

MA OR SENSING TIME-SPACE

Towards a culture of the inter

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Let me start with a very simple statement: interactivity is the activity of the inter, of the in between. To most of us this statement however may sound quite problematic, because the in between is not a person, not an agency that has intentions and expectations. It is all a monomaniacal projection that engenders effects that keep the flow going. The in between as an inter – to follow a conventional western strain of thought – is at best a void, an empty space. It only comes into existence when two identifiable agents – say: two users of the Internet or an artist and a festival participant – want to communicate something directly or indirectly to each other. As a result of this autonomous desire an inbetween is effected.

The presupposition of this critique is a definition of space that western science produced. Space is defined mathematically. A room is empty until some one enters this space. That very moment space is entered place is produced focused on this subject. His coordinates determine space as place. The moment another person enters the room something happens between them. This something can be called an inter or an in between, but no matter how one identifies this relation it is secondary to the identities. First there is an identity than there is a relation. Erst kommt das Fressen dann kommt die Moral. In a theological mode: first there is one God and in relating to himself space and time take place. Western thought is based upon this very idea of selfreferentiality. In the unfolding, die Entfaltung, le pli, in the literal de-velopment of an identity world – i.e. spatially and temporally situated matter - is created.

Our western mind nowadays, i.e. in times of terror, is more than ever obsessed with identity. Not only security services and intelligence agencies are very happy with the extradition of post-structuralist political correctness that favored difference over identity. They need clear cut, securely positioned identities. But the real question that motivated thinkers of difference like Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Irigaray, Kristeva, Nancy and many others was not so much the question on difference and the Other. It was the question on connectedness. Underneath the so called political correctness for differences there always was a more fundamental question as, for that matter, is also behind the current problematic of identities and the feared dissolution of public space. When we talk about the need for social cohesion the underlying urgent question is: what is it that relates people, what is relationality?

In the presentation that I gave on Saturday I spoke about the embeddedness of contemporary individuals in networks, about their immersion in media. I labelled our current human condition provocatively: radical mediocrity. The flipside of this negative predicate – be honest: who wants to be called mediocre? – the positive flipside was qualified as inter-esse: literally the being (esse) of the in between (inter). I referred to Heideggers notions of the Zwischen, of Mit-Sein and In-der-Welt-sein. Poststructuralist philosophers, actualizing and updating Heidegger developed notion like 'intermediare', 'différance', 'milieu', 'interval' and 'being-in-common'. But in

the final analysis all of them refer to the thinker of Enlightenment: Immanuel Kant. It is Kant who thematized societal inter-esse in his third critique *Critique of Judgement* or *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in which he talks about art and systematically analyses the aesthetic judgement. In this context Kant proposes the phrase 'sensus communis'. The literal meaning is a sensibility as understanding (sensus) that is commonly shared (communis). Communis etymologically refers to a situation in which a space that is surrounded by a wall: a city. Urbanity is sensus communis. Before people can even meet each other there has to be a sensus communis.

Before modernity this sensus communis was secured by super-individual, mythic and divine forces. In the final instance early modern state sovereignty lends its legitimization from a theological argumented connection to these forces. But once the individual becomes the center of political action, sensus communis becomes individual common sense focused on consensus. Modernity struggles with this paradox: the atomist notion of the individual only allows a con-sensus after the fact. Being-in-common, *etre-en-commun*, Jean Luc Nancy states, is retrospectively legitimized. The mathematical account of space is an integral part of this paradoxical inherence. The real hot political issue nowadays is the tension between sensus communis and consensus. Democracy is the balance act on the rope tied between the two.

Intercultural comparison

You will easily understand that the phenomenon of a medium as such is a binding force. It is a middle, in German: ein Mittel als Mitten. A medium structures relationality before specific relations are articulated. Media are dispositives for relationality. That is why I connected radical *medi@crity* to inter-esse. And that is why Marshall McLuhan sees television, being an extension of our nervous system, as the sensus communis of the electronic world that he labeled as the Global Village. But that is not really a satisfying answer. Already before decolonisation and the total implementation of television in collective consciousness we realized that our specific account of space is a typical western product. After Einstein and Bergson time became an integral element of a spatio-temporal continuum. But this is only effective on a subatomic and astrophysical scale and only visible on interfaces. What about the human scale? Is it possible to conceptualize space-time differently on a human scale that has become radically mediocre?

