

In sickness and in health

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Playlist:

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“On the map of your Empire, O Great Khan, there must be room for both the big, stone Fedora and the little Fedoras in glass globes. Not because they are all equally real, but because all are only assumptions. The one contains what is accepted as necessary when it is not yet so, the others, what is imagined as possible and, a moment later, is possible no longer.” (Calvino, 1997)

Shake the disease

When a system is disrupted, and reveals the possibility of its extreme, the malfunctioning casts a new light or shadow on how we observe(d) it. Some doors that seemed open, suddenly close. Can open-closed be observed as a binary opposition? And if not, how do we structure the meaning around them? Or, is the contrast stronger between open non-open? I will consider two cases in which doors are partially open/closed in regards to their functional and dysfunctional state: The painting “The Effects of Good Government” from 1338. Siena, and the case of Twitter over usage during the swine flu epidemic in 2009. What connects these two is disease, as a means of infecting a system. In the vast abundance of space online for everyone, of discourse of connectedness to the world and endless exchange, thin lines between wanted and compulsive. I would like to examine the walls that exist in the discourse of openness in media.

Construction time again

One of the most prosperous cities and mercantile centres in Europe of the 14th century was Siena. One among the Italian cities that began as a self governed commune after the fall of the Roman empire, during the turbulent period of barbarian attacks. From the chaotic remains cities started rising later forming what was regarded as civic policies, ruled by governors. Most of the cities-republics competed with each other in merchandise and beauty, giving rise to

their civic pride. With the arts and crafts both flourishing, Siena; the rival of Florence built, the Palazzo Pubblico at the end of the 13th century, and decorated the inside in a monumental fashion. Exuding a breath of authority, but yet civil enough, a lesson learned from old Roman and Christian reality. In the hallway is the Maesta' by Simone Martini, and in Sala della pace (hall of peace), the room where the governors met, Ambrogio Lorenzetti was commissioned to paint the walls with panoramic frescos showing effects of good and bad government. The allegory of bad government is quite damaged, but the image baring importance for this analysis is "The Effects of Good Government", the one in which the governors saw their rule brought. One of the few documents of that time, relates the image as precursor to mass media: as it is aimed to be self satisfyingly seen by the governors while meeting over state matters, and anyone else who had access, was painted in 1338/39.



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Effects of good government, 1338-39. Fresco, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy

As cities/republics saw themselves as devoted to the wellbeing of their citizens, it was in their interest to show an image different from the one having existed in the Roman Empire or during more barbarous times.

Dancing in the street

Large, and panoramic (spreading throughout the length of the wall), the painting reflects the city and it's surrounding as Siena's world of the 14th century. It's independence functioning, not the property of an emperor anymore, or the land

of God, but a city united for the good of the people. A pictorial “Declaration of Independence” with a promising future. The image is proportionally divided by the city wall and gate, the composition concentrated on the left side showing lively Siena with its dense architecture inside the wall and the countryside with Toscana’s hills and valleys spreading far beyond towards the horizon on the right side. Workmen are busy with a building under construction, and merchants and crafts are flourishing.

Floating above the image of the city right next to the city wall we have the personification of security, with a scroll in hand announcing the tranquillity that the city brings to people, and in the other, a little corpse of a person that threatened the peace and had to bare the consequences

This is the end

And so many died that all believed that it was the end of the world
(Grasso, 1971)

This was the golden moment of Siena. Only 10 years after, one of the liveliest cities of Europe closed its gates and community in the most terrible of ways until gradually 4/5 of its citizens were swept away by the plague. The same walls became the signifiers of quarantine, telling passengers to take another way, away from the disease. So did the nine governors of Siena, fleeing far away as described in Boccaccio’s “Decameron”, leaving their government and people to deal with the plague and the city. People believed that a catastrophe like the plague happened for a purpose, a purpose maybe embodied in the floating security, or possibly even in the damaged Effects of bad government, where the nine governors now belonged. The city was paying for the sins of humankind. In a way that painting depicted the world, because for Siena the plague meant the end of the world.

Language is a virus

Influence of influenza

At the beginning of 2009, a H1N1 strain from the swine influenza virus started spreading throughout the world, and together with it, panic of infection rose. The virus itself hadn't shown dramatically greater numbers of victims in comparison to the regular seasonal flue, to which it also resembles in symptoms, making it difficult to distinguish them both, causing further uncertainty and panic among people.

“Of course it's wonderful how quickly information can be communicated these days. The problem lies in evaluating that information. The media or individuals publishing on the Internet can make mistakes, panic themselves, and infect other people. And this spreads much more quickly than the swine flu” (Spiegel Online International, 27.04.2009.)

