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SPACE, PLACE, AND PRESENCE

I'm walking – probably not for the first time – along the busy streets of Chicago. The skyscrapers rise around me, and shade the bustle of pedestrians below. Sun and the shade of high-rise buildings create an atmosphere of razor-sharp light, contrasting wide streets and dark alleys. Colorful neon lights and advertisements compete for attention, and innumerable glass facades reflect and twist their surfaces into an endless and infinite kaleidoscopic image. Car horns accompany the low rumble of motors, and the train clatters by occasionally on the track above.

Something makes me confused. Everything I sense, I experience for the first time on this site, even though all this seems to be disturbingly familiar: sounds, buildings, signs, elevated railway, light and colors, even peoples' dressing, manners and gestures. In fact, this familiarity makes the place feel unreal, and I start to doubt my feelings. Do I experience everything directly, spontaneously, immediately, or am I inside some kind of a narrative – inside a film, as an actor directed by somebody else? In any case, I feel as though I am inside an image, an image that might be an exact variation, but all the same unreal, virtual, not here and now. The image – I ponder – is a membrane between the surrounding real space and myself.

I have been living in Chicago now for more than a year, and my flashbacks are being repeated. I'm sitting in a diner, and looking out through the window to the sunny street, and glancing over the bustling crowd. The loudspeakers in the restaurant start to play a popular song, and all of a sudden, the people in the street and the restaurant start seamlessly performing their role in a music video, which captures everything around me. An image in my mind – or is it inscribed in that environment?

Music videos tell us about reality – so accurately that the video world resembles it flawlessly – or is it the other way around? However, the way I perceived the environment – as if I were inside a music video – is precisely that the environment appeared to tell me about reality – more than being reality for me. That tangible, carnal reality of the here and now. Thus, again inside an image? At least amidst confusion. Why was that impression of being inside an image stronger than the feeling of presence?

While the feeling of being inside an image disrupts the train of thought, a question, “where am I really”, rises into my thoughts. What is that surrounding environment or reality composed of? Some philosophers and writers – like Jose Saramago – say that Plato's idea of the world seen as shadows on the wall of a cave is more real than ever before. The further from the antiquity of the Greeks, and the closer to the present times we come, the more accurate and real that idea becomes. Reality appears increasingly, and in particular, through images. Within that flood of images streaming before us in everyday experience, every image competes in

terms of seduction with each other – not only advertisements, but also photographs, magazines, news, movies, TV serials, reality television, etc.

Although my interest is concentrated specifically on the relationship between physical space, potentially virtualizing technologies, visual culture and the experience of presence, I have to touch on the issue of how images or technologies are capable of producing possible “dislocations”. I will examine some technologies that have been central in that cultural evolution, which has directed spatial apprehension – especially in relation to virtuality.

In his book, “The Railroad Journey, The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century”, Wolfgang Schivelbusch speaks about the alienation from space that is driven by industrialization, especially by the coming of the railroad in the mid 19th century. This alienation from space meant that the communicative relationship between man and nature was lost. The railroad brought with it a transformation from landscape to geographical space, when places and locations – instead of being visually measurable within or relative to the landscape – became measured by coordinates within a mathematically systematized space, relative to a predetermined zero or center point. The coming of the railroad also meant a shift from local time to global systematized time, when the standardization of time became necessary: standardized to central time (London, Paris), Greenwich time, local time at the railroad company headquarters. The time was no longer derived from local conditions.

Travelling by train meant losing control of the senses as one travelled as a “parcel” in a compartment. In addition, the elimination of participation in, and interaction with the landscape degraded perception into a panoramic gaze. The rapid movement of the train made the foreground indiscernible, so it then lost its function as the intermediate space between the observer and the landscape, and travellers became isolated from the landscape. Schivelbusch points out that:

“Panoramic perception, in contrast to traditional perception, no longer belonged to the same space as the perceived objects: the traveller saw the objects, landscapes, etc. through the apparatus which moved him through the world. That machine and the motion it created became integrated into his visual perception: thus he could only see things in motion. That mobility of vision – for a traditional oriented sensorium [...], an agent for the dissolution of reality – became a prerequisite for the “normality” of panoramic vision. This vision no longer experienced evanescence: evanescent had become the new reality.”¹

This mobility of vision has functioned as a preconditioning for the cinema, that followed later in modern society. Like the image on a cinema screen, the landscape seen through the compartment window is mediated as a visual image of “the other” – in this case, the landscape that the traveller was detached from.