In *The Hidden Dimension* (1966) Edward T. Hall, a contemporary of Marshall McLuhan, explores the various ways of how different cultures have conceptualized the sensory connectedness in public space: how do perceptions communicate a public experience? He too criticizes the Western modernist opposition between private and public: When Westerners think and talk about space, 'they mean the distance between objects. In the West, we are taught to perceive and react to the arrangements of objects and to think of space as "empty"'¹. An intercultural comparison is needed to make this explicit: 'The meaning of this becomes clear only when it is contrasted with the Japanese, who are trained to give meaning to spaces to perceive the shape and arrangements of spaces; for this they have a word: MA'.²

Instead of mathematical perspectivism that has structured our western gaze since Renaissance, Japanese art focuses on multi-perspectivism: 'In contrast to the single point perspective of Renaissance and Baroque painters, the Japanese garden is

¹ E. T. Hall: *The Hidden Dimension*. New York 1966, p. 153.

² Hall, op. cit. (note 46), p. 153.

designed to be enjoyed from many points of view'.³ Others after Hall have focused on MA. Speaking about the low wall that closes the world famous Ryoanji-stone garden in Kyoto off from the natural world, Ryosuki Ohashi remarks: The wall's 'decisive function does not aim at creating a perspectival effect for the garden, but to separate the natural world outside and the aesthetically shaped inside. It constitutes the "in-between" (ma) of the two worlds. It is also the "in-between" of "life and death" (shoji). The wall, that in a spatial sense is just peripheric, gets in a structural sense a central meaning for the stoneward, even better: it constitutes the real centre"⁴. Outside and inside are no longer oppositions. They are effects of MA that is a cutting, a 'kire' of the Void. In Western perception the garden in itself illustrates the Void of the Univers.

Christine Buci-Glucksmann criticizes the modern notion of space and compares the postmodern condition with the Baroque gaze. She speaks about the films of Yasujiro Ozu in terms of MA: 'While the instability – the Japanese mu-jo (not-stable) – is the pure flow of time, the interval between things, ma, is at the same time emptiness and "the in-between"⁵. MA appears to be an interval, and as such an in between.

On an 'individual' level we find this affirmative approach of the in between in Japanese 'aesthetics of existence', varying from flower arranging (ikebana) and tea ceremony (cha no yu) to paper folding (origami), ink painting (sumiye) and martial arts. These pseudo-ritual meditations clarify everyday life behavior of the Pachinko player but also the behavior of Japanese frenetically toying their digital gadgets and fanatically handling sports utensils, like golf clubs, tennis rackets, baseball bats, and bamboo swords during lunch break. Tama gotchi – the little egg – is a Japanese invention. In aesthetic and agonistic practices these repetitive drills become highly concentrated performances. Participants are not trying to grasp the 'inner secret' of an object, activity or opponent, but by attaining 'mu shin' or an empty heart, they strive for a-voiding the mediation that connects subject and object.

So MA in Japan penetrates all arts - from preparing, serving and drinking tea to doing business, from folding paper (origami) to martial arts, from painting, music and cinema to architecture. In Zen painting MA structures the emptiness that is articulated in painting. We also find it in calligraphy. In music MA is the tension between the singer and the player of the shamisen (a three string lute) who follows the voice. In Noh theatre MA structures the strictly formalized dance of the actors.

[remark dance performance TURNED of Christian Ziegler]

Japanese architecture too presupposes MA. You will probably know how spaces in traditional Japanese houses are constructed with sliding doors, with sho-ji. The space changes all the time. It adapts to the context. The architect Arata Isozaki acknowledges that MA - as a space-time interval - is the primary medium of architecture. Architects work with and in MA. In 1979 the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris organized an exhibition on MA. The exhibition, initiated by Isozaki, consisted of nine spatial, visual and sculptural installations in which different dimensions of ma were made

³ Idem, p. 154.