The more it is well spread, present, mutating, and becoming THE virus (forming a strong structure-image) the more different reactions are born, mutating. What made this virus so dangerous and controversial? Whether out of fear of another plague, or remembrance of some deadly predecessors – the Spanish flu, the pandemic of 2009 became a media monster, memetically infecting with theories of conspiracy and irrational behaviour. As Wendy Chun argues, the paranoid mind has an answer for everything (Chun, 2006). But also the paranoid mind must have resources for consuming paranoia. In the vastness of blogospheres and social networks was a fertile ground for spreading the disease of the disease. In that case we are explicitly dealing with the reality of the virtual, where the virtual belief becomes the true reality, influencing our experience of the everyday.

20th century flu pandemics					
Pandemic	Year	Influenza virus type	People infected (approx)	Deaths worldwide (est.)	Case fatality rate
Spanish flu	1918–19	A/H1N1 ^[146]	33% (500 million) ^[147]	20 to 100 million ^{[148][149][150]}	>2.5% ^[151]
Asian flu	1956–58	A/H2N2 ^[146]	?	2 million ^[150]	<0.1% ^[151]
Hong Kong flu	1968–69	A/H3N2 ^[146]	?	1 million ^[150]	<0.1% ^[151]
Seasonal flu	Every year	mainly A/H3N2, A/H1N1, and B	5–15% (340 million – 1 billion) ^[152]	250,000–500,000 per year ^[140]	<0.1% ^[153]
Mexican flu	2009	Pandemic H1N1/09	>526,060 ^[7]	7,860 (confirmed; ECDC) ^[2] ≥6,770 (WHO) ^[7]	?

 Not necessarily pandemic, but included for comparison purposes.

image from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=2009_flu_pandemic&oldid=328628201

A broken frame

painting as a window into the world

Painting, seen now as a limited two dimensional medium, has served, since it's beginnings, as the illusion of space, under the aesthetic and ethical code of it's time and context, and taste of the commissioner. In the case of "The Effects of Good Government", strictly determined are:

- 1) The painter -a person considered as holding enough craftsmanship and capabilities. He is commissioned and can rarely be replaced (except in case of not fulfilling the task)
- 2)The theme of the painting and it's purpose are set by the people commissioning it and cannot be changed
- 3)The medium, painting as a strong image-representation, readable to all

Nevertheless, here exists an emancipatory theme of the city as itself, not for the purpose of religion, but which is a strong statement on behalf of the strength of the commune, embodied in this grandiose painting. The painting the governors a mirror of what the future effects their decisions bring to the city. This approach is determined by a hierarchy of the priority of needs.

The image serves as a document, for the present and for the future to come, showing the real reality; the higher objective reality, objective as seen from the state. It is a one channel one time broadcasting, therefore It has to say much in

little space.

What is left open?

Having a human mediator between the request and the result. The actual space for possibility lies in the predetermination of all the factors that combine to make this painting existing. In other words, by closing the multitude of possibilities, the sole possibility of expression becomes open.

The wall

The wall and architecture are the building blocks of the city, also the building blocks of the government, defining its' limits and possibilities/potentials. The word wall refers to both exterior and interior walls, clearly stating that the same wall can mean an inside for someone, and an outside for someone else. And in this case we have a wall that switched its' outside for the inside, where the wanted becomes the unwanted, at the moment of the plague. Every space a wall differentiates, it also makes possible. There is the wall on the painting, the wall on which the painting is, the architecture of the painting and the architecture of Palazzo Pubblico. The effects or the conditions of a (good) government? To put it in short, without a wall, there would be no city, therefore no painting.

The city on the painting is positioned on a hill, above the countryside and its' surroundings, as a fortress and centre of the community. We see noble horsemen going through the city gate to an expedition downhill, surrounded by healthy vineyards, and in the opposite direction, peasants are on their way to the city, climbing with their goods, in the hope of selling them in the city. There is a sharp contrast between the horsemen's light and enjoyable movement, and the peasants effort in their way up hill on foot slowly, carrying the weight of their baggage and expectations to their goal. We literally see the wall, not between the classes, but between the citizens and non-citizens. And that wall, for being gated is a much stronger wall, because it doesn't explicitly say no, it allows traffic, at the same time reinforcing itself, determining who belongs to which side. The new architecture of the walled gardens could find great inspiration in this image of a flourishing gated community. The plague closed a steel door on

the Sienese community, pushing everyone away, imprisoning it's citizens where the sick were now condemned for being inside, they became the ones who couldn't climb up the wall outside to free themselves.

The personification of security is a subtle supplement of precaution, therefore a gatekeeper affirming the borderline of the city. Security is a panopticon, situated in the classical era in terms of punishment.

