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Bruce B. Janz

Editor

Place, Space and Hermeneutics

 Springer

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Digital Virtual Places: Utopias, Atopias, Heterotopias

Golfo Maggini

Abstract In my paper, I will approach virtual places neither in terms of non-places or atopias, nor in terms of utopias, but in terms of heterotopias. In order to do so I will deal with some major phenomenological commentaries of place in Heidegger before focusing on a series of placial or place-related topics in his 1936–1938 *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowing)*. In light of the *Contributions* I will first thematize virtual places indirectly by opening up the triad of calculation/digits, representation/screens, and communication/information bits. Then, I will attempt to relate the treatment of *Contributions* to a second triad of topics which are directly placial: worldliness and involvement, situatedness and affective attunement, familiarity and homelessness. I will conclude by insisting on the unique heterotopic dwelling that digital places as places of alterity offer us beyond the all too easy *topos-atopia* and *topos-utopia* dilemmas.

1 From Modern Places to “Super-Modern” Non-Places

In his ground-breaking *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* Mark Augé offers an incisive analysis of the way in which late modernity has profoundly altered our sense of place, thereby leading to a gradual transition from places to non-places. Instead of adopting the much-discussed opposition between space and place Augé contrasts the symbolized space of place to the non-symbolized space of non-place insisting on the textual and, more precisely, informational nature of non-places. Messages and signs, networks and screens, anonymous communication and fading identities for the sake of similitudes circumscribe the experience of non-places. Such experience is identified by a character of excess, an overabundance of events, an individualism of references, last but not least, by an overabundance of space which yields priority to an accelerated yet simultaneous time as “the inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present” (Augé 1995, 104–5).

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Although not explicitly mentioned by Augé himself, this diagnosis of the chasm between modernity and “supermodernity” in terms of an opposition between the universal, on the one hand, and the discovery of territoriality, on the other, lies in close proximity to our current experience of place within the emerging digitally-constituted informational environments. In what follows I will focus on a phenomenological treatment of digital virtual places taking Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology as a leading interpretative thread. Heideggerian hermeneutics of place has been thoroughly discussed by space theorists and phenomenologists who have thematized existential spatiality, but the intertwining of real and virtual places has rarely been treated with an eye to phenomenology, no doubt with a few exceptions (Coyne 1994; Coyne 1995). My main concern will, therefore, be to relate the middle Heidegger’s thought of place to the phenomenology of digital experience and its diversified perception of place, in particular with regard to the real/virtual dichotomy. Having accepted the phenomenological distinction between place and space¹ as well as the primacy of place over space², the question to ask is the following: Is indeed the “invasion of space by text” (Augé 1995, 99) a sign of the rapid transformation of modern places to “supermodern” non-places? Furthermore, is the textual-informational nature of this transformation, which leads inevitably to the virtualization of real places (Shields 2003, 79) and also to the creation of virtual places as alternatives to the real,³ the proof that digital virtual places are indeed non-places qualified by the denial of placial singularity and the drive towards delocalization and homogenization?

In what follows I will approach virtual places neither in terms of non-places or atopias, nor in terms of utopias, but in terms of heterotopias, a term borrowed from Foucault’s well-known 1967 “*Des espaces autres*”, and I will propose the displacement of heterotopias from their Foucauldian context and their placement within a phenomenological framework (Waldenfels 2009, 124). In order to do so I will deal with some major phenomenological commentaries of place in Heidegger before focusing on a series of placial or place-related topics in his 1936–1938 *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowing)*. In light of the *Contributions*, I will first thematize virtual places indirectly by introducing the triad of calculation/digits, representation/screens, and communication/information bits. Then, I will attempt to relate the treatment of the *Contributions* to a second triad of topics which are directly placial, such as worldliness and involvement, situatedness and attunement, familiarity and homelessness. I will conclude by insisting on the unique “heterotopic dwelling” that digital places as places of alterity offer us more than the all too easy *topos-atopia* and *topos-utopia* dilemmas.

¹ See, for instance, Casey 1993, 16; Malpas 1999, 21–24.

² See, for instance, Casey 1993, 288; Morris 2004, 181.