⁴ Ohashi: *Kire. Das 'Schöne' in Japan. Philosophisch-ästhetische Reflexionen zu Geschichte und Moderne*. Köln 1994, p. 75.

⁵ Ch. Buci-Glucksmann: *Der kartographische Blick der Kunst*. Berlin 1997, p. 166. We could enhance this perspective by referring to Luce Irigaray, when she speaks about 'the economy of the interval' and to Kristeva's notion of the semiotic.

experiential. The qualifications of ma in the catalogue are most clarifying: ‘Ma is the place in which a life is lived’; ‘Ma organizes the process of movement from one place to another. The breathing and movement of people divide the space in which people live’; ‘Ma is maintained by absolute darkness’; ‘Ma is the sign of the ephemeral’; ‘Ma is the alignment of signs. Ma is an empty place where all kinds of phenomena appear, pass and disappear...’. And finally, the most lucid description, seen in the light of my presentation: ‘Ma is the way to sense the moment of movement’⁶. Factually, one can say, the visitor of the exhibition is himself installed by MA in order to experience the object of the exposition.

‘the way to sense the moment of movement’

Etymologically ma is rooted in Shinto religion. It has a ritual background. According to the Japanese, nature embodies a multitude of gods (kami). Their presence can be invoked by performing strictly prescribed acts and sentences in enclosed sites wherein gods can ‘descend’. This stylization – or more adequately focused: this mediation – is constitutive for MA to be effective. The sacred space-time is marked by poles, gates or knotted ropes. We still recognize these elements in Sumo fights. Of course these ritual spatio-temporal sites are not solely confined to Japanese religious culture. But the specific Japanese characteristic is found in how the ‘descent’ of gods is enacted in order to ‘install’ a relationship between nature, men and gods. MA is a practice, a performance. It is the ‘informe’, the Formless, within the informatization.

Let me be more specific on the nature of MA. Not only in Noh theatre and puppet theatre, in tea ceremony (cha no yu) and arranging flowers (ikebana), but also in martial arts (budo) – known as ‘the Way (dô) of the Warrior (bu)’ – the ‘thinking body’ has its ways. My specific background is martial arts training, especially Japanese swordfighting or ken-do, the way of the sword. The France based Zen master and master of martial arts Taisen Deshimura begins his book *Zen and the martial arts* (1977) with a chapter entitled ‘Ici et maintenant’, here now, reminding us of Deleuze’s now here that is always also a no where.⁷ The chapter ends as follows: ‘In the martial arts there is no time to wait. (...) One has to live in an instant. It is exactly there that the decision of life and death falls.’⁸ In this ‘actuality’ matter instantaneously does mind. The mind is matter. The body is spiritual.

In budo philosophy the notion of the center is crucial. One has to keep – though not to defend – one’s center, both physical and mental. The energy (ki) that traverses body and mind is centered in the abdomen (hara or tanden). To explain this in a tactical sense Michael Random, a French master in martial arts, refers to the notion of MA: ‘In a word, ma is perceived behind everything as an undefinable musical chord, a sense of the precise interval eliciting the fullest and finest resonance’.⁹ MA AI technically means the correct distance between two opponents. Correct in a Confucian sense: in harmony (ai). Unlike Kant’s position towards the beautiful, however, this harmony as an aesthetic category is sensed non-rationally. MA implies an ontology of the present as pre-sent.

MA is the contextualized tensional distance that positions persons as opponents or partners. You will understand that not only every situation but also every martial art

⁶ See: ‘Ma: Japanese Time-Space’, in: *The Japanese Architect: International Edition of Shinken-chiku*, nr. 262, Febr. 1979, p. 69-80.

⁷ Deshimaru, op. cit. (note 38), p. 31.

