



Edited by Pedram Dibazar and Judith Naeff

# Visualizing the Street

New Practices of Documenting,  
Navigating and Imagining the  
City

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## Visualizing the Street

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Amsterdam University Press

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# 1. Introduction: Visualizing the Street

*Pedram Dibazar and Judith Naeff*

## Abstract

Now that we walk in urban surroundings saturated with digitally produced images and signs – with our GPS-tracked and camera-equipped smartphones in our hands – we document, navigate and imagine the urban street in new ways. This book is particularly interested in the new aesthetics and affective experiences of new practices of visualizing the street that have emerged from recent technological innovations. The introductory chapter argues for a focus on the *practice* of shaping both images and places, rather than on an image or a place as an end product, in studying the contemporary intersections of the visual and the spatial productively. In doing so, it seeks to complement the recent studies of visual culture that pay particular attention to new technologies for the production and dissemination of images with an urban studies perspective concerned with the social production and cultural mediation of space. The introduction highlights a number of key issues at stake in the proposed scholarly approach; issues that are dealt with in the concrete case studies explored by the following chapters in this volume.

**Keywords:** visualization; visual studies; urban studies; practice; street; digital

Today, images have attained new social functions and cultural meanings, because of the wide availability of digital image-making and image-sharing technologies. Equipped with cameras, GPS and the Internet, devices such as smartphones have transformed the way images are made, disseminated, interpreted and used. This book is concerned with the influence of such new forms and practices of visualization on the social production and cultural imaginaries of the street. It revisits the street – embracing a long scholarly tradition concerned with such elements as design, politics and everyday

life – and seeks to provide critical viewpoints that enrich contemporary scholarship on the street with a focus on new forms of its visualization.

Of particular interest to our investigation in this book are the politics of aesthetics and affect at stake in these changing practices of visualizing the street. We argue that, in the experience of the contemporary street, the spatial and the visual converge on multiple levels. On a manifest level, images complement the spatial as they create urban façades and shape the visual appearance of the streets. The 21st century urban experience is hugely influenced by the proliferation of signs, billboards, advertisements, posters, stickers and graffiti in and around streets. These images – whether big or small, detailed or sketchy, in print or on screens – provoke emotional responses that are crucial to the expansion of dominant urban policies, such as creativity and gentrification, and the counter-hegemonic responses to them (Lindner and Meissner, 2015). On another level, digital visual materials have become embedded in the embodied experience of the contemporary street, as one walks through it equipped with smart devices. To navigate in the street these days, we rely on interactive maps that show us routes and position us in them, and we ceaselessly complement our direct experiences of the street with images and information we find online. Digital technologies' capacity to gather data and transform codes into legible signs and images, and vice versa, is crucial in this respect. The swift ways in which we navigate multiple interfaces to read, use and modify those visualizations that render information and data flows understandable has become inextricably entangled with how we perceive our surroundings. In other words, while walking through the city with smartphones in hand, we simultaneously spatialize virtual data flows by visualizing them on physical phone screens, and visualize space by creating different forms of images – such as photographs, maps and videos – and disseminating them online through various apps.

In combining the visual with the spatial, this project seeks to complement the recent studies of visual culture that pay particular attention to new technologies for the production and dissemination of images with an urban studies perspective concerned with the social production and cultural mediation of space. Contemporary scholarship on new technologies of visualization (Larsen and Sandbye, 2014; Verhoeff, 2012) suggests that, today, the practices of mapping, photographing, filming and editing are accessible to anyone who carries a phone and is connected online. This development highlights the performativity of visualization, stresses the immediacy of networks of communication, democratizes the processes of production and circulation of imagery, and destabilizes old hierarchies of

aesthetics. At the same time, new technologies of image processing have also contributed to the expansion of a visual culture that is produced and distributed professionally, and which is partly responsible for shaping the visual experience of the contemporary street. Although responding to different sensibilities, there are striking similarities between these various registers of the everyday visual experience of the street. The digital means of production of street imagery – never delivering a clear end product and always in circulation between material and virtual networks – and the fleeting glance with which consumers relate to that imagery, point to a distinctly performative visual language.

In this introduction, we argue that, to analyse such new forms of visualizing the street, we need to move away from studying images and space separately; we need to take into account the ways in which images are produced, disseminated and consumed spatially. To do so, we propose to focus on practices that shape those images and spaces, rather than on images or places alone. It is by bringing the practice into the centre of attention that the visual and spatial intersect in a methodologically appropriate way for studying the recent developments in spatial visualization. The essays in this collection therefore build on recent developments in practice-based media studies (Couldry, 2012; Moores, 2012), visual culture studies (Rose, 2011; Favero, 2014) and sociology (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012) to analyse visualization as social and cultural practice. This way of thinking allows for meanings, feelings and social relations to be made and remade constantly in everyday practice, in ways attentive to the dynamics of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic visibilities in and of the street. Connecting practices of visual documentation, navigation and imagination, we argue that new ways of making and using images heavily influences the ways we perceive, imagine, and live contemporary streets across the world.

## The Street

As a critical concept, 'the street' builds upon an extensive scholarly tradition interested in notions of the public, the everyday and the bottom-up (e.g. Fyfe, 1998). A space of circulation – of goods, people and ideas – the street forms the privileged space for the theorization of a particularly urban condition for encounters between strangers (e.g. Watson, 2006). Such encounters are embodied and marked by differences and inequalities. Even though most circulation in the streets unfolds in the unnoticed rhythms of the everyday and the habitual, the possibility of mixing and confrontation grants this

social space an unpredictable and uncontrolled nature. It is in this capacity that 'the street' is often employed in the context of public dissent. It denotes the space in which public expressions of discontent, outrage or grief unfold. Moreover, the street connotes a community characterized by diversity and tied loosely, often temporarily, by a set of common interests. These common interests often relate to urban settings and facilities or are articulated as such under Lefebvre's notion of 'the right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1996).

The role of visual culture in contestations over space is analysed in Chapters 2, 5 and 9 in this book, focusing on cases from Hong Kong, Istanbul and Athens. Indeed, images have played a significant role in constructing imaginaries of revolt and protest (Didi-Huberman, 2016). The visual documentation of public dissent and conflict have played a crucial role in shaping common understandings of those events in the eyes and minds of the public from the mid twentieth century onwards. With the availability of handheld devices to nonprofessionals to make and share images of conflicts, recent years have witnessed a surge in the quantity and velocity of such images. This has given rise to the celebratory notion of 'twitter revolutions' and 'citizen journalists', fitting in a longer tradition of viewing technological advancements in telecommunications as a democratic promise of expanded social and political agency. In the context of the Arab spring, such images of the revolutionary street, as Mark Westmoreland argues, made 'image-making practice both threatening and powerful' as the streets became hyper-visible under the ever-present gaze of a multitude of witnesses (2016: 243-244). Amateur visual eye witness accounts of the political street, Westmoreland suggests, formed 'both documentation acts of police violence and affirm[ed] the agency of mass political subjectivity' (2016: 244). He goes on to argue that there is an interesting relation between spatiality and visuality in this case, in that, by occupying urban space, Cairenes were able to both reclaim their streets and their images (Westmoreland, 2016: 244). The Arab Spring is thus a powerful example of the way in which the practices of image-making and placemaking converge.

Yet, as several chapters in this book show, the potential democratization through digital image sharing is never without complications. Wing-Ki Lee (Chapter 2) describes how the grassroots appropriation of images and spaces is in turn re-appropriated by astroturf derivative work; Simon Ferdinand (Chapter 7) points out that, no matter how creatively we appropriate data, their availability will always also make us vulnerable to forms of surveillance and control that inhibit subversive practices; and Simone Kalkman (Chapter 11) considers how local initiatives that also serve the interests of global corporate partners risk overshooting their mark.

