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# The Writer is the Architect

## Editorialization and the Production of Digital Space

Marcello Vitali-Rosati

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Article abstract

We live primarily in a digital space. The structure of the territory first appears to us by means of the mediation of digital devices, ones predominately owned by large multinational corporations. This situation implies a huge risk – that of remaining passive while private companies organize and develop these spaces for us. How might we avoid this risk? Is it possible, in the digital age, for us to be central to the production of the spaces in which we live? How might literature constitute a tool for the production of the spatial imaginary that enables us to reappropriate the places and territories managed by the information industry? This paper addresses these questions and attempts to show, on the basis of the theory of editorialization, how writing can be a way of producing the space in which we live.

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Editorialization and the Production of  
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## **Abstract**

We live primarily in a digital space. The structure of the territory first appears to us by means of the mediation of digital devices, ones predominately owned by large multinational corporations. This situation implies a huge risk – that of remaining passive while private companies organize and develop these spaces for us. How might we avoid this risk? Is it possible, in the digital age, for us to be central to the production of the spaces in which we live? How might literature constitute a tool for the production of the spatial imaginary that enables us to reappropriate the places and territories managed by the information industry? This paper addresses these questions and attempts to show, on the basis of the theory of editorialization, how writing can be a way of producing the space in which we live.

## **Résumé**

Nous vivons dans un espace numérique. La structure du territoire nous apparaît toujours par la médiation de technologies numériques qui sont pour la plupart la propriété de multinationales. Nous risquons donc de rester passifs pendant que des compagnies privées développent et organisent cet espace pour nous. Comment pouvons-nous éviter cet écueil ? Est-il encore possible pour nous de rester au centre de la production des espaces dans lesquels nous vivons ? Comment la littérature peut-elle constituer un outil de production de l'imaginaire spatial qui nous permet de nous réapproprier les territoires gérés par les industries de l'information ? Cet article essayera de répondre à ces questions en montrant, sur la base de la théorie de l'éditorialisation, comment l'écriture peut être une façon de produire l'espace dans lequel nous vivons.

**Mots-clés** : Espace numérique, architecture, autorité, écrivain, éditorialisation

**Keywords** : Digital Space, architecture, authority, writer, editorialization

## Table des matières

Introduction . . . . .	4
Space as a dynamic structure . . . . .	5
Editorialization and digital space . . . . .	7
Editorializing the world . . . . .	10
The Transcan16 project . . . . .	11
Writing the world . . . . .	16
Bibliography . . . . .	18

# The Writer is the Architect

Marcello Vitali-Rosati

## Introduction

According to the geographer David Harvey, “The geographical imagination is far too pervasive and important a fact of intellectual life to be left alone to geographers” (Harvey 1995, 160). Since the 1960s, the human and social sciences have been marked by the emergence of a paradigm that encouraged the use of spatial concepts from an interdisciplinary perspective in order to address the construction of knowledge. This *spatial turn* has two major consequences : it marks an epistemological renewal in many disciplines (sociology, history, literature), while encouraging a new understanding of space freed from solely a geographical perspective. Space is, indeed, a complex construction with multiple intersecting origins - physical, symbolic, social, political, and literary. In this respect, one can read and analyze space as a text. Over the last thirty years, the emergence of numerous fields of research on spatiality have had a significant impact on literary studies, for example geopoetics (White et Institut international de géopoétique 1990), anthropology, geocritics (Westphal 2011), geography of literature (Moretti 1999), and space narratology (Ryan 2009). Yet, this relatively recent attention to space should not make us forget that from Homer’s *Odyssey* to the work of Mallarmé, the history of literature is replete with texts that depict and problematize issues of space.

The epistemological consequences of the spatial turn are even clearer under the influence of digital technologies. Our way of understanding and inhabiting space has undergone numerous recent mutations. The appearance in our daily lives of immersive cartographic tools, combined with photographic and satellite imagery, assures us of an apparent mastery of the world that is more comprehensive than ever. The generalization of the geolocation process suggests it is now impossible to get lost. In this respect, the influence that

digital tools exert both on space and on how we inhabit it has become a major issue for digital cultures. A quick review of our daily practices reveals the impact that digital infrastructures have on how we conceive of space. The structure of the territory first appears to us by means of the mediation of digital devices, ones predominately owned by large multinational corporations such as Google, TripAdvisor, Expedia, AirBnB, and so on.