⁸ Idem, p. 34

⁹ Michael Random, *Japon. La stratégie de l’invisible*. Paris 1985, pp. 150/5.

has a different *ma ai*. Judo is more close and linked than aikido, but aikido more linked than karate do, while kendo and kyudo – the way of the bow – have another *ma ai*. *Ma ai* depends upon speed, skill and mental state of the opponents. The physical environment, the distance is decisive. In other words space always has its specific scale. No fighter can bridge this distance without abandoning his defense first. Losing the centre, breaking the middle means being defeated, while taking the center of the opponent by energizing one's own body and mind technically (*ki ken tai itchi*) means victory.¹⁰

In *ma* space and time are both involved: *ma* is a dynamic space-time interval wherein activity and passivity, *agens* and *patiens* are one and the same, yet different. As long as *maai* is maintained, apparently nothing happens.

[short intermezzo famous samoerai fights]

KATA: Basics

I already indicated that stylization is crucial for *MA* to be operative. In all the Japanese aesthetic and martial practices stylization is basic. It is called: *kata*, a notion that can be translated as form. Living in an information society presupposes being formed in being informed. The presupposition of this proces however is the *informe* as a voided grid that consists of forgotten media.

Kata are the basics of Japanese practices. As a dynamic meditation on the mediating forms it is Zen on the move. In martial art practice performing basic forms or '*kata*' in karate - empty (*kara*) hand (*te*) – in well known through its popularization in action movies. But the active self-effacing enactment of *kata* differs from an intentionally acting out of fighting tricks or a violent passage à l'act. This 'formal' enactment undermines the opposition between heroism and mediocrity. What is realized in Zen's formal mediocrity ontologically is an 'in between' or *ma*. It is a seeking of the Void, an a-voiding of violence. Voiding concerns the matrix of relations, subjects are always already positioned in. The Void 'is' the 'inter' or medi()crity. In Japanese 'lifestyling' medi()crity is the ontological crux of a formal mediocrity that seeks to harmonize the middle.

MA: Thinking differences and Zen

But it is a long way from medieval fighters to westrn conepts of space. Let me rephrase the problem of empty space in different terms. To a certain extent this spatio-temporal nothingness instigated a debate in the 19th century on nihilism. Nietzsche's famous slogan 'God is dead' - that by the way was already stated by Hegel in the beginning of that century – bears witness of the devaluation of western social and cultural life. Nietzsche's thesis has been enthusiastically adopted by Japanese scholars. Not because they experienced their life as nihilistic, but because of their (zen)boeddhist background in which nothingness is perceived as the core of all there is.

[improvised intermezzo Japan and America: 1852 forced to open up, Tom Cruise The Samurai]

'Post-nihilism' resonates in discussions on Nietzschean nihilism in Japan. Keiji

¹⁰ See: H. Oosterling/L. Vitalis: *Kendo, techniek, tactiek en didaktiek*. Rotterdam 1985, p. 131 ff.

Nishitani is one of the main participants in this debate.¹¹ The last paragraph of Nishitani's book on nihilism deals with this problem in terms of atheism. He critically poses the question whether an existential position of 'remaining firmly grounded in one's actual socio-historical situation, or more fundamentally, in actual "time" and "space" (...) really engage actual being to the full?'¹² For Nishitani emptiness is a wrong turn. In order to elucidate this problem thinkers like Nishitani, but also Masao Abe points towards 'the locus of Buddhist "emptiness"' as fullness. The affirmation of nothingness into an affirmative fullness is phrased by Abe as follows: 'So I think that "everything is empty" may be more adequately rendered in this way: "everything is just as it is" (...) Everything is different from everything else. And yet while everything and everyone retained their uniqueness and particularity they are free from conflict because they have no self-nature'.¹³

This aspect is further explored by two influential Japanese philosophers: Tetsuro Watsuji en Kitaro Nishida. Watsuji focuses on a unity of mind and body (*shinjin ichinyo*), though not in a Hegelian sense. In Japanese the word for 'person' is *ningen*. The first character (*nin*) means 'man', the second (*gen*) space or in-between (*aida*)¹⁴. *Ningen* does not refer to a substantial core of an actual person (*hito*) - cogito - but to a dynamic sphere wherein people are interconnected. Reflecting upon Watsuji's philosophy, Yasuo Yuasa states that Western philosophy is founded on the primacy of time as the inner sense of the subject. Watsuji came to that conclusion after having studied Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, from which he adopted and rephrased the notion of *Dasein*. I agree that it is much more complicated, but the primacy of time within Western thought has only been recently criticized by for instance Peter Sloterdijk and French philosophers of difference like Lyotard and Derrida.

