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Connection in Visibility

Reconnecting the Space of Flows Unplugged

by Eric Kluitenberg

In the middle nineties the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells introduced a useful concept in his book *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) - the Space of Flows: The Space of Flows is essentially the interconnected space of electronic communication and information networks, primarily telecommunications, internet and digital financial networks.

In the book Castells contrasts two spatial logics that emerge in the network society and that threaten to become increasingly unrelated to each other - the Space of Place and the Space of Flows.

Castells writes: "...people still live in places. But because function and power in our society are organised in the space of flows, the structural domination of its logic essentially alters the meaning and dynamic of places. Experience, by being related to places, becomes abstracted from power, and meaning is increasingly separated from knowledge. It follows a structural schizophrenia between two spatial logics that threatens to break down communication channels in society. The dominant tendency is toward a horizon of a networked, ahistorical space of flows, aiming at imposing its logic over scattered, segmented places, increasingly unrelated to each other, less and less able to share cultural codes. Unless cultural and physical bridges are deliberately built between those two forms of space, we may be heading toward life in parallel universes whose times cannot meet because they are warped into different dimensions of a social hyperspace."

(Castells, *"The Rise of the Network Society"*, Blackwell Publishers, Malden (Mass.), 1996, p. 428)

Thus, while the life experience of the vast majority of people is still connected to places - the Space of Place -, economic and political power, and finally also cultural power, is increasingly organised in a the place-less and a-historical space of flows. The word "deliberate" in his call to build bridges between these two spaces is important. Castells suggests that it requires deliberate collective action if we are not to move towards a structural social schizophrenia with all its inherent disastrous consequences...

However, the question how to build such bridges, remains unaddressed in Castells analysis, and I would argue that this is in part due to the fact that his theoretical framework is simply too general to accommodate that question. Furthermore, the requirement of some form of collective action to intervene in the increasingly divergent spatial logic of the space of flows introduces, at the very least implicitly, a political dimension to the analysis that equally remains out of sight in the book.

In the middle of the debate on the emergence of geolocative media, mobile electronic media that integrate geographical positioning technologies in their functionality, an approach from a critique of public space might be useful to address some of these missing links in Castells analysis.

Geolocative bridges?

The practices involving wireless media and geo-positioning technologies indicated with the term 'locative media' can be seen as one direction where such bridging can take place, but not self-evidently so. The question is where the critical moment is, where such practices actually transcend the pure functionality of the design of the technology itself. The slogan that art involving emergent technologies can be seen as a strategy of humanising technology is not incorrect in itself, but as such much too vague and too general to be truly useful. The mere application of existing and emergent technologies as such is similarly unconvincing. It amounts to little more than underpaid beta testing by 'advanced users' in service of the identification and exploration of future markets for wireless and GPS technologies.

One strategy that might shift the debate on locative media significantly enough to offer new insights and a more critical understanding of the roles these media can play, could be to question the extent to which locative media can be utilised to create new forms of the social and new forms of public space. This can then be understood as one way of addressing Castells call to build bridges between the two divergent spatial logics of places and flows.

To do this, however, Castells rather univocal reading of the space of electronic / digital communication networks needs to be supplanted by a more diversified understanding of those structures. Secondly the notions of the public domain and public space as highly localised and historicised concepts should be brought into relation with the extreme sophistication of the contemporary electronic communication spaces. This leads towards a more general criticism of public space and requires a careful analysis of why so little of the contemporary electronic communication spaces can be considered, in the proper sense, 'public space'.

The aim of such an analysis is not simply a critique of locative media practices, or the realm of electronic mediation in general, but much more an attempt to understand how new forms of sociality and public space can be brought about through such practices.

The critique of public space and electronic mediation can start quite classically with Richard Sennett's criticism of the "*fall of public man*" and the death of public space. In his classic study of 1974, city-sociologist Sennett examines the conscious and unconscious withdrawal of modern man from public life and the retreat into the private domain or into more intimate spheres of life and experience. Sennett observes a tendency across various domains of especially 20th century life that are characterised by a simultaneous increase of visibility and transparency of public life, combined with an increasing detachment from actual engagement in that public life, a tendency he characterises as the paradox of isolation in visibility.