We can say that we are now living in a digital space and that this space is constructed by writing. All the platforms that structure and reveal the space are made of wrtiting : text, code, encoded images and videos. Our identities are made of writing : personal profiles, data entered into databases, lines of code. Every one of our actions is based, in some way, upon writing - from clicking to buying a book or planning a trip. The objects that surround us are the result of a writing process.

This situation implies a huge risk - that of remaining passive while private companies organize and develop these spaces for us (Morozov 2012). How might we avoid this risk ? Is it possible, in the digital age, for us to be central to the production of the spaces in which we live ? How might literature constitute a tool for the production of the spatial imaginary that enables us to reappropriate the places and territories managed by the information industry ?

## Space as a dynamic structure

In order to respond to these questions, we must first make explicit the definition of space on which I base my argument. Over the centuries, scholars have interpreted the concept of space in several ways. In this paper, I propose to regard it as a dynamic structure that unfolds like a melody played by several different actors - people's actions, infrastructures, speech. This idea implies to question a twentieth century *topos* : the Bergsonian idea that time would be on the side of movement, subjectivity, and difference, while space would be on the side of the *Gegebenheit* (being given), objectivity and unity. This idea is expressed in the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Bergson 1948) and can be found in several philosophical theses of the twentieth century - for instance Heidegger, Ricoeur, and also Merleau-Ponty who, trying to go beyond this opposition, proposed the idea of the "temporalisation od space".

Canullo (2016) emphasizes this point starting from an intuition of Levinas. In *Ethics and Infinity* (Levinas 2013), the philosopher affirmed that it is necessary to subtract space from the paradigm of physics in order to restore its intrinsic vitality. Canullo remarks that this allows for the development of a philosophical paradigm based on a concept of space rather than one of time. On the basis of Rosenzweig's thought, she shows that the Ricoeurian narrative identity could be substituted for an *oikological* identity.

Even if these “philosophers of time” have actually developed a more complex thought which often includes a more dynamic idea of space (Cf. for example the ricoeurian analysis of the relationship between architectures and narrativity in Ricoeur 2017), we could accept to be a little schematic for the purpose of this paper and say that the twentieth century has been the century of time, while its end and the beginning of the twenty-first century were marked by a renewed interest in the concept of space. This interest is driven by the will to emancipate space from the notion of *Gegebenheit* in order to articulate it as a dynamic process. It seems that the *spatial turn* mentioned at the beginning of this paper is based on such an idea.

Moving in a similar direction, Louise Merzeau underlines the differences between the idea of space as something given and the idea of it as a dynamic process by referring to the greek notions of *topos* and *khoros* :

The distinction established by the Greeks between *topos* and *khoros* also makes it possible to describe this displacement. The *topos*, like the Latin *locus* (“region, place, place, tomb”) serves to locate, fix, circumscribe. The *khoros* (“place where one dances”) refers to a field that can be crossed and that calls for a choreography. (Merzeau 2016)

If we interpret space as *khoros*, it means that it is not already given : it is produced (Lefebvre 1974). In approaching space as a dynamic entity, we can situate ourselves as having an active place in its production. Such an approach is crucial for addressing the issues that contemporary digital environments raise, as proprietary platforms more and more determine digital space. If we can think of these platforms as habitable and dynamic spaces, then we can rediscover the possibility of being active in the production and organization of the environments that we inhabit. The question then becomes : How can we take ownership of these spaces and how might we make them public ? In order to develop an interpretation of space in the era of digital technologies

and to better understand its structuring in digital milieus, it is useful to take up a framework that emerges out of francophone communities during the last ten years : the theory of editorialization.

## Editorialization and digital space

The word “editorialization,” in the sense that I propose to use it (Vitali-Rosati 2016), is a neologism in English. It comes from the French *éditorialisation*. In English, the word is a derivative of “editorialize,” which means - according to the Collins, Merriam, and Cambridge dictionaries - “to express an opinion in the form of an editorial” or “to introduce opinion into the reporting of facts.” In French, the word acquires a broader meaning and relates in particular to digital culture and to digital forms of producing knowledge. This shift in meaning - from an idea that denotes the expression of opinion to one that suggests the production of knowledge in the digital age - is useful and not particularly problematic in terms of the relation to its English derivative. As we will see, the recontextualization of the term in its digital sense retains its association with the notion of opinion in that it refers to the production of content that expresses a kind of opinion or that offers an alternative way to see or interpret the world.

