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BETWEEN THE (LIVE) STREAM: CONFIGURATIONS OF/FOR EMBODIMENT, TECHNICITY AND VICARIOUS SPACES

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Drawing on iterative, empirical work that investigates the conditions of an everyday hypermediated environment, this paper focuses on experiences of livestreaming from the Disney Parks in order to think about the embodied and the technological in relation to the limits of mobility within this configuration of space(s). In doing so, I engage with longstanding ideas around multiple temporalities (e.g. Kristeva, 1981; Felski, 2000; Grosz, 2005; Baraitser, 2017), concepts of space (e.g. Lefebvre, 1991; Grosz, 2001; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Kinkaid, 2020) and of the body (e.g. Grosz, 1994; Simonsen, 2005; Hansen, 2006; Knudsen and Stage, 2015a), as well as online culture and live streaming practices (e.g. Burgess and Green, 2018; Mueser and Vlachos, 2018; Taylor, 2023; Ruberg et al., 2023). These ideas come to be framed in this project by an overwhelming sense of industry that is threaded through enmeshed within neo-liberal political structures. Yet industry is not often seen here, and instead, these practices and experiences relating to live streaming are understood as centrally relating to pleasure and affect. In other words, pleasure works to mask industry – as well as issues around mobility, power and the conditions of possibility in which these experiences occur – and therefore, sets out how these experiences come to be framed and positioned, particularly in terms of the multiple, oscillatory, and fluctuating subject positions of live streamers.

Central to these issues is an idea of space which is doubly lived: first, as a physical, tangible space (in thinking about live streamers in the Disney Parks), and second, as a virtual space (such as Internet streaming sites such as YouTube, for example, which host the live stream). What I want to argue is that live streaming operates within a kind of hybrid space that is crucially both physical and virtual. Thinking in this way enables what Thornham (2018) has argued against the conceptual separation of the real (and corporeal) and the virtual (see also Grosz, 2001; Walkerdine, 2007). As such, we can see live streaming not as two separate, discrete spaces, but as transmitting across this binary and as complexly and powerfully embodied, lived and everyday. That these experiences are embodied is important here in terms of how they come to be conceived

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of and conceptualised. What I am suggesting here then is that we can think about these spaces as a vicarious space in which vicarity is underpinned by a sense of mobility and an investment in the embodied. Vicarious space is implicitly configured through the technological in relation to video-sharing platforms and within social, cultural, political, and economic structures and systems which are – ultimately – everyday and mundane.

By positioning live streaming among the mundane, I am asking us to consider how, as a practice, it is embedded within a set of routine and normative experiences (see Morris, 1988; Seigworth, 2000) that are part and parcel of Internet culture more broadly. In this context, live streaming is not just a set of protocols that enable (or not) video transmission, but the material, dynamic and anticipatory points of connection between streamer and viewer. By foregrounding these connections in this way, I am attempting to re-politicise what often is left out or forsaken in our imaginings by drawing a line of critical inquiry between the mundane, live streaming, and embodied vicarious space. At the same time, there is a further dialectic at play in thinking about Disney – which is often imagined as magical, as dramatic, and as ‘hyperreal’ (Eco, 1986) – and the mundane. What I want to say here is that Disney is all of these things, as well as ordinary and everyday and in recognising this, we also need to note the politics of this manoeuvre and the implications of this for the (neoliberal) subject. As I have already said, industry emerges throughout this paper, and it emerges here again in thinking about Disney as a global media conglomerate. Disney is historically, culturally and economically significant and holds an immense amount of power, evidenced in their impact on global culture. By turning to live streaming from the Disney Parks as I do here, I am pushing for us to think about the conditions which enable these particular configurations of embodiment, technology, and space that are, of course, framed by and recursively fed through consumer-capitalism and neo-liberalism among other systems of power.

Methods

In April 2024 I will spend a week ‘going along’ with several live streamers within the Walt Disney World theme parks. I will observe, reflect, and ask questions – encouraging those I am ‘going along’ with to do the same. Walk-along methods emerge here as an experimental method that becomes folded together with the critical issues I am taking up, which – to reiterate – crucially relate to embodiment, mobility, and a notion of vicarity. This is important because it, in part, reflects a different way of ‘knowing’ something about the ephemeral, embodied experiences of live streaming I am interested in and in so doing, challenges differentials of power in data and lead us to more responsible ways of knowing (see D’Ignazio and Klein, 2020). More than this, these methods contribute a political shift towards playfulness that invites us to expose orientations by elevating the relational, sensory, embodied and contingent ways of knowing and experiencing the space. Here then, I am drawing from ‘rapid ethnography’ (see Millen, 2000; Handwerker, 2001; Vindrola-Padros, 2021), ‘walk-along methods’ (see Kusenbach, 2003; 2016; Walkerdine, 2007; Carpiano, 2009; Rose et al., 2010), inventive and affective methods (Lury and Wakeford, 2014; Knudsen and Stage, 2015b), live methods (Back and Puwar, 2012), and feminist onto-epistemologies (Oakley, 1981; Ang, 1996; Skeggs, 1997; Barad, 2007). Taken together, these approaches enable us to feel our way through complex entanglements of sets of

politics. Indeed, what I am hoping for here, is a sense of research *with* (rather than *on*) live streamers. Yet, there are limits to this ethico-onto-epistemology, of course, and as such it is important to recognise that in writing up and sharing my work in this way, I am representing, I am performing knowledge in certain ways. These ways are not natural or value free; these are *my* accounts, based on *my* interpretations, *my* enactments of *my* research.

Speculative Conclusions

This paper focuses on live streaming as a set of experiences that configure embodiment, technology and space in particular ways that direct a spotlight on to an idea of vicarious space. In thinking about the conditions of this kind of space, I am directed to consider the implications for mobility and it is here I turn now in proposing some speculative conclusions. If Disney is a “middle class kingdom” (Mittermeier, 2019) then there is an underlying set of politics that which asks us to consider for whom this space is for. This question absolutely and powerfully relates to concepts choice and agency. Mobility is necessary in that it enables people to choose pleasure; to choose Disney. Yet, we can recognise the ways in which class, along with gender, race and disability intersect and become subsumed within powerful neoliberal politics under a guise of mobility, and as such, and in configuring live streaming as a vicarious space, the Internet makes possible certain relations and connections. What I am asking here then is how is vicarity imagined in terms of embodied subjectivity and agency? And how should we understand this in terms of the Internet and opportunities for connectivity?

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