Radio Ga-ga

Internet as an extension of reality-if you don't believe me, look it up on Wikipedia

In the 1990's to a new shrine of information and communication started evolving. Because they offered a richer way of distributing information than what existed in the mass media broadcasting model, social networks brought a trustworthy, functional, intuitive layout, for the everyday person. Instead of McLuhan's extreme campfire one-to-many approach to mass media, where it was automatically considered as stupefying, we now have a place for everyone's contribution. However, the ambivalence of this contribution can hide an even stronger passivity than absorbing informational impulses from our broadcasters, because we are absorbed in the placebo effect of activity.

In the beginnings of the Internet we had some declarations of independence (Barlow, 1996) conquering something that was considered as another borderless space. The autonomous zone (Bay, 1991) by time became a flourishing garden of visitor-created content, letting users use, feeding on these same users to grow and enrich their account. Neither John Perry Barlow nor Hakim Bay could have imagined the development in directly corporate fashion where in reference to the Internet, most of discussions would be concerning control and privacy.

If we observe the online space as a new territory or territory in general, making a space comparison, then being online means being on the proper line, as in being accepted inside the walls. Connected to all there is. Likewise all there is, is

connected to you. The technology of connecting in its' development shows this paradox of freeing and imprisoning by the same tools. All data and activities can be observed, not only by the governors, but also by other interested users. At the moment of ultimate visibility, our governors are the least visible, and our governmentality is inherently present, with and without us knowing it.

Another brick in the wall

When speaking of the Internet, the emphasis is on participation, but how much and, more importantly in which way is it allowed to participate is left without questioning. The usability of Twitter like applications, and the emphasis on production presumes connectedness and before offering the irrefutable offer that we are already contributing. Protocol is what Alexander Galloway refers to as the controlling power that operates after decentralization.

“In this day and age, technical protocols and standards are established by a self-selected oligarchy of scientists consisting largely of electrical engineers and computer specialists. Like the philosophy of protocol itself, membership in this technocratic ruling class is open. But, to be sure, because of the technical sophistication needed to participate, this loose consortium of decision makers tends to fall into a relatively homogenous social class: highly educated, altruistic, liberal-minded science professionals from modernized societies around the globe.” (Galloway, 2006, p.122)

Galloway makes a strong point by focusing on the paradoxical nature of this openness, which is exactly the point where social distance is made. Leaving an illusion of choice, as the post-modern father, we actually do what we are told. (Zizek, 2005)

“The plurality of nodes in networks does not guarantee a more inherent democratic order, indeed it is arguably serves to obscure its

totalitarian substructure. The founding principle of the Net is control, not freedom,” (Galloway, 2006, p.142.)

With this technical substructure background one might wonder, isn't the human instance of how we use this given medium the one that has the final word?

The man who sold the world

140 characters

What does Twitter's website say about how the idea for Twitter arose?

“Jack Dorsey had grown interested in the simple idea of being able to know what his friends were doing. Specifically, Jack wondered if there might be an opportunity to build something compelling around this simple status concept. When he brought the idea up to his colleagues, it was decided that a prototype should be built.”
(www.twitter.com)

Evan Williams, one of Twitter's developers says:

“What we have to do is deliver to people the best and freshest most relevant information possible. We think of Twitter as it's not a social network, but it's an information network. It tells people what they care about as it is happening in the world.” (Wikipedia)

This also embodies the change of Twitter's politics, changing the question it asks users from “what are you doing?” to “what's happening?” . Here I would be tempted to call for Lacan's dialectic of jealousy (Chun, 2006) in the sense of this need for a service only to satisfy our hunger for the knowledge the other has, or knowledge about the other. Regardless of these assumptions, Twitter is a product of connectedness. In other words, a company that functions on the basis

of its' customer/users sociability.

What does Wikipedia say about Twitter?

“Twitter is a free social networking and micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and read messages known as tweets. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to the author's subscribers who are known as followers. Senders can restrict delivery to those in their circle of friends or, by default, allow open access. Users can send and receive tweets via the Twitter website, Short Message Service (SMS) or external applications. While the service itself costs nothing to use, accessing it through SMS may incur phone service provider fees.” (Wikipedia)

What is the basis for this free service? Using Twitter is a service of the Internet, which already presupposes an Internet connection. Being connected to the Internet requires the possibility of an Internet connection, which is not universal (being free to connect), and if the possibility exists, the cost of it. By using Twitter we obey the protocol of the Internet and the protocol of Twitter itself. In this elaborately restricted form we are free to use the service.

Short, precise messages, an efficient fast medium for our fast present and its' applicability to mobile phones embodies the all in one, or all in all interconnectedness model advertised and a goal in mobile technology. And precisely the applicability of Twitter on mobile phones is the one that made it popular.

In this space for free exchange of information, the only actual space, within highly fixed parameters, left to be open-the content of those 140 characters (in the case of Twitter) is the one that by overwhelming, disabled the sole purpose of Twitter's service.