The redefinition of this concept is very useful as a way of interpreting and understanding the structure of digital space. Editorialization is more a whole theory than a simple concept. Bachimont (2007) uses the term *éditorialisation* to explain the shift of a non-digital document to a digital document. Gérard Wormser takes up the terms in a more general way to describe the production and circulation of content in digital environments (Vitali-Rosati 2016). Over the last ten years, Francophone scholars have used the term more and more frequently and everyone with some different definitions (Treleani 2014 ; Merzeau 2014 ; Le Deuff 2016), yet, in the dispersion of this term, its precise meaning has become unclear.

Here, I will use the definition that emerges from the research conducted by the laboratory directed by Gérard Wormser and myself at the Maison de sciences de l’homme Paris Nord, *Écritures numériques et éditorialisation* : “Editorialization is the set of dynamics that produce and structure digital space. These dynamics can be understood as the interactions of individual and collective actions within a particular digital environment”. This definition



is based on a prior hypothesis - the fact that there is a hybridization between the digital space and the non-digital space - and therefore emphasizes that the structuring of digital spaces means a transformation of space in general.

Beginning in the 1990s, scholars such as Castells (2000), Virilio (2010), Robin (1997), and Murray (1998) analyzed computing technologies and digital infrastructures as though they were producing a space completely distinct from physical space. In this sense, the concepts of “cyberspace,” first articulated in the science fiction of Gibson (1984), and “deterritorialization” (Deleuze et Guattari 1983), merge so as to imply that in the “virtual” and “virtual reality” that there is a progressive loss of materiality in relation to space and that this loss of materiality implies a disconnection with “real” territory (For example, Serres 1994, Virilio (2010); Novak 1992; Koepsell 2003). More recently, as a result of changes in technologies and practices, researchers tend not to consider digital space to be in breach of nominally “non-digital” space. We, instead, live in a hybrid space, which IT infrastructures help build and structure (Beaude 2012). It is therefore appropriate to reverse the paradigm of the 1990s and to assert that the space in which we live is a digital space.

First of all, let us recall that the term “digital” can no longer be understood in a purely technological sense. As Doueïhi (2011) has demonstrated, one must understand the digital as a culture that refers to a set of tools, but also to a set of values, practices, technologies and infrastructure that shapes our contemporary society. In this sense, digital space is the space of our society in the digital age. Space is digital just as our culture is a digital culture (For a more precise analysis of this idea, cf. Vitali-Rosati 2014). From this definition, the hypothesis that we propose is that digital space, as a set of relations between objects, is the organization of the totality of our reality by means of writing.

My demonstration will be based on a particular interpretation of the notion of ‘writing’, which is understood here as a very broad notion. Writing is the action of producing a permanent trace, a trace which stays inscribed somewhere after the end of the writing action. In this sense, the act of writing some letters on a piece of paper is a sort of writing, but so too is the action of drawing a line in a field in order to delimitate a border between two properties, or the action of opening up a path in a forest by cutting some trees. Writing means leaving a trace. It is important to emphasize that these traces are something material, they are inscribed somewhere – on a piece of paper, on a

field, on a territory. They are never imaginary. Each space, I will argue, is made of material, inscribed traces.

This hypothesis is not as radical as it might first seem, especially if we more closely examine the web. Indeed, while the digital can not be reduced to the web, it is true that the web represents one of the phenomena that have most contributed to the production of digital culture. The rapid diffusion of the web from the 1990s was one of the factors of this “digital conversion” (Doueihi 2011). So, while digital culture can not be reduced to the web, the web is nevertheless one of the most important phenomena of this culture. Understanding the web, its structures and its dynamics, is therefore essential if we want to grasp the characteristics of digital culture.

The web is constructed by writing. The web, it can be said, can be productively understood as a form of written text : it is a fabric, something that is weaved. The choice of metaphor is important : like a spider web, the web is a set of relationships built between objects and like a spider web this set of relationships is produced when traversing it. Moreover, even the photos and videos are writing, since they are made of code, a code that has the function of creating a particular structure of relations between objects. In this sense, the web is mainly an architectural space, a set of relations between objects. It is, moreover, concrete. Material relations unite the objects that are a part of the web. Between two given objects on the web, there exists a precise distance, exactly as in non-digital spaces. One can thus measure the distance between a Facebook profile and another, for example, from the amount of friends in common or from the confidentiality rules of the platform. More generally, there is also a determined and measurable distance between two web pages, such as the number of direct connections, the presence on the result list of a search engine which indexes them under the same keyword, et cetera.