The street's potential for disorder also means that the street is highly subjected to surveillance and control. Indeed, many of the technological innovations that form the basis of the social and cultural developments discussed in this book were initially engineered for surveillance purposes. From satellite images to drones, subjecting streets and street life to a view from above and arguably the practice of mapping itself have traditionally been entangled with the desire to manage and control the erratic and dynamic sociality at street level. In conceptualizations of the struggle over urban space, visibility, perspective and ways of looking have played an important role. Michel de Certeau's distinction between the view from above – associated with the strategies of crowd control and urban planning – and the view from below – associated with the tactics employed in the hustle and bustle of everyday life – has been of paramount importance in this respect (de Certeau, 1984). While acknowledging the entanglement of attempts to render urban space legible with desires to control it, the chapters by Simon Ferdinand (Chapter 7) on artistic renderings of GPS tracked movement, by László Munteán (Chapter 4) on drone footage of destroyed Syrian cities, by Rob Coley (Chapter 8) on fictional imaginaries of smart cities, and by Simone Kalkman (Chapter 11) on mapping the Favelas, also question all-too-easy dichotomies between the view from above and the view from below and seek to disentangle both its phenomenology and the more complex power structures involved in attempts to make visible and comprehensible the contemporary street. Thinking about the street thus inevitably requires engaging with the politics of visibility, and thinking through practices of visualization in and of the street – the focus of this book – necessitates engaging with the tensions between control and dissent that have been crucial to urban studies more broadly.

### **From Image-making to Visualization**

Only two decades ago, making a visualization of an urban space – a drawing, map, computer generated rendering, photograph or video – demanded equipment, preparation, and professional know-how. Today, in most parts of the world, the production and instant circulation of images has become an inconspicuous part of our everyday routines. With our camera-equipped smartphones in our pockets, producing, editing and sharing images has become as ubiquitous as consuming them. We have unwittingly become visualizers on a daily basis. The old notion of the passive consumer, who was thought by the 20th-century cultural theorists to be subject to monopolizing

regimes of mass culture, has been replaced in the 21st century by a more complex notion of an active participant, caught in a more dynamic field of interaction across multiple networks of circulation, (re)production, editing and appropriation.

To refer to the visual material in such a pervasive and broad field of production and circulation, we use the word 'visualization'. Under visualization, we imply all the different forms of digital content that go beyond the traditional manifestations of visual materials. These include, for instance, images whose visual content is marked by geotags and hashtags, or maps whose cartographic content includes interactive indications of individuals' locations and movements. In addition to the visual material, visualization suggests a process and practice. Unlike vocabularies such as image-making or map-making that imply a more restricted outcome – an image or map – and a more specific notion of the aims and schemes of the practice, the concept of visualization embraces a breadth of forms and patterns, which we find helpful. Visualization, moreover, is better equipped with addressing data-processing techniques, where any visual material could be regarded as a particular representation of and an outcome of abstract data processing, which, even if not manifest in the visual material, is almost always implicated in the technologies of their production and dissemination (Manovich, 2011). In the following, we review some of the social functions, technological formats and affective registers of the new practice of digitally visualizing spaces and localities.

One of the most immediate impacts of the ubiquitous technologies of producing and circulating images has been on the ways we *use* images. For instance, we use visualizations to convey a message while chatting online; we send images of where we are and what we do to mark a simultaneously visual and spatial presence. In such visualizations, we often do not pay much attention to the image itself, its composition and visual signs. Rather, the image performs a particular kind of social function. Mikko Villi suggests that images sent from and received by camera phones function as 'authentication of the sender's presence, the "I am here now"', and create a 'synchronous gaze', an 'act of seeing together' which the sender and receiver experience at the same time, and which is fundamental to the creation of a sense of mediated presence (2015: 8). Along the same lines, Mizuko Ito coins the term 'intimate visual co-presence' to denote the practice of personal camera phone use, in which 'the focus is on co-presence and viewpoint sharing rather than communication, publication, or archiving' (2005: 1). The function of such images is premised on the spatiality – I am *here* – and temporality – I am here *now* – of their nearly instantaneous production, circulation and

consumption. They are consequently rarely looked at after the moment of sharing. Martin Lister observes this immediacy and different ways of looking that it entails in other contexts within the surfeit of images in digital cultures, where he believes a new relation to the image is produced that is predicated on a culture of not gazing at, but overlooking, the image – and sometimes even not looking at it at all (2014). These new relations to the image sometimes instigate new practices and social functions too. For instance, on photoblogging, he writes, ‘photographs matter not so much as finite products (and neither does the blog), but because they provide the occasion for taking photographs: for walking, for wandering, for being alert to opportunities, for being “in the moment”’ (Lister, 2014: 19).

Likewise, Larsen and Sandbye claim that ‘increasingly, everyday amateur photography is a performative practice connected to presence, immediate communication and social networking, as opposed to the storing of memories for eternity, which is how it has hitherto been conceptualized’ (2014: xx). Thus, we could argue that the production and dissemination of images has shifted from a future-oriented documentation of reality, to be seen later as evidence of the past, to the immediacy of sharing our subjective experiences now; from an observational mode of recording to a performative mode of immersion. The shift in function of amateur photography has found particularly suitable mediations in social media platforms. The title of the first part of this book, ‘Documenting the street on social media’, deliberately evokes an internal friction, in the sense that, while all chapters in this section deal with forms of recording, documentation, storage and archiving, the velocity and ephemerality of their circulation on social media also makes these terms superfluous, or at least profoundly alters their meaning.

Another example of practices in which visualizations play a significant role is navigation in space. In orienting ourselves in the contemporary city, we use a variety of visualizations. We smoothly switch from maps to street-level footages, and from satellite photos to marketing images of local services, while also shifting through a variety of signs and images in the physical space, often deliberately aestheticized with figures and pictures for commercial ends. We have thus come to consume an ever-greater number and variety of images. In this book, we pay attention to the multiple ways in which visualization works and the particular form of images and visual material that we use. The dynamic process of computation and visualization, in which images are translated into codes and codes are rendered visually to make them comprehensible, form a significant concern of this volume. This two-way translation process between data and images is especially critically assessed in the second part of the volume, ‘Navigating Urban Data Flows’.



These new *functions* of images have also come with new image *formats*. Significantly, the images we consume today can rarely be interpreted as one unified and definitive image with only visual content. Geotagging has added a layer of informational data to digital photography, firmly anchoring images in space. Memes often consist of text-and-image, and hashtags not only add a layer of interpretation to images, but also a mode of virtual navigation. Google Street View is composed of still photographs, but they function as maps too, and we can navigate through them in a way that aesthetically resembles video games. Gifs are moving images, yet lack the narrative quality of video. Between the capturing quality of the photograph and the dynamics of the video, the gif file has opened up a new visual genre of infinite repetition. Even still photographs, with the ubiquity of digital editing, rarely find the stasis of a clear end product, endlessly enhanced, reframed, published and appropriated across various media. The old binaries between still and moving image, as Ingrid Hölzl (2010) writes, still hold to some extent, but their relationship has become more complex. To go beyond such a binary, she suggests to consider photography and film as 'synthetic "image states": they both display aspects of stasis and movement' (Hölzl, 2010: 106).

It could also be said that new forms of visualization fit into a broader trend, in which cultural value is less and less based on the signifying content or stylistic form of images and more and more on the quantity and velocity with which they transmit information (e.g. Keen, 2007; Steyerl, 2009). Such an emphasis on images as data might suggest a continuous 'waning of affect' (Jameson, 1991: 10). But new practices of visualization create new affective ecologies, such as the 'intimate co-presence' discussed above (Ito, 2005: 1). New practices of visualization have transformed the ways we read and understand images and have generated new emotional responses. We do not merely look at images, but most of the times do several things at the same time when seeing digital images. We see the image and read the hashtag, for instance; we look and scroll down or swipe over the screen; we see a collection of images at the same time or browse through them in quick succession; we switch perspective; we zoom in and out. Aaron Shapiro points out that 'using Street View in practice entails a lot of this toggling back and forth between the aerial and the street-level' (2017: 4). The fleeting, distracted glance and the quick change of attention from one system to another marks our new way of looking. It seems ceaseless and smooth in our everyday use, but involves a continuously violent disruption of the gaze.

If we review the particular affect produced by innovative visualizations of the street introduced in the chapters of this book, a striking parallel

emerges. In studying amateur photographs of suburban houses, Megan Hicks (Chapter 3) perceives in the peculiarly furtive rhythmicity of consuming Instagram's inflexibly orthogonal frame the strange reappearance of the repetitive aesthetics of modernist high-rises – the architectural style that remains conspicuously absent from such images. Discussing the imagery produced around a London street market, Karen Cross (Chapter 10) describes how the strategic reuse of older styles of photography, typesetting and other forms of visualization evoke a sense of uncanniness. Rob Coley (Chapter 8) argues that speculating about the future relation between humans and technology confronts us with the fact we share our streets with 'a weird ecology of agencies' that we cannot visualize. Thus, tracing the strange, the uncanny and the weird throughout the three sections of this book demonstrates not only how temporal disjunctures of new practices of visualization produce affects of defamiliarization in space, but also how media and technology sometimes interfere with the meanings we construct in ways that go beyond our comprehension and control.