Master and servant

The over-flooding of Twitter as an unintentional denial of service attack

A denial of service attack is an attempt to disable a computer resource, temporarily or permanently. In simple words it confuses the system. The possibility of manipulating the protocol with enough technical knowledge and ideas (hacking) is a given possibility by the same protocol, Galloway argues (Galloway 2006, p.158). But here we observe the disruption in a more evident example of unintentional disruption. Not decided or introduced by humane instance, but as a will of nature-technology, so to say. Or the will of possibility. In April 2009, there were 10000 tweets registered an hour regarding the Swine flu, disabling the usage of Twitter. One other example is the death of Michael Jackson that resulted in so many messages being exchanged via online networks that Google news and Twitter misunderstood it for a DOS attack and stopped working in order to put the services back in function.

One of the side-effects, elements and also strategies of communication today is confusion, in this case, non strategic mass confusion. And that confusion doesn't only lie in the plurality of information sources. Filtering the sources can even lead to diverse misinformation not communicable among each other. If one was to restrict himself to this free, open, personal media, the image of swine flu would grow exponentially, out of confusion, an overwhelming number of messages, and panic. In the absurd sense overusing leaves the media unusable, and only in this moment of not functioning properly users are apt to wonder, what is the nature of this system. The same way we would wonder about our electric appliances at the moment of electricity restrictions, taking electricity as something inherently functioning in our everyday. The only difference being, that nobody observes electricity as an open system or network, contrary to the networks favourite status in discussions today.

It is not as simple as in the example of Siena with its' one gate and possibilities of citizens going in and out, or non citizens going in and out. Spatial division cannot be made. Walls are not visible.

Walk on by

Social distancing as a strategy for prevention

One of the strategies recommended for preventing an epidemic is social distancing, which goes hand in hand with the paranoid fear that starts spreading parallel to the disease itself. While a virus is spreading, it is at the same time connecting and disconnecting people. It is a city growing together with its' walls. Social networks are a fertile ground for keeping the uninfected, and at the same time holding on to that primary among secondary needs of being social. The term 'to be connected' has the same potential for questioning as social and networking in "Notes in Support of Antisocial Networking" by Geof Cox (Cox, 2008). The disruption caused in the case of the Swine flu infection is both on the physical level and through channels of communication. Physical level in order to avoid infection, and through channels of communication by being infected with fear. There is a break of communication precisely because of the possibility for communication. By forcing its' inclusive character, it excludes.

It's all just a little bit of history repeating?

The question is here not whether history is repeating itself, or that these systems are sick in terms of sick=bad, healthy=good, or whether cyberspace is the new governor- kybernete (Greek-statesman, governor) and users the free labour peasants. It is more problematic than that of observing and valuing from a binary model. Every actuality is the closing of a possibility for existence, in two ways. By actualizing, something is determined, therefore closed. As Wendy Chun sees control as a part of freedom (Chun, 2006.), not only as it's complement, likewise when we encounter the "open" it holds within itself not only the antagonism of non open, but all the possibilities at once.

It would be important to note that social distance is something worth looking at

even when observing these two examples, as we are looking at a particular painting from a particular time with all the contextual distance it incorporates, also in the very notion of the city as seen on this painting is a particular notion valid in its own terms, and that by naming we accept a certain disharmony of our particularity with its' context. This Derrida calls *differance* (from the meanings of difference and difference-french) which

"Goes further beyond De Saussure's postulate that meaning is the result of the difference in the binary code. By this Derrida attempts to show that meaning always encapsulates difference within itself, which means that meaning is never fully present, but at the same time both absent and present." (Djordjevic, 2009, p.102)

In that sense whether we call a media closed or open, we are distancing, moving away from the actual media, and undermining human agency. Moreover in holding the antagonism inherent in every condition that could be observed as binary, we draw attention to its' opposite. Also with the institutionalization of the Internet (in the sense of stricter and more recurrent protocol) the question of the future of our omniconnected media rises, and our social, correlative to production. One of the questions Howard Rheingold and Eric Klutenberg (Rheingold, Klutenberg, 2006) raise in their "Counterpowering the Panopticon from the Inside" is:

"If we gain health and wealth, amusement and empowerment, through our use of a tool or medium, how have we, by that use acted to constrain or expand the range of potential choices? "

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Soundtrack:

- Shake the disease – Depeche mode
- A broken frame – Depeche mode
- Dancing in the street- Mick Jagger and David Bowie, 1985. (first recorded by Martha and the Vandellas, 1964)
- Language is a virus - Laurie Anderson
- The wall - Pink Floyd
- Another brick in the wall - Pink Floyd
- Radio ga-ga - Queen
- The man who sold the world - David Bowie
- Master and servant - Depeche mode
- History repeating - Shirley Bassey