

LACAN'S ALETHOSPHERE: AN EARLY PSYCHOANALYTICAL MODEL FOR AI AND BIG DATA

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THE THRESHOLD AND THE SCREEN

Even if we walk in the city (*polis*) as visitors, we walk as citizens, thanks to the imaginary status conferred on everyone who occupies a public space, blending stranger and resident into a composite company of speaking-beings who may, at minimum, learn to say hello or nod as they pass by each other. This is the principle of conviviality, the baseline of the civic. There may be departures from this standard, from indifference to protests, to riots, to violence. These may be done “to say something” – the exercise of free speech, for example – which are not exceptions to the public idea of conviviality but a confirmation its built-in tolerance. In this sense, the exception proves the rule and shows just how much public space is also (or mainly) a stage that appropriates buildings and parks as *scenery* to frame messages directed to international audiences, as in the occupation of Zuccotti Park in as a part of the 2011 “Occupy Wall Street” protests. In such cases, the audience’s relation to the stage skips over locale; tourists and workers actually passing by the protestors became a part of the spectacle. Like some Elizabethan theaters, the audience’s view included parts of itself, as if to provide a model for the kind of responsiveness expected by the theatrical action.

Even before technology made the commodification of civic events possible, the city was already a screen in that the public *polis* made what was said and done there politically significant, and this significance *ipso facto* has involved a structure of stage and auditorium, with the necessary support of props, wings, lobbies, dressing rooms, and storage spaces. This leads to the following thesis: that for every inhabitable public space in a city, there is a set of *secondary spaces* that are charged up, waiting to attach to a public event, with the structure of the theater and the dynamics of performance. Before the event, they are only a potential, virtual. During the event they appropriate the simple furniture of the everyday and conscript it into service to the “fourth wall,” by which any space may host a spectacle directed to those who are *called to judge the validity* of this public act. In other words, a *secondary virtuality* lies latent within every public space in every city. At any moment, a city space can become a stage for *political* visibility, inserting its own functional geometry into Euclidean normality, as a parasite might take charge of a host.

Lacan’s Lucky Guess?

On May 13, 1970, on the steps of the Pantheon in Paris where Jacques Lacan was to give a lecture that had to be cancelled thanks to the Paris riots, the famous psychoanalyst entertained an impromptu question-and-answer session. A transcription of this event became chapter X of the publication of that seminar, where Lacan talked about Hegel's dialectic, Kierkegaard, the ideas native to psychoanalysis, confrontation with the Big Other (impossible? Lacan denies that he said this), another denial of an inaudible question claiming he had attacked philosophy, a defense of analytical discourse, anxiety, university discourse (which could be considered as, essentially, the discourse proper to cities), and proletarians.

Then, Lacan noticed that someone was recording the session on a small portable tape machine: "What do you do with all I tell you? You record it on a little machine, and afterward, you give parties which you Hand out invitations to – that's a Lacan tape for you." We can easily imagine how, thirty or forty years later, this "party" would have been streamed instantly onto Instagram, Facebook, Vimeo, or TikTok. Physical parties might still be held, but the feature of Internet versions would be to re-watch what had already been made Public a minute or two after the actual event. Lacan had his own "instantaneous response." In the very next chapter of *The Other Side* he invents two new terms, the "alethosphere" – an early depiction of what would, in the mid-1990s, become the Internet – and the "lathouse," any small gadget capable of linking the local with the global in the same way Lacan's Q&A would be featured in future parties.

These neologisms should not be dismissed as clairvoyant lucky guesses. Where the alethosphere and lathouse link the civic locale to a dispersed audience, who then certifies or rejects it, it evidences a secondary virtuality embedded within the idea of the civic, as a virtuality relating private witness to public reception, *already* and *always* embedded within the idea of the civic. This could be summarized by saying that, *before there was soap, there was the soap box*. This is another way of saying that, even before there were cities there was the *civic protest*. Lacan's lathouse and alethosphere are ancient corollaries of urban development and urban form. Each age discovers new technologies to repeat this ancient algorithm. Although new gadgetries tempt us to assign them the role of cause, they come into existence *because of* this primitive need: to insert a virtual theater into the everyday of the city, even before there is such a thing as "the everyday of the city," caused and justified by this virtuality. The everyday is the necessary ground against which the event is the figure. The means of flattening civic components into the 2d service functions of (back-)ground are "what is the event before the event." Logical priority exists before the "first" that is the spontaneous political act.

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