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Some Assembly Required
The Screen and the City

To grasp its secret, you should not then begin with the city and move inwards towards the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards towards the city.

Jean Baudrillard, *America*

Multiple screens inhabit the city, operating neither as simple optical phenomenon nor as mere representation. The spatial dynamics – the complicated correspondances between one point and another – and the forms of attention and subjectivity that belong to a perceptual order that is informed by these multiple screens have become issues of interest within a variety of fields including architecture, geography, urban studies, and media art.

Common to many discussions of the image within the urban scene is some reference to Guy Debord’s 1967 essay *Society of the Spectacle*, a publication that offered a critique of the vain show of a relentlessly appetitive economic order threatening to recruit all human activity to its core logic of consumerism. What Debord thought to be most virulent about the process of image accumulation that characterized modern public life was its direct threat to lived experience. While some aspects of Debord’s critique still ring true, changing conditions
of image production, dissemination, and encounter suggest that rather than the world being absorbed into the fixity of the commercially constructed image, contemporary image-practice seems to be drifting in another direction.

One way to figure the difference is by shifting emphasis from economics to biology by replacing the notion of accumulation with that of proliferation. Another is to draw a distinction between the societies of the spectacle to what is sometimes called “interface culture” (Johnson, p. 264). In both cases the body of the apprehending subject and its active processing of its surroundings are brought to the fore.

While this might seem resonant with de Certeau’s notion of “ways of operating,” it does not necessarily maintain his well-known distinction between space and place economically represented in the phrase: “space is a practiced place.” For de Certeau the technologies of place, formal configuration of scientific information or abstract representation, tend to eclipse the local and participatory properties of space. Using the tactics of the everyday (ritual, storytelling, poaching, bricolage), space is insistently recreated by social actors or “users.” The possibility that it might reconfigure the representational order of place is not, however, of much significance to de Certeau. But perhaps in the transformation of the city by the proliferation of screens (which immediately also imply networks and the flow of data) there is not only a new image of the urban scene that calls into question the society of the spectacle but also a new kind of abstraction that calls into question the distinction between space and place.

The City, Actually

One way to think about the relationship between screen and city is in terms of the processes of framing and dissolution of the frame. Historically the relationship arcs steeply and then continues to modulate slowly for a number of decades before entering our own era of dispersal and proliferation. Today, urban screens seem almost edge-less as buildings become surfaces of projection where they blur into the surrounding city. Handheld devices, tactile user interfaces for everyday activities such as parking and purchasing, and electronic billboards in a wide variety of sizes exist everywhere within and throughout the city.

Motion pictures built on what photography had already begun to reveal, expanding the scale, proportion, and, in time, its representation of spatial depth. Many of the first films of the Lumière Brothers archive feature urban scenes or social activities that are recognizably public. (Close to half of the recent Kino DVD compilation are from the more than a thousand archived
actualities, hundreds of which feature city scenes.) The Library of Congress offerings from the early years of cinema also indicate that the urban landscape was itself a significant subject matter for the cinema. The collection features forty-five films of New York City made between 1989 to 1906. Between 1903 and 1908 however, the output of actualities dropped precipitously: from three hundred and fifty-one to two.

In a single decade the cinema had constructed a genre: the cityscape. More than simply a set of conventions relating to subject matter, structure, or iconography, the cityscape also introduced a mode of visual perception, a way of looking, that corresponding to the urban scene and its paradigmatic inhabitant: the flâneur.

**A Poem of Progress**

In the following decades, especially throughout the 1920s, the screen continued to construct the city. Emerging out of the early actualities, the “city symphony” exploited the distinctive formal properties of cinema (editing and motion) to create its ode to modernity and the metropolis. With film fully established as a medium (one around which an industry was rapidly taking shape), its poetic possibilities could be fully brought to the fore.

Films such as *Manhatta*, directed by photographer and painter Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler in 1921, Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), and Dziga Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) epitomize a certain view of the city which had a pivotal role in terms of fashioning the last century’s understanding and experience of the city. According to Juan Suárez, what is key is to these celebrations of city life is the creation, through abstraction, of a composite perspective.

Abstraction figures prominently both in terms of the use of geometric forms and graphic composition and in terms of the treatment of the inhabitants of the city who are presented to the viewer as “an organic accretion on the city’s surface” (p. 86). The poetic underpinnings of *Manhatta* are also made evident in its borrowed title and inter-title quotations of Walt Whitman. And, like Whitman poems, the film privileges transience and the broken view of the vista over the comprehensive understanding afforded by the continuity of the panorama.

The cinematic subject that *Manhatta* (and films of its type) propose, apprehends the city in terms of its larger structures and forces, as a complex, dynamic entity. The collage technique that inserts and continuously repositions
the viewer works on two levels; its poetic effect amplifies and dramatizes everyday human activity while simultaneously heightening awareness of the infrastructure that miraculously sustains the modern metropolis.