Schivelbusch also speaks about isolation and the pleasure that one feels while isolated in a train compartment. It is – I quote – “a pleasurable feeling of self-forgetfulness [...] brought on by

¹ Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. The Railroad Journey, Trains and Travel in the 19th Century. New York: Urizen Books, 1979. (p. 66)

the isolation of the ego in the compartment, and the powerful mechanical motion of the train.”² In contrast to this assimilation by powerful machinery, the traveller is simultaneously confronted by a fear of derailment; as a “feeling of impotence due to one’s being, confined inside a fast-moving piece of machinery, without being able to influence it in the least.”³ Although Schivelbusch talks especially about the experience of the railroad journey, the new kind of spatial experience was emblematic and characteristic in the change of overall urban spatial perception that happened simultaneously with the development of urban space in general. The new urban experiences strengthened nervous stimulation and stress – a shock effect – in the urban dweller, which leads to a counteraction. Schivelbusch brings on a concept of a “stimulus shield”, a psychological means of defence that a railroad traveller – or a city dweller – builds inside himself to be able to endure the stressful situation. However, this shield isolates oneself from the space – especially in the urban environment. On the one hand, one has to get used to (in other words, one is forced to forget or deny) the overwhelming stimulus or fear that comes from the surrounding environment. On the other hand, one is led to an increasing self-discipline to avoid the dangers haunting one.

I mentioned earlier that the mobility of vision that derives from the experience of railroad travelling, has functioned as a precondition for the cinema. However preconditioned by the mechanization and technologization of travelling means, the cinema has subsequently had a strong impact on the perception of space – and further on its dislocative aspects. In his article, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin compares looking at a painting and a film. He notes, that looking at a painting is a contemplative state enabling individual associations. But this state is not possible when watching a movie. Benjamin quotes Georges Duchamel:

“I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images. [...] The spectator’s process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by the constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by the heightened presence of mind.”⁴

Benjamin notes in the same article:

“The film is the art form, that is keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man’s need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him. The film corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus – changes that are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big city traffic, on a historical scale by every present-day citizen.”⁵

One can observe the similarities between cinema and railroad experience, but there is still a

² Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *ibid.* (p. 83)

³ Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *ibid.* (p. 83)

⁴ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1986. (p. 238)

⁵ Benjamin, Walter. *ibid.* (p. 250)

further shift in the “uncontrollability” of one’s perception. As the train traveller forgets or shields himself from the fears and anxiety, and therefore attains a state of mind capable even of leading to boredom in a railroad compartment, he aims his attention at something else – still being isolated from the surrounding outdoor space. In contrast, the filmic space – and as Benjamin notes, also the urban space – sucks one’s attention.

In his book “The Aesthetics of Disappearance”, Paul Virilio speaks about speed in relation to film, TV, cars, technology, and how it affects our way of perceiving reality. He speaks about pycnolepsy as a normal human psychological phenomenon, where one loses the sense of time and space and enters into an inner one of one’s own. One example, he says, is the space of children playing. While playing, they enter a personal realm of individual and separated time and space. Virilio speaks about absence in the everyday. He says that these normal pycnoleptic states of mind are not possible in a contemporary environment. Instead of temporary absences in the form of pycnolepsy, there comes some sort of a continuous ecstasy, which alienates oneself from personal time and space. Temporal and spatial experience is driven from outside one’s self, when one’s attention is drawn to overwhelming stimuli and there is no escape into an individual and arbitrary, temporal and spatial experience. This ecstasy is produced by speed of (for instance) automobile and audiovisual vehicles. These technologies produce an illusion that the world comes to the “spectator-traveller”, and by detaching from his arbitrary rhythms they detach him simultaneously from himself. The idea of heightened presence of mind that Benjamin is talking about, is therefore replaced by, or translated to an idea of a continuous ecstasy of attention in Virilio’s text.