³ This is usually viewed as the utopian approach to virtual space (Rheingold 2012). For the proponents of the utopian approach, virtual space is a space on its own due to its non-reliance upon physical space (Rushkoff, 2002, xx). See also: Dodge and Kitchin 2001, 52–64.

2 The Ambiguity of Digital Virtual Places: Homogeneous Spatiality, Eventful Placiality, and Non-Placiality

Phenomenological philosophy has often been praised for taking into account the experiential parameters related to spatiality as well as temporality. It is in virtue of its emphasis on the experiential background that phenomenology in E. Husserl, M. Heidegger, M. Merleau-Ponty, H. Dreyfus, D. Ihde, A. Borgmann has been called upon to overcome the one-dimensionality of theoretical approaches which focus exclusively on the cognitive aspects of information technologies. Instead, phenomenological approaches tend to raise questions of worldliness, situatedness, orientedness, and embodiment with regard to ICT’s recent immersive and interactive versions. By focusing on the role and function of experiential involvement with a non-physical space such as a digital virtual space phenomenology discloses new possibilities of being-in-the-world. Hence, in order to account for the way in which phenomenology in Heidegger sheds light on the placiality or non-placiality of virtual space, several distinct threads of his questioning have to be brought together, primarily his questioning of space and place and also his confrontation with modernity and technology in the middle period of his work. To this aim I will, first, make some suggestions concerning the thought of place and placiality in the 1936–1938 *Contributions to Philosophy* which could be of value for our treatment of digital placiality and then I will proceed to raise the issues of calculation, representation, and communication as the three components of a post-Heideggerian understanding of digital virtual places.

Space and place in Heidegger have been a favorite topic among phenomenologists. In this light, many aspects of his topological analyses have been critically examined and thought upon, such as the difficult balance between embodiment and spatiality, the diversified emphasis on placial phenomenology in his early writings in comparison to his later work, last but not least, his re-evaluation of place with regard to his ontological investigation into time and Being. All these questions re-emerge within the framework of the discussion on digital virtual places, even though little attention has been paid to it by these leading phenomenologists, except for a few critical remarks.

On the one hand, Edward Casey argues that “this virtual implacement can occur in image or word, or in both. The comparative coziness and discreteness of such compresence – in sense of having boundaries if not definite limits – makes it a genuine, if still not fully understood, phenomenon of place.” (Casey 1998, xiv).⁴ Nevertheless, he does not elaborate on this issue, while his unique emphasis on the

⁴ Casey further notes that new electronic technologies are caught in the odd, age-old dialectics of space and place as they structurally belong to geometric, abstract space, but their “dromocentrism” endows them with a placial significance (Casey 1998, 343). In his review of Casey’s *The Fate of Place* Jeff Malpas criticizes him for not paying enough attention to Heidegger’s treatment of the technological in relation to the topological and also to virtual reality’s tendency to forget place. Casey tends to give more importance to the reappearance of place in late modern thinkers and not to some problematic aspects of the odd dialectic with the spatial and the virtual (Malpas 2002, 97).

role of embodiment in place-making renders his analysis of placiality entirely body-dependent: "Much as we might like to think that we could do otherwise (and much as we may be drawn to theories of placelessness in an age of spatial and temporal nihilism), we are *bound by body to be in place*." (Casey 1993, 104; his emphasis).

On the other hand, Jeff Malpas points out that for Heidegger modern technology leads inevitably to the spatialization of the world: "place 'shows up' within technological modernity as nothing other than spatial 'position' (which means that 'place' as such does not appear at all, while things appear as nothing more than nodes within a uniform and extended spatial array." (Malpas 2006, 293) As Heidegger views the essence of modern technology solely in terms of positioning (*Gestell*), through its provocative action technology ultimately turns singular and heterogeneous places into homogeneous spaces. This shift is by no means contingent, since information technologies exacerbate this trend inherent in modern technology, as Malpas comments on the occasion of the later Heidegger's example of a highway bridge (Heidegger 1976, 153–154): to build networks, such as virtual communication highways, means to induce a certain disruption in our sense of place, as nearness and distance are re-organized following new spatial and placial configurations ordered by specific technological imperatives. In light of these changes what becomes evident is that virtual technological spaces are not independent from physical spaces and they do possess a place-making ability. It is at this point that Malpas detects a profound tension: "The more the technological covers over its own character as a mode of revealing, and so as itself constitutive of a certain place and placing, the more it misunderstands and misrepresents its own character and the more it opens up the possibility of its own breakdown." (Malpas 2006, 302) Hence, the ambiguity of modern technology, of which digital communications are but the ultimate manifestation, is its co-belonging to homogeneous spatiality and to genuine, eventful placiality, to the appropriating event (*Ereignis*) as a "happening of place" (Malpas 2012, 219).

