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Worlds of Meaning

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Welcome to the fifth issue of *Humanist Studies & the Digital Age* entitled *Networks and Projects: New Platforms in Digital Humanities*. The sections *Perspectives* and *Interventions* are devoted to the publication of a selection from the proceedings of a colloquium held at Brown University in the Spring of 2015. These first two sections are presented and introduced by Massimo Riva in his essay on *Scholarly Networks and Collaborative Practices*. The third section of this issue, *Projects*, is presented by Crystal Hall in her introduction, *Italian Studies and Digital Humanities: Research Outcomes*.

In the brief notes of my Editorial, I reflect on the idea of “network” as conceptual framework and privileged space of knowledge engaging with Pierre Lévy’s work, and I anticipate the topic of the sixth issue of this journal that will be published in 2019.

The media scholar and philosopher Pierre Lévy conceives the “network” (which he prefers to call “cyberspace”) not only as the material infrastructure of digital communications but also the immense information it holds as well as the human beings involved in it. The impulse behind this new “medium of communication” made possible by the global connection of computers is the search for the actual living unity of human knowledge despite human scattering in space and time. He sees the theological and philosophical origin of this conception in the Aristotelian idea of *active intellect* that developed in medieval philosophy in the attempt to find vehicles of communication between the celestial worlds emanating from God and mortal humanity dispersed in time and space (*Cyberculture* xvi; Peters, *Interview with Pierre Lévy* 263). Lévy’s idea of collective intelligence emerges from this mystical background and finds operative applications in concrete intellectual communities that gather themselves through the technological support to “think together”. In this perspective, the network is not a physical space, as technology is not an entity in itself; rather, it is constituted by an interactive and community-based means of communication, becoming one fundamental element of what Lévy calls “collective intelligence”. This is a very important idea if one wants to start conceiving the computer field in a philosophical direction beyond the pervasive technical and programming issues.

What is the “collective intelligence”? First of all, “it is a universally distributed intelligence that is enhanced, coordinated, and mobilized in real time” (*Collective Intelligence* 16). Lévy argues that cyber culture, “gives shape to a new form of the universal, the universal without totality”, not because it is everywhere in actuality (as per globalization) but because the idea of cyberspace implicates “by right” all human beings. Lévy holds that the new universal is characterized by “immersion”, related to “universal access” and should be conceived as a right, a kind of moral imperative that does not totalize through meaning: it unites us through contact and general interaction. In other words, this technological universal is not simply the result of a technology producing messages but of the actual thinking together and interaction within cyber culture. The point is that we are all in the same communication “deluge” whereby the identity of meaning, “the question of semantic closure or totalization is no longer relevant” as it was for the static form of alphabetic writing (*Cyberculture* 100). What matters in the community prefigured by the network is not the content related to traditional forms of reading and writing but the being together in itself as a form of “negative” community which comes close to those envisaged by Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Disavowed community* and Roberto Esposito’s *Communitas* among others.

The real-time interconnection and dynamism create a shared context, “the same immense living hypertext for the participants in a communication” regardless of the message: “any text can become the fragment that

passes unnoticed through the moving hypertext that surrounds it, connects it to other texts, and serves as a mediator or medium for reciprocal, interactive, uninterrupted communication". From this perspective, there are no more messages "out of context" to be reduced to the meaning strategies and logic of previous media of communication including books and the institutions that controlled them: these are now "an imperfect fringe, the partial and unequal appendixes of an open space of interconnection animated by nonhierarchical communication (...) set in motion by magmatic processes of collective intelligence" (*Cyberculture* 99). Along these lines, Lévy underlines that any public text accessible through the Internet is now a virtual component in an immense and ever-expanding hypertext to the point that "hyperdocuments that are accessible through a computer network are powerful instruments of a *collective reading-writing process* (*Becoming Virtual* 59)

Collective intelligence comes to life in a culture and a community but it cannot be reduced to the status of conventional culture:

In an intelligent community, the specific objective is to permanently negotiate the order of things, language, the role of the individual, the identification and definition of objects, the reinterpretation of memory. Nothing is fixed. Yet, this does not result in a state of disorder or absolute relativism, for individual acts are coordinated and evaluated in real time, according to a large number of criteria that are themselves constantly reevaluated in context. (*Collective Intelligence* 17)

The individual of the intelligent community moves from the Cartesian *cogito* to the *cogitamus* without disappearing into a sort of indistinguishable magma. The intelligent community encourages a process of growth and distinction that leads to a renewal of singularities, a new mode of identification, open, dynamic and positive (*Ibid.* 18). It is the opposite of Artificial Intelligence: it does not put the machine at the center, it is a way to grow a renewed human/cultural cognitive system by exploiting the increasing computing power.