Electronic mediation exponentiates the severity of this particularly modern disorder of social life:

Sennett: "Electronic media is one means by which the very idea of public life has been put to an end. The media have vastly increased the store of knowledge social groups have about each other, but have rendered actual contact unnecessary. The radio, and more especially the TV, are also intimate devices; mostly you watch them at home. TVs in bars, to be sure, are

backgrounds, and people watching them together in bars are likely to talk over what they see, but the more normal experience of watching TV, and especially of paying attention to it, is that you do it by yourself or with your family.

Experience of diversity and experience in a region of society at a distance from the intimate circle; the "media" contravene both these principles of publicness."

He then goes on to ask in what way the electronic media embody the paradox of an empty public domain, the paradox of isolation and visibility?

Sennett: "The mass media infinitely heighten the knowledge people have of what transpires in society, and they infinitely inhibit the capacity of people to convert that knowledge into political action. You cannot talk back to your TV set, you can only turn it off. Unless you are something of a crank and immediately telephone your friends to inform them that you have turned out an obnoxious politician and urge them to turn off their TV sets, any gesture or response you make is an invisible act."

(Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York / London, 1974, pp. 282 - 283.)

Thus, Sennett indicates how the pervasiveness of electronic media continues and exponentiates the trend of isolation and visibility, by locking people in their private homes connected to the outside only by an electronic screen, which allows no feedback, no communication, no exchange, and certainly no encounter with the 'other'.

Mobile electronic media transfer this trend of electronic isolation to public space itself. They create a dramatically increased isolation in visibility, and this in the midst of all others, through the progression of wearable technologies: walkman, mobile phone, 3G and 4G wireless media. Mobile media entrench many people in a form of electronic autism in which these people are locked in singular concentration on their wearable devices while they move through public spaces, visible and plugged-in, but entirely disconnected from the environment...

This trend towards a semi-conscious withdrawal from public life and an increasing retreat into the personal sphere is further made evident by the curious tendency of a considerable amount of people to make their personal lives loudly manifest in public space by discussing at length the excruciating details of their highly personalised existence on mobile phones. Such acts of unwarranted intimacy are a blatant disregard for the social and the necessarily rule-based conduct of public life. What they in fact demarcate is a radical expansion of personal life at the cost of (the possibility of) public life, and thus they contribute significantly to a further hollowing out of the public sphere.

What to do?

Smash mobile phones?

One of the most violent reactions to the invasion of public space by obtrusive personal communication devices is probably the Phone Bashing action, carried out in London (date unsure, end of nineties). Two young gentlemen dressed up as walking mobile phones, wearing a prop-suit (in fact stolen from a video shoot for a commercial video clip), look like giant mobile phones with legs and arms sticking out.

Upon the sound of a mobile phone going off in public space they swing into furious action: running towards the person holding the phone, grabbing it, and smashing it in front of their eyes, upon which usually a pursuit by foot ensues. As the phone

bashers run, their suits sway back and forth in a ridiculously caricaturesque manner....

“Run!!! Keep running!!!” they shout half out of breath, pursued by the outraged former owners of a working mobile phone...

<http://www.phonebashing.com/>

Although a most welcome and warmly supported gesture, this seems hardly a viable strategy to rescue public life...

Disconnecting?

A more subtle solution has been proposed by the Dutch artist Arthur Elsenaar, who developed a portable transmitter to block the spectrum bands used by mobile phones and other wearable communication devices. The transmitter has about the size of a regular matchbox and is battery-powered. By pushing down the only available button a jamming signal is released, just strong enough to switch off all mobile devices in an area of about 3 to 5 metres around the device - i.e., exactly enough to turn-off the obnoxious conversation in the tram, metro or train seat in front of you...

The device has been packaged as a possible product for the wider consumer market under the name Bubl-Space. The only drawback here is that the device is completely illegal, because of existing telecommunications laws that protect vital wireless communication services.

<http://www.bubl-space.com/>

The social and economic pressures not to engage seriously in these and other acts of selective disconnectivity, at present, work against such an idea. However, I strongly advocate locating the right to disconnect firmly in the universal declaration of communication rights!

Beyond the Space of Flows

The differentiation between the Space of Flows and the Space of Place is not nearly as clear-cut as Castells presents it in his Rise of the Network Society. Interconnection of geography and electronic communication networks is far more complicated and manifold. For one, the image of a separate space of flows or a “cyberspace” tends to forget the enormous material investments needed to provide for the infrastructure needed for this electronic communication space to come into being. These investments in themselves already make the space highly inaccessible for the majority part of the world.

