

Reviews

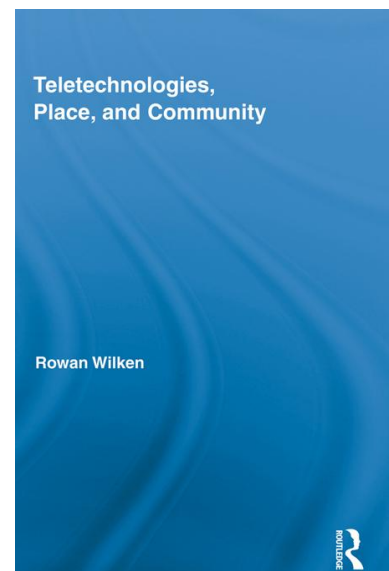
Wilken, Rowan. *Teletechnologies, Place, and Community*. New York & Oxford: Routledge (Co-media Series), 2011, 259 p., ISBN 978-0-415-87595-0 (hbk); 978-0-203-80702-6 (ebk).

In his book, Rowan Wilken, lecturer at the University of Swinburne, Australia, makes an attempt at providing a theoretical frame for a three-dimensional problem: the relation between new technologies, communities and places. His main goal is to sculpt an understanding of the relationship between place and community, both of which are transcended by what he calls ‘teletechnologies’ such as mobile phones, internet and their eventual derivatives. Looking for ‘productive theoretical possibilities to make sense of the complex interactions and interconnections between teletechnologies, place, and community’ (203) appears to be a very difficult task.

The first two of the seven chapters are devoted to problems of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and virtual communities. The next three chapters deal with the notion of place (or various metaphors of space), and the last two chapters theorise the complicated relationship between teletechnologies, place and community. Wilken’s book is a dense guide through a whole library of publications in various fields such as semiotics, philosophy (including media philosophy), cultural anthropology of the internet, and so forth. However, Wilken’s main source of philosophical concepts is Jacques Derrida, whose ideas, often originally irrelevant for the analysis of ‘Cyberia’, as Wilken shows, could be extremely useful for a better understanding of the subject of ‘Teletechnologies’.

At the outset, Wilken shows how the Aristotelian category of space, or the answer to the question ‘where?’, is being deconstructed in the CMC through ‘recurrent metaphor types’ (73). Analyzing Navigation and Transportation, as well as Pioneer and Architectural metaphors, Wilken brings the reader to the conclusion that to talk about communities, which in fact cannot be located anywhere, is a problem that can hardly be solved at all.

In his criticism of space-based terms (Taekke 2002), Wilken provides his reader with an extremely multifaceted, creative history of future technologies. Oscillating between a purely theoretical approach ‘guided by a “humanist” agenda’ (114), and a compact presentation of the techniques of domesticating spaces, Wilken projects chains of scholarly and media dis-



cussions onto pre-CMC technological and social tools like Minitel, used in Australia Europe and the US. Created for other purposes, they ended up creating new communities.

The book form of 'Teletechnologies...' is just a cover for what is a more complicated web-structure, isomorphic with the internet as a quasi-spatial subject. Wilken would have rather preferred to present his material not as a book, but as a website linked with his sources and discussed topoi rather than bringing them all in the two-dimensional traditional paper form. Chapter 5, 'Fantasies of Transcendence and Transformative Imagination: Architectural Visions of Cyberspace' (117-145), which is probably the strongest of all, is preceded by epigraphs from Frank Lloyd Wright, Bertrand Russell and Karl Marx, each of which opens windows to different forms of materiality in cyberspace. In a one-page discussion of 'key-texts', Wilken discusses ten authors, references which a reader would have to 'google' in order to contextualize their concept in the framework of the book. It is very demanding to assume that his reader is so widely educated in so many fields of knowledge. Another group of windows consists of historical imagery created by architects, fantasy authors, architects-scholars, ranging from Leone Battista Alberti (1404-1472; 119-121) to Cedric Price (1934-2003; esp. 102-103, 108-115). The third material used for modelling cyber-spatiality consists of words, or rather, a dispersed catalogue of verbal transformations, which Wilken labels as 'pre-existing alternatives' (based on the Massey's 'alternative positive understanding of place', 200). These are terms born out of frustration because of the impossibility to describe what cyberspace should be in terms of spatial arts ('dematerialised architecture', 'transmissible architecture', 'electrotecture', 'datatecture', 'archimusic', etc. 117-125).

As Wilken points out, it is important not to delete these freaks of nature, but rather to keep them 'sous rature' – 'as a ~~neuromantic architecture~~ in order to highlight its own predestinate inadequacies' (127; the strikethrough is by Rowan Wilken: Deciphering the very notion of 'neuromantic' as an inclusion of neurons, mantics alias divination, with the traces of romantic approach to the technological revolution, it is understandable, that Wilken reluctantly rejects a lovely coined word overburdened with meanings).