The networked intelligence triggers the creation of what Lévy calls the "space knowledge" conceived as a form of "cartography, a conceptual toolbox, a portable guide to anthropological mutation rather than a history" (*Collective Intelligence* 19). In this perspective, even though it has always existed the "space knowledge", properly speaking, is the last of the four anthropological spaces occupied by humanity, each of them with its own distinctive features. The first was the nomadic space of earth, conceived not as a planet or a biosphere, but as "a cosmos in which humanity communicates with animals, plants, landscapes, locales, and spirits" (*Ibid.* 131). Starting from the Paleolithic it was characterized by a sense of identity established through totems, lineage, myth and rites. The second anthropological space was the "territorial space" that establishes a predatory and destructive relationship with the earth: "it dominates, confines, encloses, inscribes, and measure. It takes place during the Neolithic and among other things it gives birth to territorial inscription, writing, history and the State as a privileged political form. The commodity space, was the third anthropological dimension inhabited by humans; it is related to the appearance of the alphabet in Greece, which was contemporary with the emergence of money. The commodity space gradually became a new world built from the unprecedented circulation and interaction of money, banking, capital, technology and extended markets. The Industrial Revolution was a key moment in this process whereby identity started to be related to the position within the domains of production and consumption in an economy of material and statistical goods centered around the Capital. The growth of reading, printing as industry of mass production and later of electronic mass media, created the condition for public opinion and modern democracies (*Ibid.* 58). Lévy underlines here an important point that he applies to the fourth space and previous spaces as well: "When the commodity space assumes its autonomy within the territory, it doesn't simply abolish the preceding spaces but subordinate them, organizes them in terms of its own objectives" (*Ibid.* 137).

The fourth space is the cyberspace, the networked space that we already introduced at the beginning of these brief notes. This new form of space is coming alive as an autonomous space and not yet fully developed as such; it will not erase the previous three anthropological spaces as they are irreversible and to some extent

“eternal”. In this sense, they should not be conceived as successive eras or epochs because they cannot be substituted for one another but coexist (*Collective Intelligence* 225). Lévy holds that the four anthropological spaces depend on each other; he argues in favor of a form of human ecology conceived as the art of establishing harmonious relations among them (*Ibid.* 230). Since no semiotic operates without precedents, “the earth (here, the consubstantiality of signs, beings and things) is and remains the soil of meaning” (232). In this perspective, any form of media makes sense only because the public is able to integrate them in its cosmos and because they awaken the “terrestrial being in us” (*Ibid.* 233).

However, the anthropological spaces are related to one another only in terms of “causality without contact”: each of them encloses the previous space and imposes its direction and signification. The anthropological spaces are not a succession of layers, a system of infrastructures or a hierarchy of conditions. Lower and upper spaces reciprocally nourish themselves and, in the end, the knowledge space, the space of imagination and creation nourishes all of them like the divine effusion in medieval cosmology was flowing from intelligence to intelligence until it reached the sublunary world (*Ibid.* 236). Nonetheless, the space knowledge does not point to some ideal of static perfection but to “the principle of self-organization, the continuous self-inventions of human communities and their worlds” (*Ibid.* 239). In this perspective, one understands why this last anthropological space in which we live is not simply a way out of the earth space, territorial space or commodity space but a “bridge” between them establishing an essential continuity: the collective space of knowledge finds its unity in thought and is suspended in the void, it is “the centermost void that drives the entire universe” (*Ibid.* 242-244).

The ideal figure or metaphor of the fourth space is what Lévy calls “cosmopedia”, the new organization of knowledge in the cyber space (*Collective Intelligence* 216). The sum of knowledge in the cyber space is now organized by the cosmos that cannot be reduced to static images such as the circle, the text or even the ipertext network. The cosmopedia is

a dynamic and interactive multidimensional space. Instead of the conjunction of image and text, characteristic of the encyclopedia, the cosmopedia combines a large number of different types of expression: static images, video, sound, interactive simulation, interactive maps, expert systems, dynamic ideographs, virtual reality, artificial life, etc. At its extreme the cosmopedia contains as many semiotics and types of representation as exist in the world itself. (216)

The cosmopedia explores mutant semiotics and multiplies non-discursive utterances showing how discourse alone is insufficient for the investigation of meaning. It dissolves the differences between discrete and hierarchical disciplines and materializes in a dynamic topology, in an “immense multidimensional electronic image, perpetually metamorphosing”. However, moving beyond the metaphor and considering a technical point of view, Lévy argues that collective intellects are effectively capable of constructing their own cosmopedia and that the space of knowledge represents an immanence of meaning and a return of the real within what remains a virtual reality (*Ibid.* 216-217). Following Deleuze, Lévy holds that the virtual possesses complete reality, in its virtuality: it is a new mode of reality emerging from change when one moves away from the discursive plane of actuality and embraces the enunciation process of the event. As he writes, “the virtual, strictly defined, has little relationship to that which is false, illusory, or imaginary. The virtual is by no means the opposite of the real”. Lévy definition of virtual as opposed to what is actual is central to understand the new condition of meaning within intelligent communities and their cosmopedia: “it is a fecund and powerful mode of being that expands the process of creation, opens up the future, injects a core of meaning beneath the platitude of immediate physical presence” (*Becoming Virtual*, 16).

Lévy argues that media communication, from telephone to electronic mail, from radio to television and cinema establish a continuity in space and time that is far removed from the “living thought” possible in what he calls the space of knowledge (*Collective Intelligence* 108). He is convinced that the mass media are of little use in helping people think as a group and collectively develops solutions to their problems (*Ibid.* 59). For him while the cyberspace triggers a redefinition of perception and interactive relation to space, the television and

other media simply lead to forms of unreality detached from perception. In other words, Lévy thinks in post-media terms and encourages a reflection in this area as well. Lévy's theory should continue being part of the most important debates in digital humanities. As Alan Liu writes, digital humanist should for sure continue creating digital archives and resources but at the same time they should enter into broader dialogue with the adjacent fields of computer and media theory, new media studies and media archaeology. From that dialogue standard issues in the digital humanities could be enlarged with philosophical and sociocultural meaning producing positive ripple effects on research and projects implementation (501). In closing these brief notes, I follow his suggestion and anticipate that the 2019 issue of *Humanist Studies & the Digital Age* will address precisely these crucial questions that intersects media theory and social media.

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