Secondly, the emergence of geolocative technologies is part of a larger trend both in security and control, as well as in the provision of wireless services, where the physical / geographic location becomes an intractable part of the electronic communication space. We therefore need concepts that can more properly accommodate the intertwinedness of physical and electronic spaces.

Looking back today at cinematic imaginaries such as “Lawn-Mower Man”, we cannot help but get a hopelessly antiquated, dated and retrograde sensation. The very idea of a disembodied self-contained data-space today seems patently absurd. It is this retrograde conception, which does not allow any understanding of the intertwinedness of the two spatial logics, and that also makes The Matrix into a highly conservative vision of the relationships between embodied and electronic data-space.

“Hybrid Space”, as a concept, is better suited to help us read the complexities of how electronic and physical space weave in and out of each other. The resulting image is more diversified; an image of complexity, rather than the strict duality that Castells still suggests. This intertwinedness, however, in no sense does away with the issues of inclusion and exclusion in the electronic communication space

The question then is how the interface between the electronic communication space (the Space of Flows), and the lived embodied spaces of people’s actual existence and experience can be made more radically public?

From my own experience I can only offer some approximative models of working with such an extended concept of hybrid space. What these, and other similar projects can do is to highlight a new sensitivity for the hybrid in the spatial experience that they produce. It suggests a shift from the descriptive and analytic mode towards the aesthetic. This could be problematic. For instance, Jean-Francois Lyotard’s famous exhibit “Les Immatériaux” (1985) similarly tried to highlight a new sensibility to what is changing in our relationship to reality, vis-à-vis the “fact” of the “new materials” (the immaterials). His argument, ultimately leads in the direction of a technological sublime that denies an actual possibility of agency in the new material/immaterial configuration, which was so brilliantly outlined in his visionary project. (J.F. Lyotard, Thierry Chaput, “*Les Immatériaux - Conception*”, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1985)

It is therefore important to re-emphasise the conversion into political action of these approximative models (sometimes called “art”), so as not to end up in a dead-end street....

Models

In 1999 together with architect Frans Vogelaar and students of the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne we devised an interesting fusion of different spatial logics in a singular context. The project was called “*reBoot: a floating media art experiment*”, and it entailed bringing 50 artists for a week together on a ship that was simultaneous a working space (media-laboratory), a presentation space, and a living space. The boat would move between the cities Cologne, Düsseldorf, Duisburg, Wesel, Arnhem, Rotterdam and Amsterdam, all connected by the river Rhine, another network backbone for this part of Europe, though a far more historical one. (Amsterdam is connected by a branching canal but previously connected by the original historical trajectory of the river).

<http://www.khm.de/reboot>

The important aspect of the project, however, is the layering of spatial logics; the permanence of the environment of the ship, mirrored in a permanent connection to the internet, broadcast signals emitted from the ship throughout the week, and discontinuous connections to local media, most notably to local television in Amsterdam. The flow of the project was further determined by the shifting geographical location of the boat and the docking points where local presentations and projects were staged, and finally by the continuous flow of the river and its historical role as transport route, as travel space, as mass sewage, as release of superfluous water masses.

In this complex configuration new types of public interfaces could continuously be tested, and for the audience the possibility of having different entry points to the project, on-line, via television or radio, at a docking point, or by joining the ship from one harbour to the next, could generate a distinct as well as a multi-layered experience of the project, of immediacy and delay, of proximity and distance.

The discontinuous nature of the actual technical possibilities for connectivity, lead to a highly discontinuous experience for both the artists as well as the audience, and highlighted the micro-interstices between the physical and electronic space. Often, only sound could be transmitted live from the ship, especially when it was moving, with at best a reBoot chat running next to it. Video materials produced on the ship had to be shipped to the central studio in Amsterdam by car and aired from there. Such fault lines did not constitute failures, but actually emphasised the highly discontinuous nature of hybrid space, which can be regarded as one of its essential characteristics.