Malpas unfolds his questioning of technology and placiality in the later Heidegger by elaborating on a series of critical placial concepts such as ground, gathering, boundary (*πέρας*), and clearing. At the heart of his treatment lies the re-evaluation of Heidegger's middle period marked by the hermeneutic shift from meaning to place made possible through the gradual understanding of presencing in terms of placing. From the late 30s onwards, the residues of the physicalist conception of space in *Being and Time*'s existential analytics gives its place to a more thoughtful topological questioning. In doing so Malpas takes his distance from the criticism of Heidegger's questioning of place by Casey, who opts for the priority of embodiment over place. For Malpas, Casey is wrong in making placiality dependent on embodiment, as it is in light of placiality that the body is to be viewed. Moreover, Malpas' hermeneutic reversal shifts the attention to other important aspects of Heidegger's phenomenology of place with regard to modern and late modern technology: "Heidegger's own critique of the technological character of modernity can itself be viewed as directing attention to the way in which the technological involves a fundamental concealment of place and placedness." (Malpas 2002, 97).

The Malpas-Casey exchange on placiality and embodiment in Heidegger brings us back to our questioning of virtual space, for the latter is frequently linked to questions of embodied – or disembodied – self (Ihde 2002). But is the primacy of the body over place and of embodiment over placiality justified? I agree with Malpas' claim that this is not so. Contrary to Casey who insists on the later Heidegger's re-evaluation of place in relation to modern technology only from the 1949 Bremen and Freiburg lectures on, Malpas pays attention to several critical insights from his middle period, in writings such as the 1936–1938 *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowing)*, even though he recognizes their inadequacy (Malpas 2012, 106). Following this hermeneutic thread, instead of an exclusive focus on the early or the later Heidegger on place, I will concentrate on *Contributions to Philosophy*, where a multitude of placial themes are introduced in connection with his critique of metaphysics and modern technology. The texts from Heidegger's middle period which most commentators choose to focus on is no doubt *The Origin of the Work of Art* and the Hölderlin lectures, whereas *Contributions to Philosophy* are often simply mentioned but never discussed in detail. My aim is not to unfold the entire placial horizon of *Contributions*, but to shed light on the themes of affective attunements (*Stimmungen*), time-space (*Zeit-Raum*) and momentary site (*Augenblicksstätte*), as they could offer us critical insights into the nature and function of digital virtual environments.

3 The Middle Heidegger's Phenomenology of Place and Space: The case of *Contributions to Philosophy*

Toward the middle of the 30s and in the 40s Heidegger seems to have put aside his sole preoccupation with temporality, thus paving the way for a renewed understanding of spatiality. Phenomenologists of place and Heidegger scholars have most of the times thematized the essay on *The origin of the work of art, Introduction to Metaphysics* and the Hölderlin lecture courses in order to document Heidegger's topological shift.⁵ Although the importance of the cryptic 1936–1938 *Contributions to Philosophy* has not been neglected,⁶ no thorough examination of its essentially topological questioning has appeared, even though it is clear that the triad of time-space, un-ground and momentary site allow for a transformed understanding of *Da-sein*'s placedness (*Räumlichkeit*) as to its essential site: "Measured against their ordinary representations, time and space are here more originary; and ultimately, they are time-space, which is not a coupling of time and space but what is more originary in their belonging together." (Heidegger 1999, 132). What already underlies this unique conceptual triad is the historicizing and therefore spatializing power of the guiding attunements that qualify the appropriation event of *Da-sein*'s relation

⁵ See Casey 1997, 258–269; Elden 2002, 64–70; Malpas 2006, 147–155.