For a further clarification Watsuji introduces a new notion: *basho*. 'To exist in betweenness (*aida gara*) is to exist within the life-space. Furthermore, to exist in a spatial *basho* means nothing other than to exist as a human-being by virtue of one's body; I exist in my body, occupying the spatial *basho* of here and now...'.¹⁵ In using the notion *basho* Watsuji refers to Kitaro Nishida. It has a common meaning as a physical place, but 'basho' is the idea of place, *der Ort-Gedanke*. It is developed by Nishida as a countermove to the Cartesian dualism¹⁶. To Nishida the Self is not the unity of consciousness, but rather the 'autonomy' of the field of consciousness.¹⁷ *Basho* in sum is 'the logic of place' or 'spatial logic'¹⁸ with the moving body as 'pure experience' (*junsui keiken*) - a synthesis of phenomenological (Heideggerian) en zen

¹¹ K. Nishitani: *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. New York 1990.

¹² Nishitani, op. cit. (note 35), p. 190.

¹³ M. Abe: *Zen and Western Thought*. Honolulu 1985, p. 233; see also Nishitani: *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. New York 1990, p. 180; T. Deshimaru: *Zen and Arts Martiaux*. Paris 1977, p. 31/145.

¹⁴ The pronunciation of the Japanese *kanji* or character differs depending upon whether it is used separately or in connection with other *kanji*. *Aida (gara)* is the same character as (*nin*)*gen*.

¹⁵ Idem, p. 39.

¹⁶ R. Elberfeld, *Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945). Das Verstehen der Kulturen. Moderne japanische Philosophie und die Frage nach der Interkulturalität*. Amsterdam/Atlanta 1999, p. 105.

¹⁷ Idem, p. 107-109.

¹⁸ Nishida is probably one of the first Japanese philosophers who succeeded in connecting traditional Japanese concepts with Western philosophical ideas - ranging from Kant, Fichte and Hegel up to the neo-Kantianism of Rickert - but as Piovesane states in *Recent Japanese Philosophical Thought 1862-1996. A Survey* (1997) 'this system, though including the method of western philosophy, is still thoroughly oriental in its theme and fundamental approach'(88).

notions – as focal point.¹⁹

So the Cartesian duality of body and mind is completely neglected in the analyses of Japanese philosophers. In spite of the primacy of appearances, Japanese zen-buddhism acknowledges an experiential truth one can grasp in a radical affirmation of appearances. In this full affirmation the intentional subject and his will dissolve. The empty mind or no-mind (*mu shin*) is one of the most prominent articulations. So *ma* is neither Descartes' mathematical notion of extension, nor Kant's transcendental time-space. *Ma* is a spatio-temporal interval in which a dynamic in-between is systematically prior to, though retrospectively simultaneous with the installed entities.

Tensional reflections

Let me now shift to the in between in order to lead my argument via the inbetween or inter to the basics of new media. Mind/body, subject/object, active/passive, message/medium, global/local and virtual/actual are rephrased as tensional differences. To my opinion only a radical analysis of the 'inter' will throw some light on our actual 'condition humaine'. The prefix 'post' or 'trans' to 'human' is just a matter of definition. The question remains as to the 'what' of this in-between. Does the inbetween travers the opposition between presence and absence and does this imply a collective aesthetic practice that articulates and endures the tension of the in-between? Does it 'help' to be informed by other cultures like the Japanese that developed aesthetic practices in which the medium is radically affirmed as a result of which the ego is made transparent?