Although Benjamin’s urban environment was already saturated with overwhelming stimuli, Virilio’s contemporary world has confronted an exponential multiplication in the omnipresent excitement. In her article “Cinema and the Postmodern Condition” Anne Friedberg brings on a concept of “mobilized virtual gaze”. Like Virilio, she also points out how the mobilized virtual gaze, with its spatial and temporal displacements, has pervaded the public sphere just as much as the private. She says that cinema - as the first apparatus composing together the mobile and virtual - modified in a new and efficient way the concepts of present and real. With their ability to manipulate time and space, the contemporary audiovisual technologies (TV, cinema, etc.) have “...produced an increasingly de-temporalized subject. And at the same time, the ubiquity of those simulated experiences has fostered an increasingly de-realized sense of presence and identity.”⁶

Virilio also speaks about crossing borders in the everyday. Even he takes mainly the car and the street as examples (stepping into a car, sidewalk edge, etc.), the same notion can be expanded more widely to the urban environment. In Virilio’s perspective, the space has become fragmented so that one’s location is no longer essential. The technology-saturated contemporary world dissolves the space, so that only time is left - we live in time, not in space. This does not mean simply the vanishing of the borderline between private and public, but also the overall change in the perception of time and space in contemporary society. The same ecstasy pervades and occupies private space.

⁶ Friedberg, Anne. Cinema and the Postmodern Condition in the book *Viewing Positions, Ways of Seeing Film*. Edited by Linda Williams. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994. (p. 61)

I will shortly touch on the issue of space, cinematic space and memory. When speaking about TV and film, Michel Foucault says that “people are not shown what they have been, but what they must remember they have been.”⁷ Memories are manipulated with audiovisual communication technologies and these technologies are said to provide memory devices, but these memory devices also affect our perception of time and space.

In his book “In/Different Spaces”, Victor Burgin speaks about the truth of memory. He gives many examples from Marie-Claude Taranger’s oral history project, where the people interviewed were invited to recount their personal memories of the years 1930 to 1945. In one example, a woman recollects her memories of the year 1940 in the interview about 30 years later. At the age of 10 she lived in Marseille in an orphanage, and in her narrative she speaks about her partaking in an exodus of people from the North. I quote Burgin:

“The narrator, here, had mixed with refugee children, but had not herself shared their experience of the exodus. In telling what she remembers of this time, she shifts almost imperceptibly from her own direct experience to what she can only have seen later, and indirectly – in the cinema, or on TV. ‘I saw at the cinema’ has become quite simply ‘I saw’.”⁸

In the other examples, the same structure is repeated – personal experiences and confrontations are mixed with scenes from fictional and documentary films.

Films and photographs have come part of one’s own memory, and part of experienced things. There is some kind of a screen memory that lends a secondhand “memory” experience for the observer. These experiences can fill the gaps of one’s memories – embellish, or even replace them. As memories come as composites of actual events and scenes from films and TV news, they become personal, or more precisely internalized but mediated memories. One can no longer speak about the true/false dichotomy of memory, when the “gaps” are filled with constructions from films, TV, etc.

Moreover, sources like cinema and TV interfere with each other, and in relation to memory. Burgin takes the Gulf War and TV newsreels as an example, and speaks about how Hollywood war films interfere with the images from news, and how the films actually educate us to look at them. He speaks about a stroboscopic effect of news: they are fragmented into rapid glances, and at the same time they are familiar stories from movies. There are no new stories, but repetition, variations of something already known. This stroboscope of fragmentation and familiarity not only flattens the individual events, but also lowers the fluidity threshold between actually/subjectively experienced and subconsciously internalized secondary experiences.

Cinema (or TV) is not only a source of memory, but also an authority with a communal nature of experience. If a film can be considered as having a weight of evidence, it is its inherent

⁷ Friedberg, Anne. Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. (p. 6)

⁸ Burgin, Victor. In/Different Spaces, Place and Memory in Visual Culture. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. (p. 227)

mass/volume/quantity character that raises and re-emphasizes its validity as a memory source. As Burgin points out: "...as if the truth, "we all saw it," makes what was seen "the truth"."⁹

In addition to filling the gaps of memory, photographs, films and videos actually guide our perception of space. These preconceived images affect our perception of both familiar and unfamiliar places and spaces – the tableau at the beginning could function as an example. Are our "mental images" and "future memories" predestined?

In her article "The Naturalness of Virtual", Leena Krohn speaks about a need to ask epistemological and ontological questions now, when virtual reality penetrates everyday life, and when the borders between simulation and reality, hallucination and reality have become all the more unclear. Krohn speaks about a need to redefine the human body – instead of the discourse of disappearance of the body in the technology-saturated world. She makes a comparison between travelling in virtual reality and reading books and that in both cases we can speak about a physical, visible body and a real, non-physical, invisible body.