In conclusion, visualizations in and of the street are characterized by performative gestures that entail sharing and navigation. Rather than a definite image of which the value is constituted by its visual signification, infinite processes of (re)editing and (re)appropriation produce what could be called synthetic 'image states' of which meaning and value continue to change across multiple performative instances of making, sharing and receiving (Hölzl 2010: 106). Our seemingly smooth but ultimately fragmentary navigation through such image states via multiple interfaces can evoke a variety of emotional responses, including enchantment and disaffection. We have gestured towards two affective registers in this respect: the intimacy of online sharing and the uncanny (re)emergence of what initially escapes our perception.

## Space, Bodies, Technology

To understand how the street is visualized, we need to take into account not only the politics of the media through which space is visualized, but also, conversely, the ways in which these visual media are spatialized. This means, first of all, that we remain attentive to the complex ways in which images travel through multiple networks. Wing-Ki Lee (Chapter 2) provides a particularly sophisticated analysis on derivative work related to Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, as it traces the various transformations of images and their meanings in their online trajectories. Yet, images are

not limited to the visual translations of data flows on our screens, they also find material expression in the urban environment. From huge billboards to dilapidated shop signs and from authorized beautification projects to subversive graffiti, visual culture plays an important part in how we experience the streetscape – even if other senses also play a part in the physical realm. Indeed, the photoshopped images circulating online in Lee's analysis find their way back to the streets in the form of large prints pasted on cardboards or as stenciled murals.

Simon Ferdinand (Chapter 7) and Asli Duru (Chapter 5) point to the significance of embodied movement through the streets of London and Istanbul, respectively. The performative immediacy of claiming the right to the city through embodied presence in both case studies is given more durable form through practices of visualization. Visualization in these cases constitutes the recording of a trace of physical presence and practice in space. Nanna Verhoeff and Karin van Es (Chapter 6) point to ways of visualizing the invisible data flows that run through our urban environments, and emphasize the political stake of making these visualizations available in public space, embedded in the materiality of our everyday surroundings. Ginette Verstraete and Cristina Ampatzidou (Chapter 9) and Karen Cross (Chapter 10) explain how the right to the city is also played out in contestations over aesthetization and beautification projects, which entail different ways and forms of imagery. These chapters demonstrate the complex ways in which the visual appearance of the street in its physical manifestation is entangled with virtual visualizations of it.

The affect produced by new practices of visualization, some of which have been discussed in the previous section, rely largely on new forms of embodiment that digital technologies instigate. Digital devices, interfaces and apps have become extensions of our bodies; we increasingly see, hear, calculate and communicate through them. With the use of digital technology, we gain knowledge about our bodies and environment, we track ourselves and turn into, what Deborah Lupton calls, quantified selves, with our data profiles following us everywhere (2016). In addition to quantifying the world around us, we also feel the world differently through digital devices. As Mark Shepard suggests, 'today, the "feel" of the street is defined less and less by what we can see with the naked eye' (2011: 21). The discourse of smart cities and sentient futures pays particular attention to the embodied forms of everyday interaction with, and through, digital techniques of data visualization. This phenomenological aspect of technological innovation is central to László Muntéan's (Chapter 4) investigation of the sublime effects of drone visibility. The body-technology relation and the issue of human

perception are also at the heart of the three chapters collected in this volume under the title 'Navigating Urban Data Flows'.

A productive case study to think through the intersections between virtual imagery and urban space is the digital renderings of architectural projects. Such computer-generated 3D visualizations not only have become the dominant visual language within the discourse of professional urban design and architecture – such as professional architectural journals, city planning and real estate projects – they are also a prominent feature in urban space and the public sphere in the form of large-scale posters on walls and urban surfaces, and small scale prints and images in magazines and websites. In a series of articles on the digital visualizations of urban redevelopment projects, Gillian Rose, Monica Degen and Clare Melhuish (2016) argue that, in order to understand these images, one needs to consider the conditions of their production. One has to understand the labor that has gone into producing these seemingly easy visualizations, to consider the network and process of their making. They propose to use Actor Network Theory for the study of these images because its emphasis on networks, mobility and agency allows us to challenge the picture-perfect completion that the visual content of the images seems to suggest:

What examining the labour of creating these visualizations suggests, is that they are far from being near-magical, seamless, pristine images of glossy urban futures. Instead, they are rather more like sites of debate and disagreement, which shift and change as different designs are inputted, different sorts of views desired, and different sort of audiences anticipated. And if they could be seen like that, the seamless views of urban living that they offer could also be challenged, by being seen as networked. (Rose et al., 2016: 116)

They suggest that, by considering how these visualizations imply multiple, sometimes conflicting, practices, we not only understand the labor gone into their making but also are better equipped to question these images' 'strategic erasure of their processes of production' critically (Rose et al., 2016: 111). Here, Actor Network Theory is complemented by close analysis of both visual content, that is, the type of social reality depicted and the choices made in terms of composition, framing, lighting and perspective, and the affective qualities, i.e. the shiny, glossy, happy atmosphere of the images. Interestingly, the authors suggest not only to study these three aspects of architectural renderings critically – how the images are produced, what they show and what emotional response they (seek to) evoke – but also to interrupt their intended

affective atmosphere by locating ‘visualizations whose glamour is in some way defective, and then to share that deglamourization with various audiences’ (Rose et al., 2016: 113). In other words, Rose, Degen and Melhuish argue that exclusionary visualizations of the street could be countered by circulating other visualizations, those that capture faded, torn and inconspicuous versions of these CGIs in our everyday urban reality, confronting the envisioned futures with the messy and more inclusive nature of real streets. To understand these images, Rose, Degen and Melhuis suggest that the details of the practices that have led to their visualization should be taken into consideration. This type of practice-based research, attentive to the intersections between spatial and visual regimes, is what we argue for in this book too.

In line with the argument made in this introduction, the scholarly approaches of the chapters collected in this volume have at least two things in common. Firstly, they appreciate the inextricable entanglement of the (virtually) visual and the spatial. Secondly, they pay attention to *practices* of visualization and its related aspects of embodiment, materiality and affect. The chapters speak to each other in a variety of ways and show considerable thematic and methodological overlaps. In this introduction, we have traced some of those recurrent notions and suggested key points of convergence between chapters. To highlight our approach to visualizing the street as *practice*, however, we have ordered the chapters according to the following overarching themes: documentation, navigation and imagination. These themes are to help readers navigate the chapters through our conceptual approach, and they are not meant as distinct categories as most of the chapters relate to more than one of them. The following section outlines the main content of each part and each chapter.

## Documenting Streets on Social Media

The first part of the book explores diverse examples of street images circulating on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. The images discussed in this section capture streetscapes with the aim of documenting a significant historical event, registering transient acts of defiance or archiving the status quo for the future. Despite their divergent concerns, the four chapters in this section share an interest in the politics of circulation and the affective register of visual consumption on these media platforms. Paying particular attention to the aesthetic qualities of their case studies, all four chapters critically assess the affect produced by such documenting and sharing.

In Chapter 2, 'Derivative Work and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement: Three Perspectives', Wing-Ki Lee starts from the conspicuous absence of any visual reminder in the streets of Hong Kong of the 2014 street protests that came to be known as the Umbrella Movement. In response, the author turns to the virtual archive of hyper-mobile images on the Internet, in particular the derivative work of photoshopped, re-edited and re-appropriated images surrounding these street protests. Interestingly, Lee moves beyond a celebratory description of the peculiar subversive aesthetics of amateur image appropriation to consider its historical resonance with state-authorized visual censorship in mainland China, its immoral use by conservative and patriarchal Internet users, and its re-appropriation by state actors. Thus, the chapter raises questions about all-too-easy dichotomies between oppressive and subversive visual regimes.

Chapter 3, 'Strange in the Suburbs: Reading Instagram Images for Responses to Change', provides a reading of Instagram feeds that form visual archives of Australian suburban façades. Megan Hicks argues that, when standing alone, these images do not evoke any particular feeling. Yet, in the flick-flick-flick of the Instagram feed, the images become haunted by their deliberate exclusion of the rapid increase of high-density apartment blocks in suburban landscapes. Especially those photographers who succeed to frame the suburban decorative details in symmetrical compositions, in the orthogonal frame of the app, uncannily evoke the repetitive geometry of the very high-rises that threaten to erase the captured landscape but remain conspicuously absent within the frames.