Or is the question 'What is the "inter"?' badly formulated? Then the 'inter' is not, it operates. But how it operates is to a great extent dependent upon the individuals that are sensibilized to its movements. *Sensus communis* is not a potentiality to be realized in the twofold Hegelian sense of the word: it is an actuality to be virtualized. According to Sloterdijk, we live in the age of the in-between. But did we not always live in the in-between? Is the in-between, precisely because of our shared ability to reflect upon our material conditions, is this mediumlike existence, is this 'mediocrity' perhaps our condition humaine? And is, instead of negating 'mediocrity' as modernity legitimized by the Grand Narrative of emancipation and *Bildung*, a radicalization of mediocrity the path we have to take nowadays?

Against the background of the recent digitalization I prefer to understand 'inter'activity as an operative cluster of tensional fields as a 'foundation' for the affective and reflective human relations. What we use to qualify as 'soul' (*anima*), 'mind' (*spiritus*), 'cogito', 'selfconsciousness' or 'intersubjectivity' to me are totalizations of these tensional fields. The human mind/body tension appears as such as the *modus operandi* – as foundation and operation – of the in-between.

Interactivity is activity of the 'inter'.

MA and cyberspace

Ma may be that basic, but that does not explain what it has to do with new media. As I indicated in the beginning of my presentation Western theoreticians have used the Japanese concept 'ma' to redefine public space. Within a postmodern frame of mind it

¹⁹ In Japanese two words are used for 'experience': *keiken* and *taiken*, respectively 'Erfahrung' and 'Erlebnis'. Of course, the second meaning is more appropriate within this context. See Yuasa, op. cit. (note 51), p. 49.

is not hard to acknowledge Isozaki's idea of a building or even a city as a dynamical space-time machine, that produces intersubjectivity and – given Foucault's thesis on the 'panoptic dispositive' exemplified by the Benthamian prison – even as a micropolitical *sensus communis*.

Ma was discovered by new media theorists almost 10 years ago. The most daring 'application' of ma as the quasi-transcendental global spacing comes to the fore in *The Skin of Culture* (1998), a book published by the present-day director of the McLuhan-Institute, Derrick De Kerckhove. Inspired by McLuhan's vision of the Global Village he explores the influence and creative possibilities of digitalized worldwide communication in terms of MA. He applies MA to the dynamic network-structure of the Internet and other kinds of computerized communication-systems, in short: to cyberspace. De Kerckhove sketches the growing awareness of Westerners that public space outside our skins is not empty, but exponentially filled with networks of different qualities. He understands MA as 'a continuous flow, alive with interactions and ruled by a precise sense of timing and pacing'²⁰. People are now connected and on line as a result of the operative forces of a in his words 'psychotechnological MA'. Eventually – and De Kerckhove must have had McLuhans thoughts on medial extension in the back of his mind - our minds will externalize themselves as this 'psychotechnological ma, a world of electronic intervals in constant activity and reverberations'. De Kerckhove goes as far as to proclaim that 'ma is the quintessence of a certain aspect of the global human civilisation'²¹. To De Kerckhove's estimation Japanese designers have understood the creativity that is enclosed in this concept more than their Western colleagues.

Ma becomes an interface between mind and technology. I am not going to discuss De Kerckhove's uncritical presuppositions here – his cartesianism and Hegelian notion of progress, notwithstanding his explicit refusal of the myth of progress. Neither will I discuss his technological reductionism of the *sensus communis*. But I cannot but finish my exploration on MA with a critical note on De Kerckhove's suggestion that MA is fully identifiable with computarized space. If I tried to make a point in my explanation of MA than this one: MA can not be manipulated and reproduced by programmed devices. MA is a vital force that molds contexts. In the final instance computers are programmed devices. The most we can say is that we are installed by what we retrospectively can explain as a time-space interval that is technically produced. What Kant rightly noticed in relation to the *sensus communis* also counts for the 'inter' of the Internet: this cannot be managed – that is: mapped, extrapolated and calculated. It cannot exhaustively be understood by referring to globalization and rule guided hard and software. Yet, technological literacy enables us to forget this programmed being there, this designed Dasein.

[final improvisation:

Paradox 'How can the unpredictable be predicted?'

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²⁰ D. de Kerckhove: 'The Skin of Culture', in: *Investigating the new electronic reality*. Ed. Ch. Dewdney. London 1998, p. 165.

²¹ Idem, p. 167.