In short, I’d like to propose these four essential characteristics digital space :

1. Digital space is an architectural space that organizes the relationships between objects in our society.
2. Digital space is a real space, in which we live. The adjective is used here to refer to the space in which we live today- it can not be limited to technologies alone, because it has acquired a cultural meaning which means a set of characteristics, structures and values that describe our society. Digital space is the space of our digital society. It is the space

in which we live and we act.

3. Digital space is a hybrid space. Some relationships that make this space are determined by a network connection or by some other technology, but others do not depend on electronic or connected technologies. For example, in digital space, the distance between two objects is determined by both the positions of these offline objects and their position in an online database.
4. Digital space is in motion. Our actions change it.

## Editorializing the world

If editorialization is the set of dynamics that produce and structure digital space and if our space is a digital space, it means that editorialization is a way of producing space more generally. Editorializing is a form of building. This is the fundamental characteristic of editorialization, what distinguishes it from editing and curating content. Editorialization is not about structuring some information about something, for example, about a person or about a place. It is a matter of structuring the world itself. We editorialize things and not information about objects. We could say that the encyclopedic project as it was conceived during the 18th century by Diderot and D’Alambert was realized with the world wide web : the totality of our knowledge has been organized and linked in a unique and huge architectural framework (For an analysis of the relationship between the Encyclopédie and the structure of digital space, see Melançon 2004). But it goes further : with editorialization we are not only structuring the knowledge, we are structuring the world itself. We can say that editorialization is not only an architecture of knowledge - or, to use Schnapp (2011) ‘s concept, a ‘knowledge design’) but more precisely an architecture of being. This is why the concept of space becomes so crucial : editorialization is a way of organizing space not in a metaphorical sense (as the space of knowledge or the space of information) : editorialization is an actual architectural action, it organizes our actual space.

Let us take an example in order to further illustrate this idea. Let us analyze the position a restaurant occupies in the space of a town. This position implies the visibility of the restaurant and therefore its place in a social space. It is obvious that this position depends on the structure of the town : where the

town center is, what the most crowded and visited places are, where people go to work or to hang out. The space of the town is the set of relationships between streets, buildings, and other sites, and these relationships shape and are shaped by the way people inhabit the town, their habits, their activities. Yet digital technologies and the sets of common practices involved with their production and use also structure these these relationships. In order to find a place, one can use Google Maps. In order to find a restaurant, one can use Yelp, TripAdvisor, or other platforms. The fact that a restaurant is on a highly trafficked street has a similar function on defining its position as the fact that a restaurant is ranked first on TripAdvisor or at the top of a search engine listing. The material position of an object is at the same time the place where it is in the non-digital town and the place where it is in the digital town. Together, they form a unique space. The editorialization of the restaurant, i.e. the position of the restaurant in digital space, is actually its position in the space in general.

Structuring digital space therefore means structuring space in general. This is a fundamental characteristic of editorialization. It does not actually refer to the structuring of specific information. It is, instead, concerned with structuring of space that a specific object occupies in the world. This, if editorialization is the set of dynamics that determine the place of a thing in digital space, then, editorialization means concretely operating on things themselves. This is why we should speak rather of editorialization of the world than of editorialization of contents.

## **The Transcan16 project**

In order to question the relationship between digital and non digital-space and to prove the spatial function of editorialization, the Canada Research Chair for Digital Textualities, led by myself, undertook in 2016 an action-research project focused on the space that is the Trans-Canada Highway. This mythic road that crosses Canada from one ocean to another has indeed inspired a wide range of media productions, including images, videos, maps, historical texts, digital data, and literary works. In this way, the “real” infrastructure (the road, its motels, its rest stops) mixes with literary discourse to create its own imaginary. In order to study this hybrid space, and to measure the influence exercised upon it by our digital culture and tools, our team

embarked on a crossing of the Trans-Canada Highway itself. We documented this contemporary road trip in real time by producing and geolocating our travel accounts through a series of platforms - Twitter, Facebook, Periscope, Tumblr, TripAdvisor, OpenStreetMap, among others. Our objective was to show that literature participates in the editorialization of the Trans-Canada, with editorialization referring to the process through which interactions of individual and collective actions in relation to digital environments produce and structure the space in which we live.