Although both "components" (physical and non-physical) have always existed as human parts, the differentiation between the physical and virtual body has become apparent only with the emerging issues of real, virtual, simulation, etc. In Krohn's words:

"With the aid of technology, man has learned to travel so fast that paradoxically the invisibility of the body is ever more clearly visible. The self is not determined by the physical and visible borders of the body, to the extent to which we are tempted to believe. The self is more likely a presence that prevails and continues via the senses and memory."¹⁰

However, as well as travelling in virtual reality, while reading a book, the "spectator" also moves into another time and space. I quote Krohn:

"While we concentrate on reading, the immediate environment disappears momentarily from our vision. We adopt the experiences confronted by the writer's person, more than our own physical reality."¹¹

We immerse ourselves in the world of the book. In books, as well as in virtual reality, "the role of signs, bits, pixels and binary codes is denied." Krohn points out, that:

"... in order for the narrative to exist, the author has to die. The narrator has to die. Even the reader has to die. However, they recover or are resurrected again, when the narrative has been read and experienced."¹²

⁹ Burgin, Victor. *ibid.* (p. 229)

¹⁰ Krohn, Leena. Virtuaalisen luonnollisuus in the book *Koneihminen: kirjoituksia kulttuurista ja fiktiosta koneen aikakaudella* [Mechanical man: writings on culture and fiction in the machine age]. ed. Kai Mikkonen, Ilkka Mäyrä and Timo Siivonen. Jyväskylä: Atena Kustannus Oy, 1997 (p. 293)

¹¹ Krohn, Leena. *ibid.* (p. 294)

Although Krohn says nothing about media-saturated or media-generated environments in general, I am tempted to ask that, regarding physical space as a mediated construction – as I have already tried to outline it roughly in this speech, is the “narrative” ever closed or switched off? What would be the moment of resurrection?

My aim here is not to be against technology. New technologies evolve, the world changes, and the people with it. Nor is my aim political. Alienation has been talked about for decades, as a result of technologization in society, abstracted by production and capital – in spectacle society, where environments and social interaction are mediated with images. However, the literature I have read in connection with the theme and, especially, my own experiences of sudden dislocations that have startled me, forces me to ask: if reality has become a confusing image, not only do I ask what is that environment that is encircling me, but rather to what extent can I speak of presence? Or, is the question of presence relevant anymore?

If the issue of presence is relevant or problematic, what could be the task of art in the face of this kind of question? Art is often considered as a form of cultural production aestheticizing reality, and being itself alienated from everyday life. One could ask: can art offer, particularly via the images it produces, some kind of a critical perspective for culture which in an accelerated extent defines reality as images and via images?

In the 60s, the Situationists came to the conclusion that the quality of spectacle is inscribed in art in general, that art as an institution leans on and sustains the spectacle society, and that art as an institution alienates and has become alienated from life itself. Situationists ended up denying their “production of situations” being art. Their acts were not works of art, but instead, political and social activity outside art institutions. Helena Sederholm points out in her dissertation on the Situationists:

“Since art, which had been flattened to repetition was, in the minds of the Situationists, art appropriated to spectacle, it had to be banned. Although art would continually renew itself, at least so Debord thought, that which changes the way we perceive the streets is far more important than that which changes the way we see a painting.”¹³

The notion of environmental art (as well as the Situationist movement) developed in the 60s, in my view, partly due to criticism of and drawing away from the gallery and museum institutions and their conventions of presenting and representing art. Sometimes environmental art works have been critical just in relation to the “environmental values” of their locations. At times, they have taken a stand on the part of the anonymous spectator, changing the passive spectator into an active participant in art. One critical objective and challenge that could be directed at environmental art (or art in general), or could be materialized in it, could be in

¹² Krohn, Leena. *ibid.* (p. 295)

¹³ Sederholm, Helena. Intellektuaalista terrorismia – Kansainväliset Situationistit 1957-72 [Intellectual terrorism – the international Situationists 1957-72]. Jyväskylän Yliopisto, 1994. (p. 125)

those previously mentioned issues related to “imageness”, virtualization, indirectness of environments – in other words, the fermentation that the experience and understanding of space are now going through. I do not mean only works of art that bring the presence of the spectator into a tangible sensation, but also works that tangibly bring up those issues or shifts in the relationship between space and presence that this fermentation of the environment produces.

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