⁶ See Escoubas 2008, 85; Dastur 2008, 148–51; Russon and Jacobson 2013, 347–50.

to Being.⁷ In the *Contributions*' preliminary part, Heidegger specifies two grounding attunements corresponding to the first and the other beginning of thought, deep wonder and deep foreboding, the second one manifested as startled dismay, reservedness and deep awe – which open up history as “*thrusts* of time which spatialize be-ing’s opening of its self-sheltering.” (Heidegger 1999, 13; his emphasis). Moreover, the theme of the momentary site is explicitly discussed in sections 238 to 242 of the fourth joining of *Contributions* (“Grounding”). Here the project of existential analytics is reiterated in a totally new perspective taking as a starting point time-space, as the issue is to define the domain of the truth of Being. Reiterating the first beginning of thought is meant to take the form of a instantaneous turning, whereas truth as the truth of Being receives the topological determination of a “between” (*Zwischen*). Correspondingly, man’s relation to Being as an appropriating event which manifests itself through the grounding attunement of reservedness is understood topologically as a momentary site (Heidegger 1999, 261). Hence, the time-space, as well as the time-play-space (*Zeit-Spiel-Raum*), bear witness to a radically new understanding of the temporal mode of making-present. What, thus, becomes apparent is that the unfolding of time-space out of the momentary site is not a process of subjectivization but, on the contrary, its decisive overcoming.

These subtle phenomenological analyses pave the way to wrestle with the question of time-space’s abysmal nature. From Aristotle to Leibniz and from him to Kant and even to Bergson, *τόπος* and *χρόνος* are metaphysical representations of place and time that are to be overcome. But this overcoming is only possible through the enactment of *Da-sein*’s momentary site as the gathering of the re-movals-onto (*Entrückungen*) is a displaced, dynamic form of jointure (Farrell Krell 1991, 60). Thus, on the one hand, the structure of “jointure” is that of adversity – the counterway of time and space – qualified as an *Ab-grund*, which is nevertheless attuned. On the other hand, language is the privileged place for setting forth this complex topological scheme. *Wink* – the gesture that gives a signal – makes up the essence of language, whereas the spatializing of temporality takes place in the mode of language understood as “hesitating refusal” (Heidegger 1999, 268–9).

In his illuminating commentary on *Contributions* Alejandro Vallega sets up the stage for Heidegger’s intense questioning of place in light of all these themes by introducing “the exilic” at the heart of it. Spatiality, which is not to be identified to mathematical space, exceeds the order of presence by appearing with beings and yet withdrawing from them: spatiality “remains a stranger to the main discourse of *Being and Time*” by “slipping away from Heidegger’s articulation.” (Vallega 2003, 128). As language and thought are the domains where this “slipping away” or this alterity occurs, these are the themes that the enacting or performative character of the thinking of *Contributions* invites. The elaboration of a set of topological themes – the in-between, time-space, going over, ungrounding last but not least, the attunement of thinking – go in the direction of demonstrating the heterotopic or

⁷ John Sallis refers to the spatial effect of the guiding attunement of distress (*Not*) in the first beginning of thought as what “breaks up beings so as to ground a possible standpoint for man within this space.” (Sallis 2001, 183).

“ektopic”, from the Greek *έκτοπος*, non-representational character of thought. Hence, Vallega’s “exilic” is a rich placial concept that seeks to grasp the way in which existential spatiality, in contrast to physical or abstract space, is intrinsically heterotopic, because it implicates alterity, withdrawal, and uncanniness at the very heart of the finite thought of being: “...*Contributions* thinks out of alterity and in the enactment of a transformative openness in ephemeral passage.” (Vallega 2003, 171).

4 Heidegger’s Critique of Modern Technology and its Aftermath: Digital Calculability, Representationalism, and Informational Space

Three important issues are worth raising with regard to the middle Heidegger’s critique of modernity and technology before attempting to approach it in light of the phenomenology of virtual places. First, calculation as the pervasive character of the beingness of beings in modernity: “Everything must be adapted to the existing state of calculation. From here on the priority of *organization*, renunciation from the ground up of a freely growing transformation.” (Heidegger 1999, 84).⁸ Second, the persistence of representationalism in late modernity: “The planning-calculating makes a being always more re-presentable, accessible in every possible explanatory respect, to such an extent that for their part these controllables [...] broaden a being into what is seemingly boundless – but only seemingly.” (Heidegger 1999, 348). Last but not least, the informational transmutation of language is the ultimate manifestation of the logical domination of language in Western metaphysics which as such conceals the “enigma” of language: “How does what is ownmost to language arise in the essential swaying of be-ing?...” (Heidegger 1999, 352).