Another example of the enquiry into the characteristics of hybrid space are the scenario studies that Frans Vogelaar and Elisabeth Sikiarid are conducting in the frame of their studio invOFFICE for architecture, urbanism and design, in Amsterdam. They propose typologies for public interfaces at the intersection points of physical and electronic network flows. These connection points are sometimes located in highly ordinary daily spaces - the laundrette for instance - and sometimes they are positioned in spaces devoted to the concentrated study of informational resources (such as libraries for instance). However, these spaces are always decidedly public so that more traditional forms of public behaviour (washing clothes or reading books outside of the confines of your private home) merge with new hybrid electro-physical interfaces.

Towards a politics of hybrid public space

In quite a different context an engagement with the politics of public space was sought in the project "Debates & Credits - Media Art in the Public Domain", which was initiated in late 2000 by the then Moscow based curator and media art theorist Tatiana Goryucheva, and finally executed in the Fall of 2002. In this project we brought together 4 artist collectives from Russia and four collectives from The Netherlands to design media art projects as interventions into the urban public spaces of Moscow, Amsterdam and Ekaterinburg.

<http://www.debates.nl>

One of the most challenging projects was BeamMobile™, conceived by the Dutch art/design collective DEPT who now work under different names. Their project was as simple as it was effective. By hooking up a strong beamer to a regular construction-type electrical generator with stable output, and connecting a laptop or simple video equipment, they managed to create a mobile digital agit-prop device. The equipment fits in a simple delivery van and can be easily driven around any city. In minutes the projector can be aimed at a nearby building or larger structure in the environment, and different kinds of visual materials can be superimposed on the architecture or the environment at large.

In this case BeamMobile was used to project images and messages in the urban environment that are notably absent there: poetic statements, highly personal imagery, displaced images that for instance transposed summery scenes from Amsterdam's infamous Vondel Park (former Hippy-heaven) into a cold nightly bedroom region of Moscow (Biberova). In other actions the gesture became more overtly political when imprints of digital culture were superimposed on the material remains of authoritarian culture in ruins, such as the central icon of the Soviet Union, Vera Mukhina's Worker and Farmers-daughter, designed for the Paris World Fair in 1937 and later placed outside the monumental permanent exhibition park of economic achievements of the Soviet Union Republics in Moscow, or the façade of the now out of use Heineken Brewery in the heart of Amsterdam (dysfunctional branded urban space).

This personal voice made into a public interface, layering material and digital culture, authoritarian and micro-cultural poetic imaginations, has no place in our contemporary over-regulated urban public spaces. The voices that regularly manifest themselves in the urban environment are those of corporate power (advertisement) and state power (regulatory indications, prohibitions, propaganda). The personal voice is reduced to a purely personal imagination that remains, on the social plane, invisible, or it surfaces only as an annoying hindrance in public transport, but is never (allowed to be) converted into social dialogue. The results for social and civic life are disastrous, and it is this inequality that such projects attempt to address, even if they remain completely marginalised.

Connected Unplugged

Locative media as an artistic and cultural practice can be seen as a more sophisticated way of addressing this complexity of how the geography and the (wireless) electronic networks interweave. At the very least it heightens the experience of a new hybrid spatial sensibility. But these practices do not contribute self-evidently to countering the paradox of isolation in visibility in public space - I can be very isolated in the singular concentration on my geolocative contraptions. The question remains how to design more radically public interfaces for these media in order to engage people actively in a social, and therefore, by necessity, political process.

In hybrid space the challenge would be to feel, and actually be, deeply connected to both the physical environment and to others in that space, as well as to the disembodied confines of electronic space. To paraphrase the words here of Richard Sennett, to be able to engage in a form of *"civilised existence, in which people are comfortable with a diversity of experience, and indeed find nourishment in it"*, where people can actively pursue their interests in society. A space that can serve as *"a focus for active social life, for the conflict and play of interests, for the experience of human possibility"*.
(Sennett, 1974, p. 340)

Sennett speaks in these words about the city as "the forum in which it becomes meaningful to join with other persons without knowing them", in short the encounter with the 'unknown other'. He could in 1974 hardly have imagined how his analysis would be brought to the point of absolute crisis by the advance of mobile electronic communication media and the take-over of public space by personal life; in which everything is there for us to see and hear, while everyone remains essentially isolated from each other.

One way to look critically and I would suggest productively at artist projects in the realm of locative media would be to question to what extent they facilitate or deny public interaction and communication, and indeed make possible this encounter with the unknown other.

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Eric Kluitenberg
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