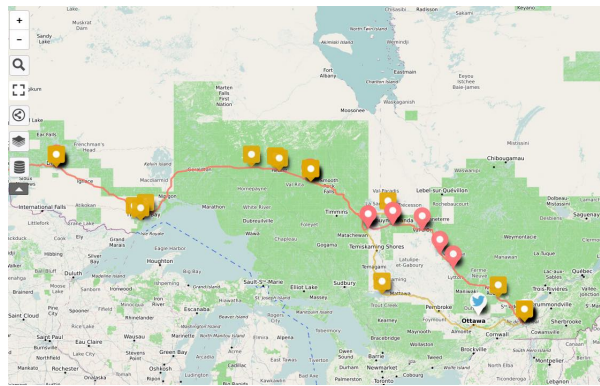


FIGURE 1 : Map of the projet Transcan16

During the second half of the 20th century, highways offered renewed possibilities for producing space and assigning meaning. The Trans-Canada, officially opened in 1962, thus illustrates the desire to produce a crossable space, where people and goods can efficiently circulate. If our sense of space today remains structured in part by these highways, their use and implicit values, it is also increasingly effected by new digital infrastructures, of which Google Maps is but one of many examples. On the one hand a space for speed, highways allow for efficiency and productivity according to the values of capitalism. Yet, we also now find that they are controlled, managed, and detailed by Google Maps. The platform makes the highway visible, traceable based on “row data” and systems of control based on Silicon Valley culture. In pointing this out, I do not mean to call into question the highway infrastructure, but rather the digital infrastructure that marks a new turn in the production of space.

The Trans-Canada was presented to us as a digital space, as it is clearly a real and hybrid architectural space, constructed by the sum of the relationships between maps (digital and non-digital), narratives (literary, historical, private,

touristic), images (photos, videos), writings (on various platforms), the road (and its infrastructure), the motels, the stops and restaurants, and other fellow travelers. The main focus of our research consisted in finding out how we could play with these relationships in order to have an active role in their organization and thus to remain architects of our own space. The concept of editorialization has therefore become the theoretical pivot of our work. By editorializing the Trans-Canada Highway we have sought to demonstrate the fact that editorializing means contributing to the organization of things and producing our actual world. With regard to this point, the interpretation of space-production proposed here is different from Lefebvre's idea. According to Lefebvre (1974) there is a precise hierarchy of the elements which contribute to the production of the space : some of these elements are more material than others. Typically, according to Lefebvre, all the elements related to the cultural way of interpreting a space are less important than the elements related to the infrastructural structure of the space : a highway structures a space in a stronger way than the cultural perception of what an highway is. But as Agostini-Marchese (2017) underlines, this hierarchy is problematic because the cultural representations of space are deeply entangled with the other elements.

In fact, if editorialization means structuring the space in which we live, it can therefore be conceived as a spatial narrative, as it creates relationships between objects. In this sense, a highway is simply a form of editorialization. The infrastructure is part of the editorialization device - it is defined as roads, urban developments, and means of transportation, as well as digital platforms. During our trip, we tested this hypothesis by trying to produce space through a series of editorialization strategies. Our project expanded on a principle of detourning digital tools, particularly those produced by the web's large multinationals. This "resistance" to rules that are imposed by large platforms echoes what Lovink (2002) calls the tactical media, or the daily practices through which we short-circuit the functioning and structure of dominant platforms that have, little by little, asserted themselves as authorities. Along our trip, we have put these devices to the test by using digital tools to write the space ourselves, in order to become agents of its organization. Our experience also involved establishing a corpus of digital and non-digital literary works about Trans-Canada Highway to read collectively during the trip. Editorializing the Trans-Canada Highway, for us, has meant crossing it by car, stopping to sleep in hotels and eating in restaurants, planning our



FIGURE 2 : Storify - Transcan16 (by Marie-Christine Corbeil)

itinerary with the help of Google Maps, tweeting the progression of our trip, reading literary works about the spaces that we crossed, and producing new narratives.