Let us now find some relevance between these three themes and our questioning on digital virtual places. First, concerning the calculative essence of virtual reality digital ontologist Michael Eldred argues that digital space is the ultimate stage within the mathematico-Cartesian framework of modernity. The mathematical-calculative dimension is the very core of digital ontology which has to be perceived not instrumentally, but as a mode of being. It is the middle Heidegger who thematized more adequately the onto-arithmetic constitution of virtual space in a way that brings forth its controlling character (*κυβερνητική*). Hence, what is of crucial importance about virtual places is not the real/virtual dichotomy, but their digital

⁸ Stuart Elden points out the significance of calculation in Heidegger’s *Contributions to Philosophy*. He also makes an insightful comment about the theme of the gigantic (*das Riesenhafte*) in the same text in its relation to calculation. Heidegger relates modern calculation to the securing of space and time which is proper to modernity. Though he explicitly refers to machine technology, Elden establishes a hermeneutic link between “the gigantic”, and also “total mobilization”, to late modern globalization and its intertwining with information technologies moving between real and virtual space. See: Elden 2006, 142–150 and Jeff Malpas’ commentary on Elden’s account of the placelessness of number (Malpas 2012, 294).

nature-numerical nature which possesses a totalizing, autopoietic, and controlling character (Eldred 2009, 91). Contrary to what is often said to be the case, the problem with virtual space is not ubiquity or placelessness but control through the digital-cybernetic network. Even before *Being and Time* Heidegger had dealt with the issue of ἀριθμός in Plato and, especially, in Aristotle. But it is only the middle Heidegger who fully revealed not only the metaphysical but also the historical consequences of numerical representation and calculation. The mathematical-cybernetic representation of beings in digital networks completes, therefore, the consummation of Western metaphysics, as the placelessness of Greek *logos* attains its peak in digital arithmology. Hence, there is no point in making real entities compete with digital entities or real places compete with virtual places. For Eldred, virtual places are not *simulacra* or *duplicata* of real places, but exist as places in their own right parallel to real places.

Eldred's claim about the arbitrariness of digital virtual space is a typical example of a dominating trend among Heidegger-inspired digital ontologists who succumb to ontological parallelism, for they defend the "split thesis" about virtual space being constructed according to laws other than those which dominate physical space.⁹ For Michael Heim, Plato and Leibniz are the two heroes of the late modern cyberspace project: "although Platonism provides the psychic makeup for cyberspace entities, only modern philosophy shows the structure of cyberspace itself." (Heim 1993, 91). Eldred extends further the arguments put forth by Heim in his classical "Heidegger and Computers", where he goes against those who, like Hubert Dreyfus, take Heidegger's positioning (*Gestell*) to be the "Computer Opponent" (Heim 1994). Therefore, he brings Heidegger close to Marshall MacLuhan who sees in computers much more than their cognitive exploits in terms of AI by stressing Heidegger's pioneering insights into the role and importance of the language machine (*Sprachmaschine*). Heim emphasizes the ubiquitous, flexible, interactive, and destabilizing character of computers producing universal hypertexts. Nevertheless, he does not elaborate further this holistic view of computerized interaction, as he insists on its digital-informational character and ends up subscribing unquestionably to the Heidegger-inspired information/ meaning dichotomy.

Digital ontologists such as Heim and Eldred have put emphasis on the digital, numerical constitution of virtual space and its calculative and controlling character. A second aspect of virtual reality and virtual space that also stems from the middle Heidegger's critique of metaphysics is its representationalism. Here the phenome-

⁹For a concise account of the dualist, parallelist and phenomenological approaches to digital virtual reality and virtual space: Qvortrup 2002. A significant modification of digital ontological parallelism has been attempted by Rafael Capurro. Capurro's digital hermeneutics or "angeletics" (*Angeletik*) presents a weaker version of parallelism by stressing the hybridization of digital space and the hermeneutic nature of digital networks taking Heidegger's phenomenology of worldliness as a starting point (Capurro 2010, 35–42). Based on this new hermeneutic emphasis Capurro designates, after Gianni Vattimo, virtual technologies as "weak" (*schwache Technologie*), thus stressing the need to recover the long forgotten by digital ontologists need to recover "the local" in digital virtual space against the atopic and utopian perspectives adopted by digital divide theorists (Capurro 2003).