From the repressed anxieties in Australian suburbs, László Munteán takes us to the overt horror of the war-torn streets of Syria. Chapter 4, 'Droning Syria: The Aerial View and the New Aesthetics of Urban Ruination', critically assesses the aesthetics of Russian journalistic aerial footage captured by drones hovering over Syrian cities in war. He not only criticizes the way in which its mode of production is implicated with the Russian war effort, but also dwells on the specific phenomenology of droning and how it is geared towards continuing a long tradition of *Ruinenlust*, thus questioning the ethics of not only the mode of production and the aesthetic composition of the footage, but also of its mode of reception as a YouTube hit.

In Chapter 5, 'The affective territory of poetic graffiti from sidewalk to networked image', Aslı Duru opens up the intersection between space and visual culture to include poetry. Duru investigates the #siirsokakta movement that emerged in the wake of Istanbul's Gezi protests. 'Siir sokakta' means 'poetry in the street' and refers to the widespread practice of scribbling or spray-painting lines of poetry in public space, then

capturing the lines with a camera phone and sharing it online using a shared hashtag. The chapter considers the relations between poetic text, image and urban space from a historical perspective, and reflects on the methodology of walking ethnography. Duru argues that the peculiar geography of the #siirsokakta movement asks for an expansion of this method to include browsing ethnography, pointing out their parallels and intersections.

## Navigating Urban Data Flows

The chapters in the second part of the book are concerned with practices of orientation and navigation. We use images to navigate virtual geographies of information spatially, and, conversely, we use visualizations of those very data flows to navigate the social and physical space of the city. The three chapters in this part of the volume are interested in the politics and aesthetics of this translation process between data and image, between real and virtual space. A shared concern in the chapters gathered in this section are the limitations of the visibility and legibility of the environment despite, and often precisely as a result of, technological advancements.

In Chapter 6, 'Situated Installations for Urban Data Visualization: Interfacing the Archive-City', Nanna Verhoeff and Karin van Es take creative media installations as a starting point, in order to propose a set of conceptual approaches to visual interfaces that provide access to a layered urban reality of data flows. Interestingly, the navigation of immaterial data is translated into exclusively spatial concepts. Verhoeff and van Es's concept of 'performative archaeology' elegantly expresses the tension between the vastness of the informational geography that escapes our perception in the urban environment and the temporality of instantaneity, both as the nature of data flows and of the instance of their uncovering.

In Chapter 7, 'Cartography at Ground Level: Spectrality and Streets in Jeremy Wood's *My Ghost and Meridians*', Simon Ferdinand analyses the GPS-tracked walking performances and their visual renderings by the artist Jeremy Wood. Producing cartographies that trace his erratic or choreographed movements in space, Woods plays with preconceived ideas about what cartography is or should be. Using technology that registers space using satellites, his artworks present us with a visual rendering of space that is profoundly embodied. Ferdinand proceeds to argue that Wood's art exposes slippages in digital mapping's pretentious worldview of existential security provided by precisely calculated locations.

In the Chapter 8, 'Street Smarts for Smart Streets', Rob Coley argues that the aesthetics of smart cities, as of yet largely speculative, reveal how humanist assumptions that the human subject has privileged access to seeing and visualizing reality are in crisis. He explores two very different fictional accounts, a television series and a novel, that are dark, unsettling, and 'weird' in their questioning of subject-object relations and argues that these darker visions form a necessary critical counterpart to the more utopian visualizations in the areas of design and urban planning. The detectives that form the protagonists of these fictional narratives are increasingly bewildered by the fact that the urban territory in which they try to navigate remains largely illegible to them.

### **Imagining Urban Communities**

The third section of the book addresses the ways in which visualizations of the street serve to forge associations and construct narratives and imaginaries of urban communities. The chapters in this part tease out the contentious dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that are invariably part of the processes of visualization. They pay particular attention to the ways in which the visual plays a role in the struggles over the right to the city, which can no longer be considered apart from the claims to agency in hegemonic visual regimes.

In Chapter 9, 'Chewing Gum and Graffiti: Aestheticized City Rhetoric in post-2008 Athens', Ginette Verstraete and Cristina Ampatzidou contrast two different types of urban imaginaries and the politics of their visualizations. First, they offer two examples of what they call a post-political stance that seek to develop a pristine urban environment of which all traces of poverty and crime are removed, so as to attract new capital investments and tourism. These are contrasted with two examples in which a crack opens in these sanitized urban spaces, from which a notion of the political emerges. Through these case studies, they demonstrate the volatile dynamics of appropriation and co-optation at stake in these DIY visualizations of the street.

In Chapter 10, 'The Uncanny Likeness of the Street: Visioning Community through the Lens of Social Media', Karen Cross analyses the aesthetics of social media visualizations of a UK volunteer-led 'alternative' market. Considered within the context of larger processes of gentrification and their concomitant socioeconomic tensions and struggles, the chapter considers the uncanniness of retro aesthetics in what seems to be a genuine attempt to envision a sense of community in South East London.



In Chapter 11, 'On or Beyond the Map? Google Maps and Street View in Rio de Janeiro's Favelas', Simone Kalkman discusses the hybrid configuration of local actors and global companies involved in digitally mapping Rio's favelas. Historically excluded from cartographic visualizations, these initiatives seek to generate visibility, recognition and opportunities for the favela streets and their communities. However, Kalkman also highlights a number of pitfalls. In marketing the new mapping of the favelas, it is in the interest of commercial actors like Google to perpetuate the oversimplifying imaginaries of Rio as a 'divided city'. Kalkman argues that, especially those initiatives that fail to create some form of contact zone, whether online or in urban space, seem merely to reproduce the exclusionary binaries they claim to address.

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# Part 1

Documenting Streets on Social Media



## 2. Derivative Work and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement: Three Perspectives

*Wing-Ki Lee*

### **Abstract**

This chapter discusses a type of visual image that emerged from the Occupy movement in Hong Kong – ‘derivative work’, or Internet meme, a visual and photographic manipulation of found images to parody public events. A selection of derivative works emerging from and related to the Umbrella Movement (2014) are brought into discussion to examine the social, cultural and political aspects of visual images and Hong Kong's recent history. The theoretical framework is primarily drawn from recent discussions of visual images and digital humanities. Derivative work is used by different groups with different political views and aims of which three are distinguished in the article: grassroots participatory propaganda, sexist and racist cyber culture, and the recuperation by pro-establishment lobbyists. Two critical points are highlighted in the conclusive remarks to, first, bring these three perspectives together as the three perspectives may, or may not, be treated in a linear progression; and, secondly, to suggest that forms of censorship will always be imposed on derivative work because they are direct responses to local politics. The author suggests that future practices of visualizing the street are dependent on and conditioned by legal-political progress.

**Keywords:** Umbrella Movement; Occupy Movement; photographic manipulation; Hong Kong; grassroots democracy; gender; rerouting

## **Introduction: Imagery of Hong Kong's Street in Umbrella Movement 2014**

I was standing on a footbridge looking towards Harcourt Road, Admiralty, Hong Kong on 28 September 2016, two years after the eruption of the Umbrella Movement in 2014. Harcourt Road (the first of the Occupy streets), Admiralty (the first of the four Occupy sites) and Hong Kong looked as if this city, like other global cities that once experienced an Occupy movement, did not allow for change or disruption in its visual representation. The occupants, the tents, slogans, political banners and the yellow umbrellas that all signified the call for democracy and once persisted at this particular landmark were now out of sight. Since the clearance of the Occupy sites in Hong Kong in December 2014, the landmarks, objects and imageries of civil disobedience in Hong Kong had gradually disappeared. Tents were demolished. Barricades were removed. The mass of occupants resumed their 9-to-5 work routines. Life seemed to have returned to normal. The Umbrella Movement seemed not to have left any trace in the physical reality in Hong Kong.

The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong is a crucial public and political event with regard to redefining public space and the streetscape of Hong Kong. From my observation, the notion of 'street' in Hong Kong had undergone a drastic transformation over the course of the 3-month occupation. Street and public space were redefined from sites of flow and circulation into spaces to stop, stay and suspend; from sites of planning, rationality and neutrality, to political arena of alleged chaos, civil disorder, civil disobedience and grassroots democratic empowerment. During the Umbrella Movement, different forms of visual work related to the Occupy Movement were created to signify such changes and redefinitions: a utopian and spontaneous urban planning, composed of collapsible tents and umbrellas, temporary site-specific installations and public artworks, and political banners and propaganda. However, these visual works have all disappeared since the clearance of the Occupy sites. The delirious state of 'knowing and not seeing' unsettles and interests me as a researcher and as a Hong Kong citizen who participated in and experienced the Umbrella Movement.