FIGURE 3 : Postcards from Street View - Transcan16 (by Servanne Monjour)

With regards to our trip, three elements were of particular interest : the major role literature played in constructing the land ; the capacity of digital tools to lend themselves to diversion ; and the decisiveness of the web surfing community in the eventual success of the editorializational undertaking. Our web publications allowed us to gather a community of subscribers that accompanied us along our course, helping and even sometimes participating in writing it. In this way, editorialization appears like a form of what we refer to as “designing for loss of control,” meaning that it consists of setting up a device that would soon no longer be under our control. The form exceeds its creators and gains autonomy. It functions on a principal of implication - other ideas, other people, other desires. We might even say that editorialization begins in the instant that gives rise to the unexpected, when others takes up the process. We asked ourselves the following question : In what way has our project allowed for external appropriation, unmanageable by those who initiated the original idea ? Only others besides us can respond to this question, those who will undertake the trip after us, to do yet other things,



allowing our hashtag to live on, diverted, disfigured, reinterpreted.



FIGURE 4 : Postcards from Street View - Transcan16 (by Servanne Monjour)

## Writing the world

In *Eupalinos ou l'architecte*, Paul Valéry's Socrates tells us, from beyond the grave, that he could have been an architect instead of a philosopher, and that this would probably have been a better choice. "I was born many, and I die as one," he states (Valéry et Hytier 1980, 114). The potentiality runs out over the course of our lives - the only one, among the heroes of Valéry, who does not exhaust this virtuality is Leonardo da Vinci - and so, the dynamic movement of life turns into the stable immobility of death. Unity and motionless concepts are characteristic of death because life is multiplicity and movement. It is for this reason that the ghost of Socrates laments to the ghost of Phaedrus that architecture might have been a more interesting job than philosophy.

For Valéry, in 1923, two features of architecture make it a superior art compared to the art of speech : first, it creates a living space ; and, second, it is in motion. Let us try to understand these features. First of all, architecture is the only art form that produces a space in which we can immerse ourselves. Other art forms produce objects for us to examine, to appreciate, but we cannot live inside them. We can look at a painting or a statue, but we cannot inhabit either of them. In contrast, a temple can be entered. The art object, in this case, completely surrounds us, and - more importantly - we can act inside

its space. A temple is habitable, and things can be done inside it. Art, in the case of architecture, envelops life. As Valéry says, architecture “puts man into man” (Valéry et Hytier 1980, 103). Architectural space is the context of the action. It makes it possible, and it shapes it.

Secondly, and in connection with the first point, architecture is an art of movement. This may seem counterintuitive - buildings are, after all, motionless - but if we analyze the structure of the architectural act, we see a profound relationship between architecture and movement. Valéry’s Socrates explains this by providing a definition of “geometric shape” (Valéry et Hytier 1980, 109). In describing geometric shape, he gives an example : a command for one to “walk while maintaining an equal distance between these two trees.” This order clearly defines a straight line. Which means that these words describe - or, more precisely, produce - a movement. The sentence - “Walk while maintaining an equal distance between these two trees” - is a mathematical function and therefore a force, a virtuality, that determines a specific movement. It is, in fact, the very condition of the movement, the force that is in action at the time of movement. It is the force that produces the movement and that determines it. Architecture is the art of geometric shapes, and thus it is the art of structuring space through mathematical functions. On account of the fact that these functions are moving forces, architecture is also an art of movement.

This praise of architecture is at the same time a harsh critique of philosophy. Philosophers, Valéry argues, build castles in the sky. That’s why they pay no attention to the details of their constructions : “They never see the universes they imagine are collapsing, because finally these universes do not exist” (Valéry et Hytier 1980, 86). Philosophers work with words that are dead and immobile. They aspire towards eternity, but eternity is nothing more than death and immobility. By inverting the myth of the cave, Valéry presents Plato’s ideas as motionless shadows, corpses.

This critique of philosophy is, more generally, a critic of any form of writing. Writing means making still what is moving. Written words are frozen frames, inert corpses that only represent the moving bodies that populate reality. Valéry criticized writing, because it produces dead words - to write is to merely represent. Valéry aspired to be a writer of movement, an architect more than a writer. Behind this forceful critique of philosophy and writing in general lies a more global critique of the representational paradigm : representations

are only imitations of reality, but these imitations are frozen frames of life in movement and, therefore, useless representations. Ultimately, Valéry's critique does not apply in the digital age because digital writing is itself bringing about a crucial shift : from a representational paradigm to a performative paradigm. The hypothesis I tried to demonstrate in this paper is that in digital space a writer becomes an architect, writing becomes the building material of a living and moving space. Editorializing the world is a way to perform the production of the space in which we live.

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