Noting the film’s failure to comply with the “monolithic conception of modernism” represented by Greenberg’s purely aesthetic understanding of formal experimentation, Suárez suggests that Manhatta anticipates the eclecticism and popular savvy routinely attributed to post-modernism; at the same time, the film’s tendency to homogenize city space and to erase social and cultural difference runs counter to the locally nuanced, subculturally inflected depictions of the urban environment advanced in postmodern texts (p. 90).

With this in mind, it could also be argued that such cinematic transports also anticipated the vantage point afforded by the two forms of transportation that would both come to define postmodernism and threaten to undermine urban life: the car and the television.

**Fishbowl Plentitude and Placeless-ness**

In a 1984 essay entitled “Television, Furniture and Sculpture: The Room with The American View”, video artist Vito Acconci speaks about television’s ability to implant ideas and to displace the viewer. He discusses how it concentrates attention narrowly, captures life at a reduced scale, and disavows its own domestic environment. With the world in a box, television makes it seem domestic and containable. But its “fishbowl space,” Acconci argues, remains at odds with video (the actual medium) which is inherently multiple and thus positively disposed toward the particular and the partial. The processes of displacement are also subject to criticism when Acconci dismisses television as “a rehearsal for the time when human beings no longer need to have bodies.”

While television might have multiplied the number of screens, the screens did not proliferate so much as accumulate, doing so at the expense of the urban relation. Similarly, while its domestic context might suggest dissolution of the frame, the televisual fishbowl was, as Acconci’s points out, more of dissolution of surroundings – including the spectator’s body.

For many theories and cultural products of the 1980-90s the question of the future of the body in light of virtualization became a central preoccupation. The paradigmatic film of the period, Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (1982), utilized a continuously shifting, highly mobile vision that, like the emerging new media itself, was regularly identified with a form of spectatorship that
implicitly denied the limits of the body. In retrospect, the “unrestrained” vision of *Blade Runner* seems less about the disappearing body that about a shift in perception from observation to navigation — a key term for describing the viewer’s relation to the digital screen. Immersive or navigable space offers the viewer an imaginary mobility that undermines voyeurism’s division of self and scene. Thus, the body is re-located along a path that gives it a sense of direction, scale, and constraint.

While *Blade Runner*’s “proliferation of screens” references an emerging visual environment that threatens to make impossible demands on our capacity to pay attention, *at the same time*, its use of camera motion and soft-edged edits provides a comforting sense of spatial continuity. As a relatively early representation of space constituted by information technologies (i.e. cyberspace) the film presents a picture of localized physical space intersecting with a global realm of data. We might even think of its multiple screens as points where this invisible network periodically makes itself visible.

Returning vision to the body and drawing attention to the data networks that provide the infrastructure of communication are two of the identifying features of an era that is decidedly post-spectacle. It is a perceptual order in which the screen is configured as a space rather than as a mirror of the world.

**Mirror, Broken Mirror**

To say that the cinema provided the city with its mirror is a complicated claim. The mirror, both socially and psychologically, is an ambivalence-producing object. On the one hand it augments the sense of self and refines the sense of context, on the other it creates the conditions for fragmentation. As Sabine Melchior-Bonnet writes in her history of the mirror:

> The subject, capable of objectivizing himself and of coordinating exterior perceptions with interior sensations, can then progress from the consciousness of the body to the consciousness of the self… From a glance in the mirror flowed not only a taste for ornament and an attention to social display and hierarchy, but also a new geography of the body, which made visible previously unfamiliar images (one’s back and profile) and stirred up sensations of modesty and self-consciousness (p. 1).

This dual tendency was materialized by Dan Graham in his 1976 project *Public Space/Two Audiences* and succinctly summarized in the Pavilion Sculptures section of *Two-Way Mirror Power*, his collection of writings about his art practice.
Psychologically, in *Public Space/Two Audiences*, for one audience the glass divider is a window, objectifying the other audience’s behaviour. (The observed, other audience, becomes by analogy a “mirror” … of the audience observing.) Simultaneously, the mirror at the end of one space allows the viewing audience to observe themselves as a unified body (engaged in looking at the other audience or at themselves looking at the other audience.)… A parallel, but reverse situation exists for the other audience (p. 157).

Graham’s pavilion projects are meant to question the presuppositions about perception that guided the Minimalist art of his time. Uneasy with the notion that perception could be thought of in some “time-free” fashion, and unconvinced that Minimalist efforts to erase connotation could be successfully realized, Graham developed structures that, at first glance, might seem like purely aesthetic objects, but that can readily convey the audience into situations either psychological or social, or both.

Using both reflective and transparent materials, Graham enacts a proliferation of screens – both actual and metaphorical. It is not coincidental that his materials evoke corporate power, surveillance, or issues of public health and safety. In fact, his work can even be understood as subversively “taking aim at” the systematic organization of public space that subordinates the particular and haptic to its rigorous delineation by centralized authority. Ultimately the work places greater emphasis on an experiential rather than strictly visual understanding of the art and in so doing anticipates what has become widely discussed in new media theory as augmented space.