After two years had passed, I would sometimes wander the Internet (without visiting the Occupy sites) to recollect the Occupy experience. There were many forms of visual records of the Umbrella Movement, for example news reportage, documentary photography, live-stream video, video footage, computer animation and illustration. The Internet was a visual archive to revisit these experiences, given that Internet censorship was not yet



Fig. 2.1: The 'suspected' Banksy graffiti 'you do not have the permission to vote' in Hong Kong during Umbrella Movement, 9 December 2014, maker unknown.

exercised in Hong Kong. I became more and more intrigued by the power of one type of visual images: 'derivative work', a visual and photographic manipulation of found images to parody a public event. I employ 'derivative work' to describe such digital image manipulation created by both known and unknown (anonymous) creators, and their viral dissemination on the Internet. There are other terminologies to describe similar phenomena, such as Internet memes (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016), viral media and spreadable media (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013). I choose 'derivative work' over other terminologies because it is context-specific and responds directly to Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement.

In the past decade, derivative work and advocacy journalism had burgeoned much appeal among Hong Kong citizens due to cynicism about the objectivity of mainstream journalism in Hong Kong. The satirical and entertaining nature of derivative work also attracts people who are less concerned with current affairs and politics. Thousands and thousands of derivative works were created and circulated on the Internet during the Umbrella Movement, while the image-makers were often unknown and unidentifiable. One of the works that I found on the Occupy site (also on the Internet) titled 'you do not have the permission to vote' may speak for the theme visualizing the street, and particularly how derivative work in the Occupy Movement hacks the street and hacks the 'author'.

On 9 December 2014, a piece of street art was found at the periphery of Admiralty's Occupy site. It was an enlarged Window computer 'system error' dialogue box sticker, saying 'you do not have the permission to vote'.



There were two choices given to proceed after this notification, either to 'Try Again' or to 'Cancel' (Fig. 2.1). The visual content of this work represented public pessimism towards the end of the Umbrella Movement. This work was photographed and circulated on many social media platforms. Most Hong Kong citizens believed that it was made by the anonymous graffiti artist Banksy, but Banksy never publicly mentioned it nor claimed authorship. *Apple Daily*, a mainstream prodemocratic newspaper in Hong Kong, subsequently confirmed this was not a work made by Banksy. It is a derivative work, a secondary creation, an appropriation and parody of Banksy's graffiti, by unknown maker(s).

'You do not have the permission to vote' demonstrates the pervasiveness and importance of derivative work in the Umbrella Movement. Street art could be perceived as visual metaphors to examine mediations of social, cultural and political aspects of a city. During the Umbrella Movement, a larger amount of visual metaphors were created to respond to the social, cultural and political aspects of Hong Kong. These visual metaphors are not, and should not be, examined for their originality. It is the viral, performative and transformative qualities and the instrumental usages of derivative work that draw my attention to these visual metaphors, their meaning and their implications.

In this chapter, I will examine a selection of derivative works related to and emerging from the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. Throughout the analysis, I will illustrate a trilogy of visual phenomena that helps us to understand the social, cultural and political aspects of Hong Kong's recent history. The three perspectives on derivative work are:

1. Derivative work as participatory propaganda through the use of parody and humour in the name of civil disobedience and grassroots democracy;
2. Derivative work as unethical image-making and cyber terrorism with underlying sexist and racist assumptions, driven by the male-dominated gamer and hacker culture;
3. Derivative work as rerouting and recuperation through astroturf lobbying techniques by political parties and government officials.

### **Derivative Work: Working Definitions**

'Derivative work', also known as 'secondary creation' in the context of Hong Kong or 'meme' in the discourse of the digital humanities, is a blanket term to define creative arts that modify, appropriate and/or adapt an earlier

work. In this paper, the visual examples that I use as 'derivative works' are photographic images, or more precisely photographic manipulations that are created using digital technology and then circulated on the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Even though photography is a visual medium of mechanical reproduction, derivative work, as a working definition in the writing, is not a reproduction of an original; instead, the intention to create a secondary image is to parody and comment visually on an event or to caricature a public political figure. Derivative work may draw visual and semiotic meanings from the original, the image that it derives from; or the new meanings derived could be irrelevant to the original.

Derivative work is made by amateur and unknown image-makers. 'Amateur image-makers' share two important characteristics. First, to make a derivative work does not require one to engage in the act of photographing but to collage a digital composite through found images from different sources on the Internet. Secondly, these image-makers usually do not authorize their works and are therefore unidentifiable. Because of the anti-government expressions, these image-makers are unwilling to be identified, or choose to be 'anonymous'. Derivative work, hence, is often made by an anonymous creator or a creator in his or her cyber identity. Limor Shifman, in an interview with Henry Jenkins, defines 'internet meme' as, '(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users' (Jenkins and Shifman, 2014). Shifman's definition suggests that researchers should identify, recognize and examine the creative intention (or by and large 'stance') and common interest of the image-makers of derivative work on both individual and social levels. This definition informs how I formulate the three perspectives to examine derivative work from Hong Kong since the Umbrella Movement.

In terms of aesthetic appeal, I observe that derivative work is carefully composed and rigorously created using Photoshop and/or other image enhancement and editing software, although the word 'amateur' image-maker may suggest a lack of skill and technique. In terms of effect and affect, derivative work is entertaining and parodic in nature. Through the uses of exaggeration, parody and humour, derivative work attracts viewers in a very short browsing time. Another characteristic of derivative work is that it goes viral and has 'spreadability' on the Internet as a way to circulate

1 Derivative work could also be found in different visual media and other arts forms, for example, caricature and parody in political comics, movie clips, music video, animation, lyrics, literature, drama and many others.



Fig. 2.2: Danny Yung, 'Works by Danny Yung' in Ka-sing Lee, Holly Lee, and Ching-ping Lau, eds., *Dislocation*, no. 4 (1992).

visual information in the networked culture (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013). The power of derivative work lies in its performativity. A derivative work is created, uploaded, disseminated, and could be simultaneously downloaded by another image-maker to transform. The chain and cycle of creation and reproduction of images characterizes the very performative nature of derivative work. In the first perspective, to examine derivative work as participatory propaganda, I will demonstrate and argue that derivative work used for political purposes helps to mobilize and congregate grassroots citizens and is employed as a decentralized and participatory propagandist model. The very transformative and performative nature and the metamorphosis of visual representation and signification will also be demonstrated in the first perspective.

### **Derivative Work and Political Expressions in Historical and Cultural Contexts**

To begin with, derivative work as tools and means for political propagandist purposes could be illustrated from both historical and cultural contexts, so as to illustrate 20th-century Communist China and the complicated relationship between Hong Kong and China since then. Photographic manipulation in the political context is not a 21st-century novelty. The rhetoric and representation of untruthfulness in political propaganda and photographic images occurs long before the prevalence of digital imaging technology. Claire Roberts describes strategies of photographic manipulation of the image of Mao Zedong in Communist China as follows:

Like all official photographs from the period, images that were submitted for use were the property of the news agency and not the individual

photographers and were manipulated according to official requirements. It was common practice to enhance Mao's appearance. He was a heavy smoker and there was a person dedicated to the task of retouching copy negatives to whiten his teeth. Through negative editing, dodging and burning, images were improved, the positions of people were altered or they were removed. Re-editing could occur numerous times as individuals went out of favour, sometimes with the result that an image bore little relationship to the original scene (Roberts, 2013: 111).

Political propagandist photography uses seriously manipulated images, and, through manipulation, a political expression through public imagery is achieved. Two photography projects by contemporary artists from China and Hong Kong are discussed in the following to situate how parodic tactics are employed through appropriating political propagandistic photography. Contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Dali (b. 1963), in his work *A Second History* (2012), unearths the making of cultural and political icons in the eras of the Republic of China (1911-1949) and the People's Republic of China (1949 to present) in photographic representation. Informed by research on found news pictures, Zhang compares the original photographs (without retouching or manipulation, the official, the *second* history) and publicized photographs (after retouching and/or being manipulated, the official, the *first* history). Strategies of photographic manipulation are discovered, including hand-colouring, cropping, alteration of background, alteration of text in photograph (such as political slogans), taking a person out of the photograph, keying a person in the photograph and many other inventive and almost intuitive ways. Zhang's *A Second History* demonstrates the omnipresence of photographic manipulation in the making of New China through fact and fiction, and truth and falsity. This work also serves as demystification and provides critical readings of political propagandist photography in Communist China. Betrayal to the original, if there is any 'origin' in terms of representation, is not the key to understanding how political propaganda works. It is the effect and affect the photographic image creates and spreads that matter. To quote David Levi Strauss, 'the truth is that every photograph or digital image is manipulated, aesthetically and politically, when it is made and when it is distributed, and this is key to how they can be used to subtly influence us' (Strauss, 2011).

