillo offers a poignant understanding of a new mode of being both 'here' and 'there' that arrives with the Internet – once again recognising the defining experience of disorientation, but now in a new technological register.

> She stopped listening to weather reports. She took the weather as it came, chill rain and blowy days and the great hunched boulders in the slant fields, like clan emblems, pulsing with stormlight and story and time. She chopped firewood. She spent hours at the computer screen looking at a live-streaming video feed from the edge of a two-lane road in a city in Finland. It was the middle of the night in Kotka, in Finland, and she watched the screen. It was interesting to her because it was happening now, as she sat here, and because it happened twenty-four hours a day, facelessly, cars entering and leaving Kotka, or just the empty road in the dead times. The dead times were best.
> She sat and looked at the screen. It was compelling to her, real enough to withstand the circumstance of nothing going on. It thrived on the circumstance. It was three in the morning in Kotka and she waited for a car to come along – not that she wondered who was in it. It was simply the fact of Kotka. It was the sense of organization, a place contained in an unyielding frame, as it is and as you watch, with a reading of local time in the digital display in a corner of the screen. Kotka was another world but she could see it in its realness, in its hours, minutes and seconds.
> She imagined that someone might masturbate to this, the appearance of a car on the road to Kotka in the middle of the night. It made her want to laugh. She chopped firewood. She set aside time every day for the webcam at Kotka. She didn't know the meaning of this feed but took it as an act of floating poetry. It was best in the dead times.[lii]

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i   Lev Manevich (2001), *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 64, 63.

ii   Flann O'Brien (1974), *The Third Policeman*, London: Pan, 44-45.

iii   See Brian Massumi (2002), *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham: Duke University Press, 6 ff.

iv   Massumi, *Parables*, 6.

v   Or, as I have done, Brian Massumi account of it in *Parables for the Virtual*, 6 ff.

vi   Massumi, *Parables*, 6.

vii 'Movement is no longer indexical to position. Rather, position emerges from movement, from a relation of movement to itself. Philosophically, this is no small movement.' Massumi, *Parables*, 180.

viii It was the Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg who noted in his 1916 study *The Photoplay* how editing allowed the cinema spectator to have the experience of being 'simultaneously here and there'. Quoted in Stephen Kern (1983), *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 71.

ix   J.K. Huymans (1959 [1884]), *Against Nature*, (trans. Robert Baldick), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 143.

x   Quoted in James Donald (1999), *Imagining the Modern City*, London: Athlone Press, 187.

xi   Gianni Vattimo (1992), *The Transparent Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 51

xii Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 53.

xiii See Massumi, *Parables*, 9: 'there is an ontogenesis or becoming of culture and the social …of which determinate forms of culture and sociability are the result. … That interaction is precisely what takes form. That is what is socially determined – and renegotiated by each and every cultural act. Assume it, and you beg the whole question. Not assuming it, however, entails finding a concept for interaction-in-the-making.'

xiv Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (eds.) (1997), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, London: Sage, 184.

xv   Quoted in David Frisby (1985), *Fragments of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 18-19.

xvi Walter Benjamin (1973), *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London: New Left Books, 170.

xvii Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 69.

xviii Simmel, 'Metropolis', 175.

xix Benjamin (1973), 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, London: Fontana, 227.

xx   Benjamin, 'Work of Art', 229.

xxi Dziga Vertov (1984), *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (ed. Annette Mchelson), Berkeley: University of California Press, 17-18; translation modified.

xxii Rudolf Arnheim (1936), *Radio* (trans. Margaret Ludwig & Herbert Read), London: Faber, 279-80.

xxiii Quoted in Lynn Spigel (1992), 'Installing the Television and Domestic Space 1948-1955', in Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (eds), *Private Screening: Television and the Female Consumer.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 7.

xxiv Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*, Durham: Duke University Press, 10.

xxv Samuel Weber (1996), *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

xxvi Massumi, *Parables*, 85.

xxvii Site-specific installation art is 'work designed solely for a particular place or institution, work that cannot be transplanted elsewhere.' McCarthy, *Ambient Television*, 2.

xxviii McCarthy, *Ambient Television*, 2, 3, 5.

xxix See, for example, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985), *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour*, New York: Oxford University Press; Margaret Morse, 'An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall, and Television', in Patricia Mellencamp (ed.) (1990), *Logics of Television*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

xxx Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 4, 10.

xxxi See, for example, Cass Sunstein(2001), *republic.com*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

xxxii Søren Kierkegaard (2001), *A Literary Review*, London: Penguin, 82; Hubert L. Dreyfus (2001), *On the Internet*, London: Routledge, 76.

xxxiii Kierkegaard, *Review*, 82-3; Dreyfus, *Internet*, 77.

xxxiv Dreyfus, *Internet*, 76.

xxxv Kierkegaard, *Review*, 80. See Donald, *Imagining*,183.

xxxvi Benjamin, 'Work of Art', 235.

xxxvii This point is made by Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 38/9.

xxxviii Quoted in Dreyfus, *Internet*, 88.

xxxix Kierkegaard, *Review*, 97

xl Jeffrey Shaw (1995), 'The Dis-Embodied Re-Embodied Body', in Manuela Abel (ed) (1997), *Jeffrey Shaw – a user's manual: From Expanded Cinema to Virtual Reality*, Edition ZKM Cantz, 155.

xli 'The Legible City', in *Jeffrey Shaw*, 128

xlii See Donald, *Imagining*, 13; also Henri Lefebvre (1991), *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell.

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xliii   'The more one dreams of an immaterial world of pure simulation, the more the body finds itself encased in technological supplements whose complexity is no less great than their fragility.' Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 39.

xliv   Dreyfus, *Internet*, 50.

xlv   Massumi, *Parables*, 141. On attention and distraction, see Jonathan Crary (1999), *Suspension of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

xlvi   Quoted in Massumi, *Parables*, 122.

xlvii   Jean-Luc Nancy (1991), *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.xil-xl.

xlviii   Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 35

xlix   Massumi, *Parables*, 134.

l   See Jean-Luc Nancy (1991), *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, xxxviii-xxxix; (1993), *The Experience of Freedom*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 33-43; (2002), *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 76-79.

li   Friedrich A. Kittler (1999), *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, xxiii, xxiv.

lii   Don DeLillo (2001), *The Body Artist*, London: Picador, 37-9.