**Haptic and Networked Screens**

As with Dan Graham’s sculptural interventions, the three-dimensional possibilities of the screen figure prominently as a defining feature of new media. The intersection of electronic information and physical space is discussed by theorist Lev Manovich in his essay “The Poetics of Augmented Space” as a process that involves both the introduction of mobile devices and the overlay of dynamic information into the visual field of the user or viewer. While cinema can provide extraordinarily sensuous images, its evocation of tactile experience is not literal; its haptic aspect is remarkable because of its powerful call to the imagination. Embodiment and tactility, although central, are not necessarily always sensuously engaged within the context of augmented space. When screens are mobile or embedded, however, the haptic dimension cannot be ignored for the human body is constantly referenced and actively engaged in assembling the screen space.
At the same time as the screen becomes increasingly personal and particular – that is, responsive to the user and their location – it is also increasingly able to represent large-scale (impersonal) processes through a variety of forms of data visualization. Within the world of augmented space the movement that surrounds the screen is complemented by the movement of data that occurs beneath it. The location of the screen on the network introduces direction and velocity as important properties. Network access also transforms the time variables associated with screening situation: alternately heightening a sense of instantaneousness and lessening a sense of linearity. For de Certeau, these elements (direction, velocity, and time variables) are actuated in space but not in place. The ensemble of dynamic elements functions as a unity that is provisional and polyvalent.

It is debatable whether the hope of the 1970s video avant-garde that their medium might be able to establish an alternative to the hegemony of the singular immersive screen is being adequately realized within the contemporary context. It is nevertheless apparent that the technological infrastructure is now inextricably linked to what artist and “telemedia” activist Amerigo Marras anticipated as “a new condition of self-managed culture” (Tuér, p. 58).

**Re-framing Augmented Space**

The influence of the contemporary world of multi-screen, augmented urban space is felt not only in practices that employ the technologies that are characteristic of this particular space-time. Visual arts (painting, collage, still photography, and print making) are also practices within which we can find shared interest in depicting an urban phenomenon inflected by an understanding of the urban condition as one of flow. Social systems and physical phenomena either too large or too small to fit into the narrow frame of the narrative format are rendered in terms that suggest the influence of electronic media’s dynamic understanding of space. While some art practices move away from the screen, the frame, or the image, in their efforts to engage the ambient and autonomous aspects of lived experience – relational aesthetics, social network art, or locative media, for instance – equally interesting are the ways in which this multiplicity finds its way back into the frame.

In Michael Awad’s panoramic urban photographs, such as Chinatown, one single extended image distills four minutes of activity that occurred at the heart of the most densely populated part of the city. The photograph records no architecture but registers only those things that move or change: people and
vehicles. The purest of motion pictures, it captures the boisterous communion of the urban scene, rendering only what is happening (<www.metiviergallery.com/awad_photographs.html>).

Working paint textures of brown, black and grey to create a vibrating grid locked space, Denyse Thomasos’ Virtual Incarceration creates an image of social control that suggests both physical structures and communications networks. Identifying her work with her personal history and historical past, Thomasos associates the patterns with that of African textiles and the brush strokes with the lash of the slaver’s whip. Here abstract images combine body and institution, tactility and geometric rationality (<www.lennonweinberg.com/artists/thomasos/thomasos_past/thomasos_1999/thomasos_1999_2.html>).

A third example of the influence of interface culture is found in Leung Chi Wo’s Warren at Church part of the City Mapping: Rough Cuts photo collage series. In this work, using the pinhole camera, Leung selected certain locations and shot towards the sky from ground level. It is neither the landmarks nor the architecture that are of interest but the sky: that “negative” or “void” space which is to become the centre of his work. Shooting the sky from different corners of the streets and later cutting out the skies from the contours of surrounding buildings, the artist pictures the idiosyncratic urban space where the edifice evaporates and another meta-level of embodied experience comes into view (<redlabels.com/artist_more.asp?artist=Leung%20Chi-Wo>).

The intersection of data networks and the proliferation of screens require an understanding of space and subjectivity that is complex and dynamic. An understanding that can take into account variable time-frames and personal experiences of time, that can appreciate the extended vision of the subject and the multiplicity of visions that we simultaneously manage, and that can provide us with the opportunity to access historical information or invent new personal contacts. It reminds us that social experience is not simply spectacle but rather involves a constant process of assembly.

Today, the city is a place of circuits and networks as much as a place of screens and images. While there have long been invisible systems that hold the city together, electronic media has a particular role to play in defining our contemporary sense of space and place. Wireless networks and embedded processors suspend us in a mass media that requires not only a re-visioning of our urban iconography and representational traditions but perhaps also a new appreciation of the collective intelligence that exists below the surface of the screen.
References