Two decades before the publication of Zhang's *A Second History*, Hong Kong artist Danny Yung (b. 1943) reused, appropriated, and parodied political leaders of Communist China and then published six digital photographic manipulations in *Dislocation (NuNaHeDuo)*, a sixteen-page supplement in

*Photo Pictorial*, a popular photography magazine in Hong Kong. 'Works by Danny Yung' was made in 1992, in the wake of the introduction of Photoshop in Hong Kong. Yung appropriated a propaganda poster of six male political leaders, designed and disseminated in 1982 by the Xinhua News Agency (Fig. 2.2). The photograph was taken at the CCP's Seven Thousand Cadres Conference in Beijing in 1962. The six political leaders are Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De, Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun. The colour photograph is believed to be hand-tinted. In the six photographs that Yung presented in *Dislocation*, the six leaders are intentionally displaced (in order) and degraded (into black-and-white portrayal) against red background pages. The 'red' background was suggested by editors of *Dislocation* to underpin the Communist China context. The changes of order of appearance and from colour to black and white are the parodic tactics of Yung, simulated by the 'new' digital technology in the 1990s and perhaps challenging the sacredness of these six male icons of New China. Yung's project serves as a rear-view through reuse and appropriation. If photographic manipulation in political propaganda is made to be subtle and untraceable, Yung's work aims at the opposite, which has a liberating effect. However, given *Photo Pictorial* is one of the very few imported photography magazines in China since the Open Door Policy (1978-1984), the sensitive and subversive visual-political content of Yung made this issue unavailable to reach audiences in China. The editor of *Photo Pictorial* made a compromise and shredded the six pages of Yung's work. The magazine was then allowed to be distributed in China without Yung's work. Censorship must take place, with or without the Great Firewall of China.

Zhang's and Yung's projects are precedent cases in which printed media was effective and dominant in information exchange and spread visual testimonials in the public sphere. Parodied political propaganda creates a critical space to question authenticity and indexicality of photographic and political expressions. Political propaganda, as a convention, is created by the privileged few and spreads from the powerful to the powerless in a linear and hierarchal form. Here, I would like to employ John Corner's framework to summarize key components of propaganda as communicative practice. In short, propaganda is lying. It aims at deliberate construction and circulation of false information through exaggeration and distortion. Through withholding of information, strategic selectivity and censorship, public authority is exercised. Affective appeal and persuasion are used through rhetoric of display, rather than logical argument and rational content (Corner, 2011: 132-133). Corner's framework consolidates how I examine derivative work as a visual-political expression and how 'affective persuasion' works as a communicative practice. Hong Kong-based cultural theorist Lok



Fig. 2.3: Derivative work, maker anonymous.

Wing-kai observes that the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong can neither be categorized as 'spatial politics' nor 'emotional politics', but as an act of civil disobedience of 'space' and 'emotion' to change Hong Kong citizens' structure of feeling towards politics (Lok, 2016: 7). Emotion and affect rule over reason and effect in this regard, and that could be demonstrated by the many expressions of derivative work from Hong Kong since the Umbrella Movement in the following.

### **The First Perspective: Derivative Work as Participatory Propaganda through Uses of Parody and Humour in the Name of Civil Disobedience and Grassroots Democracy**

Why this civil protest in Hong Kong was named the 'Umbrella' Movement is illustrated by a *Time* magazine cover. On 28 September 2014, the Hong Kong Police Force released 87 canisters of tear gas at 10,000 protestors at the Central Government Complex at Admiralty, the first Occupy site of the Umbrella Movement. The demonstrators used umbrellas as shields to avoid the effects of tear gas and pepper spray from the police force and this is captured and reported in both printed and online social media. It was a significant historical catalyst when the protestors announced, and the police force denounced, the Umbrella Movement.

Two weeks after the event, on 13 October 2014, an image captured by photojournalist Xaume Olleros appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine (Asia edition). On the cover, an unnamed protestor immersed in tear gas stands against the Central Government Complex, equipped with a disposable face mask and goggles, holding two black umbrellas (one collapsed) with extended arms pointing to the sky. The headline on the cover said, in yellow: 'The Umbrella Revolution: Hong Kong's Fight for Freedom Is a Challenge to China'. Olleros's image is not merely a description of the moment: the crowd, the chaos... Through his lens and the choice made by the photo editor and the publisher, the event is reduced to the singular and the symbolic in an artfully composed picture. His image is a subjective and romanticized portrayal of a heroic individual that draws the public's attention and induces an emotional response.

On 22 October 2014, the Xinhua News Agency in China announced the winning entries of the 24<sup>th</sup> China News Award sponsored by the All China Journalists Association. Chinese photojournalist Li Xueren's 'Xi Jinping Braves the Rain and Visits Xingang, Wuhan' is one of the winning entries. The photograph depicts Xi Jinping paying a visit to a cargo terminal at Wuhan carrying a blue umbrella. Xi was prepared for a photographic moment. He stood up straight, faced the camera, smiled for it and looked rather disengaged from and disinterested in his surroundings. Shortly after the announcement of the Award, Li Xueren's reportage photograph went viral not only in the cyber territories of China but also in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's netizens adapted Li's photograph by retouching the background and changing Xi's umbrella from blue to yellow. The change of colour was significant. Yellow ribbons were used in the Umbrella Movement to represent grassroots solidarity among the pro-democracy protestors; blue ribbons signified support of the Hong Kong Police Force and the pro-Beijing politicians.

Li's image was then transformed by parody and metamorphosis in Hong Kong. Li's portrayal of Xi Jinping was retouched into Olleros's reportage and reappeared on the *Time* magazine cover as a derivative work. The unnamed protestor is replaced by China's most powerful leader. The presence of Xi at the Occupy site in Hong Kong was widely circulated on the Internet, even though this was not in print and not authorized by *Time*. The creative intention behind the making of this derivative work is subversive and this may suggest Xi's approval of the Umbrella Movement as Xi can be a participant on the occupy site. This observation is affective in a sense that it links to the desire of some of the pro-democrats and protestors. The text on the cover is not revised; the textual meaning remains the same. This is where visual parody takes place: emptying the established and authoritative

meaning in a work of art is a subversive act, the intention of which is to reject political authority. Another reading of this derivative work, however, could be pessimistic, as the political situation may not change because of a parodic alteration of a magazine cover that did not exist, where the effect is indirect or futile. And yet, a subversive spirit and a symbolic 'signal' were beginning to take shape.

As a form of political persuasion, derivative work is not created to construct a state ideology. Through grassroots and civil participation, many subversive acts are merged to question the validity and believability of political authority. For example, Xi appearing at a cargo terminal at Wuhan in a photo by Li Xueren is a visual testimony to persuade the public to believe that he was there, that he is part of the everyday life, industrial life, and the economic success of the People's Republic of China. The derivative works of Xi in Hong Kong, however, are not about transmitting state ideologies through news reportage. If photojournalism created by a public authority signifies power, derivative work can be perceived as 'signals' or 'noise' to destabilize and challenge the signifying practice of the authority (Terranova, 2004: 16).<sup>2</sup> Signal and noise are difficult to decipher if perceived independently. When a great quantity of signal and noise is presented, a pattern or an intention becomes apparent, and their effect and affect can be interpreted.