nological research on computer screens and digital screenhood serves to shed light on the way digital representations operate by relating the use of screens to Heidegger's phenomenological account of everydayness. The informational material shown on the screen is but one factor of our involvement with it, as digital virtual space is always opened up by a screen. As we already dwell within an informational space, we are surrounded by digital screens and our sense of place is shaped by them. Even though screens appear to be representational surfaces, they are also places in the full sense of the term, for, as we face screens and continue to attend to them, we relate not only or primarily to context or information. What is pre-given in this involvement is a certain "agreement on the way we are" which is an agreement about the possibilities of truth. Finally, the holistic aspects of digital virtual space do not weaken, but on the contrary, complement its representational character: "Screens are not mirrors in that they do not reflect whatever they face. They are rather surfaces that present what is already relevant within the flow of our purposeful action." (Introna and Ilharco 2006, 68).

But apart from digital calculability and representationalism in terms of screenhood a third trait is particular to virtual space, its informational nature. Here information is not understood uniquely as the content of virtual space, but as its mode of being in terms of networked communication. This is what Rafael Capurro designates as second-order cybernetics (Capurro 2010). Drawing from different paradigms within the recent phenomenology of technics Capurro opposes the linguistic idealism of Albert Borgmann's view of informational virtual space (Capurro 1999). Borgmann seems to be a proponent of the classical dualist approach to virtual space, which declares its secondary and even parasitic nature in comparison to reality. Drawing on the later Heidegger's questioning of things and thinghood, Borgmann denounces virtual ambiguity: "it is characteristic of virtual reality that as resolution and engagement grow, so does ambiguity. That detachment from reality and ambiguity of information must rise together is clear from the technical sense of ambiguity in information theory." (Borgmann 1999, 185–6). Capurro, on the contrary, opts for a phenomenologically sound treatment of informational space based on the key theme of givenness (Capurro 2009).

5 A Case for Virtuality: Digital Technologies as Place-Making Technologies

In his 2010 *Sociable Spaces and Pervasive Digital Media* Richard Coyne provides us with an exhaustive phenomenology-driven account of digital pervasiveness in terms of spatiality and placedness. While elaborating a series of placial configurations within three thematic units – "Temperament", "Everyday" and "Commonplace" – which roughly correspond to the dimensions of tuning, time, and place – he introduces the complex dynamics of integration and disruption, which he borrows from architectural urbanism, in the study of digital technologies of place.

The Heideggerian echoes of Coyne's analyses are more than apparent: the "tuning of place" lies within the hermeneutic network of affective attunements re-elaborated in view of their historicizing and spatializing in the 1936–1938 *Contributions*. "Tuning" is Coyne's term for rejecting both digital virtual naturalism and idealism by maintaining the "agonistic" nature of man-place and, correspondingly, man-computer relationship: "Spatiality embeds the capacity for quick cognitive responses. Such models have greater resonances with ideas about disruptions, breaks, glitches, and opportunistic hacks than do well-ordered plans, the pursuit of a seamless melding of tools and bodies, or the assertion that differences between organism and machine are somehow dissolved by digital technologies." (Coyne 2010, 14).

In doing so Coyne, against the majority of phenomenology-inspired virtual reality theorists, chooses to focus not on the average everyday use of pervasive digital technologies or their user-friendliness, but on the latter being "technologies of the gap". By evoking their multiple regularizing but also disruptive functions he identifies virtual digital devices as place-making, since their tuning is primarily a spatial tuning. But the agonistic coexistence of continuity and discontinuity does not turn pervasive digital places into non-places (Coyne 2007). Digital virtual places do not attest to a negative experience of *atopia*. What really shows the intensity of our existential involvement with them challenge the fine line between familiarity and unfamiliarity. This is what Coyne qualifies as a threshold (Coyne 2010, 184). Hence, the "tuning of place" through digital devices not only allows but in some sense requires the coping with boundedness as a key experiential feature.