Thus, playing with terminology which should give a virtual life to the main category of his study, Wilken develops a tool for analyzing the Barmecidal feast of concepts and theories of the 'third nature' (Wark 1993, 156 ff.). And this very tool, edged on the concepts of space and computer technologies, requires from the reader admission that the more bombastic a terminology of space, the less clear the notion of the corresponding 'community': which community would inhabit the space described by the author as a ~~neuromantic architecture~~? The inability to forget the concepts that we are supposed to reject, or the forbearance to make choices between relevant and irrelevant theoretical frameworks, creates a sort of non-stop short-circuit, which ends with the author's own final refusal to choose a positive hypothesis.

Speaking about the 'trio of concepts'—space, teletechnology and community—Wilken prioritises the first two over the third one. While in his description of space and technologies, Wilken is munificent concerning theories and variations of approaches, his understanding of community seems to be tighter; it concentrates on the discussion by Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy of the poststructuralist criticism of communality (39-60). By the end of the book, Wilken broadens his and his readers' perspective by explaining the need to move on from theorizing about virtual communities to a new 'empirical phase' (Flew 2001). Wilken

gives some extremely useful hints for a better understanding of this ‘empirical phase’ (190-191), or a descriptive theory, mentioning mounting evidence of the potential of ‘telecommunities’ for mass organisation and collective actions. However, in discussing cases such as the internet-communities used by the Zapatista movement in South-Central Mexico, or the activities of the Otpor group in the former Yugoslavia, he does not explain to what extent these sometimes remain in sharp contrast to corresponding social experiences in the USA or Australia.

Readers from parts of the world whose societies and communities adopted and took cyberspace technologies for granted, almost without direct participation either in their practical or theoretical development, could retrospectively add some useful material to the empirical base of the book, and also perhaps to its analytical core. On the subject of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, we may need to expand our understanding of the ‘liminal’ experience of place within media flows, mentioned by Wilken more than once (207). One such striking example of virtual communities, which started as a social movement based on tele-technologies, but later, notwithstanding enormous political success, disappeared within the next couple of months, is the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (November-December 2004). The weblogs, based on the LiveJournal platform did not manage to become either a virtual home or at least a discussion club for thousands of activists of the Orange Revolution (Goldstein 2007; Lysenko & Desouza 2010).

Such ‘evaporating communities’ are particularly widespread in transition societies, because the extensive use of the manna of teletechnologies notwithstanding, they lack the accompanying experience of social movements, particularly solidarity and shared fundamental values. It is remarkably easy to misuse the internet and destroy various resources by disseminating security doubts (Misuse of Internet 2007) or creating ‘ideational’ communities with no values at all – simply as an instrument for preventing the emergence of social solidarity. This is why the general optimism concerning opportunities, say, to teach online or to develop steady connections within each newly created *ad hoc* community, is not supported by the users, or communicants, or their ‘avatars’ themselves.

Wilken is definitely right when he repeatedly urges that telecommunications ‘cannot be ignored’, and that ‘detailed and sustained critical engagement with these technologies is crucial’ (208, 209). However, he also brings his reader to a somewhat odd conclusion, that the global ubiquity of mobile telephony and networked communications leaves more open ends than openness and clarity. Saying it in the simple language of the Aristotle’s categories, having replaced ‘place’ with a mere metaphor of place, and ‘communities’ with quasi-communities or aborted communities, Wilken shows that we have made it more difficult for ourselves to formulate a relation between the two.

And yet, in his book, Wilken manages to avoid this logical cul-de-sac by introducing the mixed concept of ‘home’, which means ‘place’ and ‘community’ in one. Within this concept, we can see the real parameters of the domestication of Cyberia—a place where one feels ‘at home’, ‘in both the benign domestic sense and more troubling nationalistic sense’ of the word (147-151; 208-209).

Within this particular relation, sitting between ‘geopolitical strategies’ and the ‘micro-politics’ of the individual self, Rowan Wilken admits that for now, at least, his primary inter-

est would be to investigate ‘the micropolitics of mobile, teletechnologically equipped “bodies” in transit’ (209). Teletechnologies are developing a highly risky but, at the same time, tremendously creative atmosphere, and scholars could study the metaphors of their fantasy as a parody on nanotechnology and similar disciplines.

Relationships between fictitious or hypothetically existing subjects can become extremely important in times when new technologies change and grow in scope. As Antonio Loprieno points out, the very dismantling of the notions of fiction and simulation marks not just a technological, but a cognitive transition (Loprieno 2011).

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