There are other derivative works derived from this motif. Xi appears at the Occupy site at Admiralty on a pleasant afternoon and at night during the hurling of tear gas (Fig. 2.3). The ways Xi has been inserted in these scenes are stylistically similar. Xi is placed in the middle of the frame, looking towards the camera and smiling. This stylistic attribute could be considered as a 'limitation' of derivative work: the original dictates a certain expression in the secondary creation. The smiling Xi at the Occupy site generates more questions about the creative intention of derivative work. Political caricature employs a derogatory characterization of a political figure for public shaming, but Xi is not presented as such here. Researchers in artistic activism differentiate 'humour' and 'shaming' in depiction. Sruti Bala and Veronika Zangl suggests 'humour is not used as a means of blaming, shaming, or pointing the figure but reveals an unfinished and open-ended task of imaginative memory' (Bala and Zangl, 2015: 451). Whereas the appropriating source dictates the appearance of a smiling Xi, the non-shaming visual

2 Drawn from information theory and communication system, Tiziana Terranova provides a sound illustration and explanation of how information circulates and operates in network culture, when we live in an era 'not about signs, but signals' (Terranova, 2004: 16).



tactics may reveal the utopian vision and the perpetual call for democracy of the Umbrella Movement, an affective longing.

Illustrations of how netizens (re)construct a scene of a parodic and delusional nature extend beyond the few aforementioned examples. The volume of these images derived from any Google Images search explains the plurality and diversity of the participations of many creators and the metamorphoses created by the hands of these creators. The operative process of derivative work is endless and transformative. As the Umbrella Movement grew, more and more civil disobedience happenings and visual testimonies took place at the Occupy sites. Portraits of Xi were printed out as objects and erected on-site. Protestors further adorned Xi, the printed object, by placing yellow peace ribbons on his chest, or placing a yellow sticker on his body with a political slogan saying 'I want real universal suffrage'. These cutout standees, often seen along Nathan Road in Mong Kok and other Occupy sites, attracted the attention of passersby who stopped for photo opportunities. These photo-taking scenes that render an appearance of Xi in itself create and encourage another round of photographic acts. It is a representation of a representation – a third mimesis.

What is fascinating in terms of rhetoric and aesthetic is that derivative work is not meticulously made. A picture-perfect photographic manipulation commands viewers to believe (as does an advertising image or the political propaganda of Mao mentioned above); it does not invite the viewer to question its validity. Derivative work made by amateur image-makers does not aim to render a believable portrayal. To create a technically perfect photographic manipulation is not the goal. One may see such imperfect techniques as grassroots aesthetics, but it is also an intellectual signal to the viewer to question the legitimacy of the image and its purpose and intention. The aim of photographic manipulation in most political propaganda is to indoctrinate; the aim of photographic manipulation in derivative work is to prod the viewer to think and question. Derivative work is an instrument to problematize the subject matter and discard authoritarian claims. Through representation using fakery and the rhetoric of imperfection, derivative work questions authority, the integrity of images, and perception. An alternative and delusional streetscape is rendered in appearance.

The aforementioned portrayals of Xi Jinping in Hong Kong, which never happened, are snapshots of a larger economy of image manipulation that resulted from and is related to the discourse of participatory culture. These visual 'evidences' illustrate an endless cycle of image proliferation, from a photojournalistic image to various degrees and generations of manipulation and reincarnation on the Internet. Materialization into a printed object

that attracts image-taking opportunities renders another beginning of image-making. Derivative work is not a linear, repeating circle of birth, life and death. Instead, every metamorphosis triggers mutation, expansion and an explosion of proliferation.

The mode of production and making of derivative work characterizes its participatory nature. This genre, like propaganda, is a form of political persuasion. Derivative work, however, is produced neither by the centre nor by the privileged few. Instead, it is created by the netizen through mass participation and public reinvention. The civil and participatory nature of imaging also meets the political demand of the Umbrella Movement: that is, the adoption of the 'civil nomination' in the election of Chief Executive in Hong Kong in 2017.<sup>3</sup> David M. Faris and Patrick Meier's research on digital activism in authoritarian and repressive political regimes in countries such as Egypt, Iran and Sudan indicates that digital participation enables mass communication and 'fundamentally alter[s] certain types of interaction between authoritarian governments and their opponents... changes the dynamics of state-society relations' (Faris and Meier, 2013: 204).

Derivative work is a subversive form of political persuasion akin to 'guerrilla warfare', as it cannot be formalized and homogenized. In their discussion about participatory culture, Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson remark that monopolization of information in the traditional mass media is circumvented by independent publishing and social media through the use of affordable tools and means, and therefore the hierarchy of information is disrupted (Delwiche and Henderson, 2013: 3). Because of its activist and emancipatory natures, derivative work disrupts the order of information and becomes a site of civil resistance not only to aesthetic and technical traditions, but also to political authorities.

The appropriation of existing photographic images is part of the definition of derivative work in grassroots politics. During the Umbrella Movement and other Occupy movements on a global scale, photographic imagery has become a prevalent tool to encourage the participation of grassroots netizens in anti-globalization movements and civil resistance (Eschle, 2011: 364-379). Strong iconographic imagery is created by using preexisting images that consolidate a collective identity and are employed as 'a powerful means of mobilization' (Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune, 2013: xi-xxvi). Inserting Xi into the

3 For the political demands of the Umbrella Movement by student leaders, please refer to Hong Kong Federation of Students, 'To All Hong Kong Citizens: A Vow of Civil Disobedience,' <https://www.hkfs.org.hk/2014/09/28/to-all-hong-kong-citizens-a-vow-of-civil-disobedience/?lang=en>. Accessed 1 August 2015.

Occupy sites in Hong Kong, together with other facsimiles of government officials involved in the process of electoral reform, does not create one common enemy or one scapegoat to blame for the cause of unpromising democratic progress after the handover of the sovereignty of Hong Kong to China. Instead, derivative work contributes to the waves of 'signals' and 'noises' – a collective expression and intelligence for democracy and the call for universal suffrage in Hong Kong. Derivative work is not only affordable but also spreadable (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013). The network culture serves as a springboard to accelerate the dissemination of information and is also an enabling effect for the needs of grassroots politics. The way derivative work spreads is unpredictable, stepping over the boundaries of independent publishing into other territories. For instance, *Apple Daily*, a mainstream pro-democratic newspaper in Hong Kong, regularly compiles video news based on existing derivative work and broadcasts them on its website and social media. In this way, circulation of derivative work extends from independent publishing into the mass media, which creates other opportunities for the circulation of images.

Derivative work resulting from the Umbrella Movement provides an alternative model for the dissemination of 'news': it calls for disseminating the political agenda of grassroots' interest and mobilizing the critical civil mass in what could be called 'participatory propaganda'. Participatory propaganda is a paradigm shift in the making and spreading of political persuasion. It is meant to subvert conventional propaganda in that it serves the political interest of the powerless. How the grassroots receive information is no longer determined by the powerful: rather, information itself is created and shared by civil participation. In short, the first perspective examines derivative work as a form of participatory propaganda that responds to the utopian vision of democracy and civil participation of an affective nature that was part of the Umbrella Movement.

### **The Second Perspective: Derivative Work as Unethical Image-making with Underlying Sexist and Racist Assumptions Driven by the Male-dominated Gamer and Hacker Culture**

The second perspective analysed in this chapter is a critical reading of the ethics of derivative work. Derivative work shown in the first perspective could be seen as creative work responding to the call for democracy in Hong Kong in its most utopian form. However, other derivative work made in the same period of time could be disturbing to look at from a critical



Fig. 2.4: A screenshot from a YouTube video by user 'Yim Faning' (2013) and a derivative work, maker anonymous.

distance. My observation is that derivative work as a utopian visual tool is also employed to construct and render dystopian and discriminative stereotypes, that is, a visual media for digital activism and participatory propaganda for grassroots politics could also be used for sexist and racist expressions, a rather contradictory phenomenon that is simultaneously activated in Hong Kong.

The second perspective begins with a comparison of a screen capture of 'original' social-media footage and a derivative work (Fig. 2.4). These two works are portrayals of pro-Beijing female astroturf lobbyist Leticia See-Yin Lee at the inaugural event of 'Justice Alliance', a pro-Beijing political advocacy group led by Lee. The 'original' footage was taken and uploaded by user 'Yim Faning' on YouTube on 4 August 2013.<sup>4</sup> The derivative work is a screenshot from the footage at 00:11. The screen capture, by only taking out a still image from the footage, decontextualizes the event. In the footage, Lee dealt with chaos and crowds in the pedestrian zone in Mong Kok, Kowloon, and asked for help from the 'Renmin' Police (the People's Police): an expression that does not exist in Hong Kong. This screen capture does not capture any decisive moment of the event. The chaos and the conflicts of the event are distilled to a female protagonist, Lee, holding a microphone in her hand, with a videographer in the background. Between these two people, there is a middle finger gesture pointing to Lee by an unknown third person.