Coyne's analysis of thresholds and boundaries evokes Vallega's "exilic" in *Contributions to Philosophy*. Moreover, if we bring it close to major commentaries on the role and function of place in the middle Heidegger, some critical observations are inevitable. First, with regard to the agonistic nature of place and placedness in texts such as *The Origin of the Work of Art* (Casey 1990). Then, with regard to the increasing importance of placial themes, especially that of boundary (*πέρας*) and its absence.¹⁰ Last but not least, with regard to the haunting presence of the unfamiliar or the uncanny (*δαιμόν*) as an originary experience of homelessness.

6 Digital Virtual Places Beyond Utopias and "Atopias"

In the era of ubiquitous computing, informational spaces are "everywhere and nowhere" (Hillis 1999; Gunkel 2007). We are, thus, led to the easy conclusion that they are non-places, placeless places, or atopias carrying an indubitable metaphysical weight (Forget 2008). The other side of the coin would be to consider them as utopias.¹¹ From what I argued so far, it becomes clear that they are neither. Virtual informational

¹⁰In *Contributions* Heidegger denounces the "unboundedness of machinations" (Heidegger 1999, 84).

¹¹On digital utopianism: Turner 2006; Heinrich et al. 2012.

spaces are places of a special kind: they are heterotopic places, places of radical alterity in the way Alejandro Vallega understands the strong bond between spatiality and the "exilic" in *Contributions to Philosophy*. In light of this reading it is crucial to insist on the multiples figures of alterity with regard to virtual placiality, the most primordial being that of the unfamiliar and homelessness. The experience of digital virtuality could, therefore, be designated as a heterotopic dwelling (Joyce 1999), a place of radical alterity and uncanniness.¹² Moreover, phenomenologists of place have provided us with insightful analyses of placial activities, such as building, wandering, navigating, which could be reconceptualized with regard to digital spatiality. Topological themes which emerge within Heidegger's middle and later thinking of place, such as betweenness, threshold and boundary, could serve to study digital virtual reality as what enables authentic placial experiences, though of a specific type.

The classical in phenomenology emphasis on VR representationalism and disembodiment does not usually take into account most of the times the proper character of worldliness and is often oriented towards a "place-as-pragmatics" approach (Casey 1998, 254). The existential features of situatedness and attunement, inadequately explored by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, put forth a more differentiated approach of placiality. If "places are felt" (Casey 1993, 219), then, we should start by thematizing affective attunements such as "information anxiety", with regard to virtual placiality (Capurro 2004).¹³ For the middle Heidegger, affective attunements, which have been proven intrinsically placial and historical, manifest the complex relation of man to place, even though modern technology has shut down several possibilities of this eventful relation (Malpas 2012, 109).

To conclude, late modern virtual places open new possibilities for territoriality without necessarily succumbing to the false dilemma of digital utopia (Poster 1995) or dystopia (Borgmann 2004). Hence, fully immersive digital environments are to be experienced both as an everyday lived experience and as a challenge to it. By moving at the boundaries between the real and the non-real virtual places constitute thresholds which remind us of Heidegger's "agonistic" hermeneutics of place in *Contributions*. It is in this sense that virtual placiality is closer to a work of art as a dynamic *topos* than to an everyday tool or device. Digital virtual places are heterotopias in the sense of Char Davies' "changing spaces" that are at once like and unlike real ones, therefore allowing for transformational processes to take place (Davies 2004). By being the subject and also the outcome of place-making they defy the metaphysical positioning in terms of nihilistic *Machenschaft* or *Gestell*, thus opening up a world through difference.¹⁴

¹²On the "uncanniness" of place see: Malpas 2012: 151–2.

¹³It is worth noting that, already in *Being and Time*, anxiety is place-related: "The fact that what is threatening is *nowhere* characterizes what *Angst* is about." (Heidegger 1996, 186; his emphasis). Understood in this sense, virtual places could be seen as a unique chance to challenge the primacy of the rational self in the Cartesian vision of modernity by multiplying the possibilities of attunement with our selves and fostering the respect of affective reason (Seidler 1998).

¹⁴See, for instance, Malpas 2012, 111; Coyne 2005, 194.

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