This screenshot was then widely circulated on the Internet. A few derivative works subsequently emerged, such as one of her holding an ice cream cone made by inserting a found image. Another derivative work shows the microphone in Lee's hand was pixelated. Using pixelation as a visual connotation opens up visual indeterminacy and suggests multiple

4 The video footage was uploaded by user 'Yim Faning,' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoQ1bCaUiuw>. Accessed 30 December 2015.

interpretations, implications and imaginations. The viewers know Lee is holding a microphone in her hand but the pixelation treatment is a powerful cinematic reference to pornography. The viewers may infer she is holding a penis in her hand. The maker's implication and viewers' imagination transgress the boundaries of the public and the pubic. The middle finger pointing towards her only reinforces this sexual degradation as it simultaneously signifies an insult (literally 'giving the finger'), a command with symbolic violence, a condemnation that is demeaning and hateful towards women in the mainstream heteronormative and patriarchal culture and society.

The pixelation of photographic images in the public sphere is predominantly found in mainstream mass media, where it is applied to the faces of vulnerable populations such as children, victims, and 'celebrities' in order to protect their privacy by making them 'anonymized', hence unidentifiable. The Japanese pornographic industry pixelates genitalia as required and imposed by censorship laws in the name of public decency (Mathews, 2011: 165-174). The mosaicked microphone in Lee's hand connotes a female giving oral sex. This photographic manipulation demonstrates, again, the visual rhetoric of derivative work, specifically that the meanings made of the derived may not share similarity to the original through deletion, changing and absence of context. Visual pleasure must be achieved in order to attract the viewer's attention in a very short browsing time. This raises the question whose visual pleasure this type of derivative work and this use of pixelation serve.

In 2011, Reporters Without Borders publicized an advertising campaign titled 'Censorship Tells the Wrong Story'. The campaign, through pixelating various body parts of world leaders from news photography, creates unidentifiable body gestures with sexist and pornographic connotations. In this campaign, pixelation is not used as a means to protect public figure's privacy but to imply that the censorship of photographic images in the public sphere not only endangers freedom of press but also puts truth at risk. However, the choice of subject matter (think: editorial angle), message conveyed, intention and impact in such portrayals of gender stereotypes should be called into question. The deliberately misleading image of a male touching a pixelated female body part (e.g. an act between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton during the presidential campaign) and an undetermined hand gesture of a male between his legs (e.g. performed by Vladimir Putin) are, notwithstanding, humorous, entertaining and appealing to many. However, the gender and racial stereotypes embedded in these images reflect prejudicial gender and racial ideologies that are deep-rooted in our social and cultural values. Do these photographic manipulations and publicity

images help us in battles for freedom of speech? Or do they further reinforce the norms of sexism, male dominance, and white supremacy? What is the cost to promote freedom of speech at the expense of gender and racial jokes? My reading of these photographic manipulations is that they are not only parodies, but also means to typify the subject by reinforcing stereotypical parody. The typification process is not arbitrary. In this discussion, the parody subjects women as sexualized objects.

As a general observation, the representation of women as sexualized objects is a common goal in image manipulation by the anonymous netizen. Another set of derivative work in Hong Kong appropriates a wanted ad of a massage parlour in Shenzhen, China, and inserts faces of pro-Beijing political lobbyist Lee in the style of *Being John Malkovich* (1999). The name of the massage parlour was pixelated in order to turn it into an anonymous place. Lee's Chinese name was superimposed on the pixelated title to provide a fictional context. The pro-Beijing spokeswoman becomes the target for sexual parody, if not sexual harassment.

It is not only a pro-Beijing and anti-Occupy female political lobbyist who is subjected to such sexist and stereotypical parody. Pro-democratic female politicians in Hong Kong are also targeted in ways that further speak for male's visual pleasure. This series was uploaded to a discussion forum in Hong Kong and titled 'Anti-occupy low-quality derivative works' by user 'BIZHUB'. The derivative tactic is to insert faces of Hong Kong politicians onto found images of protestors and criminals arrested by militants in other parts of the world. All male politicians were clothed, yet the face of Claudia Mo, the only female politician in this series, was inserted into a female protestor with her upper torso exposed. This particular image appropriates American photographer Eric Wagner's work *Liberated: Arresting America* from 2004, in which Wagner photographed an anti-Bush and anti-Republican street protest in New York City. In Wagner's image, the female protestor was captured with a sense of hope and defiance on her face and a political slogan painted on her bare stomach. The context of the 'March For Women's Lives' provides a feminist and empowering reading of her voluntary chest-baring. The derivative work does not prompt the idea of female empowerment, however. The local milieu in which the image was situated determines its meaning to Hong Kong viewers. This milieu includes the political climate in Hong Kong, the relative obscurity of the original US image to local viewers, the cultural context and perception of displaying the body in the public space and the lack of a local feminist activism that includes baring the chest as a political, feminist and emancipatory act. Claudia Mo was portrayed with no facial expression of hope or defiance. Given the milieu described

above, she was depicted as a sexualized object and the hanging brassiere strap implies sexual violence, not self-determined liberation. Sexual parody in derivative works is gendered and context-specific. These gendered objects have little to do with the empowerment of women and gender equality. Next, we turn to the significance of these gendered visual manifestations created by Netizens and amateur image-makers. They are habitually identified only by pseudonyms and commonly mistaken for the 'Anonymous'.

Discussions about gender politics of cyber activists, the identity politics of the 'Anonymous', and the ultimate dark side of Internet freedom argue that the gamer and hacker culture is male-dominated and it is in this broad counterculture that the Anonymous and the cyber activists are most commonly situated by scholars. For example, media theorist Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli argues that cyber behaviour that is intentionally offensive results in 'toxic environments that silence voices – particularly those of the traditionally disenfranchised, i.e. women, people of colour, and the LGBT communities that Anonymous ridicules often and explicitly' (Ravetto-Biagioli, 2013: 184). A male-chauvinistic and racially superior attitude seems to dominate the culture of high-speed browsing and, to gain viewers' fleeting attention, further visual exaggeration is employed. One should also note that the image-makers of derivative works are simultaneously consumer and producer of images on the Internet. One user looks, grasps, appropriates, creates and uploads; and another user generates a similar lifecycle of images. These cyber behaviours are almost instant, in a click that is itself sometimes autonomous. The viewers who used to be the consumers of sexualized images are now also the producers of such images. Viewers no longer passively consume images, but actively engage in making images and are therefore part of constructing the ideologies associated with those images. The aforementioned derivative works in the second perspective illustrate the unethical expressions in name of cyber activism and civil disobedience – they enable and perpetuate a misogynistic environment and render the utopia of image democratization a dystopia of discrimination and immorality instead. Hatred of women builds up image after image. To look at the portrayal of women in derivative works collectively suggests the works do not only publicly shame a particular woman but womanhood *per se*.

This hatred is also extended to another dimension of global violence. This analysis of the second perspective ends with a brief discussion of another derivative work found on a Facebook account named 'Pro-police Alliance' or 'Alliance in Support of our Police Force' in Hong Kong. Fourteen male pro-democrats (including legislators and political activists) and student



Fig. 2.5: A derivative work of John Tsang Chun-wah, the former Financial Secretary of Hong Kong government and Ray Chan, Founder of 9GAG, a social media platform that curates Internet memes.

leaders who were involved in Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement were portrayed (with their headshots inserted in a found image) wearing the orange jumpsuits first associated with US political prisoners detained at Guantanamo Bay and more recently associated with prisoners of ISIS that were executed. This derivative work is connected with ISIS's use of orange jumpsuits, with one Internet commentary saying, 'Beheading them all!' This derivative work typifies cyber terrorism. The politics of derivative works depends on the context in which they are made and seen, but their online dissemination means that the subtleties of personal, social-categorical, political, ideological, national, and international meanings could not be easily separated. Derivative works that reinforce negative stereotypes and perpetuate hatred of others should not be explained by perceiving them as acts of parody, satire and harmless joke. The intention and implication of the satirical and parodic expressions should be cautiously handled. The futures of images and visualization in the public sphere should not only concern the degree of manipulation and technological advancement in ways to share and transform – it must include a debate about the ethics of image-making and image-sharing.



## The Third Perspective: Derivative Work as Recuperation through Astroturf Lobbying Technique

The first and second perspectives of derivative work examine visual manifestations that call for grassroots democracy at the height of the Occupy movement and related events in Hong Kong. These visual manifestations provide critical responses to the establishment and thus substantiate the imager-makers' political standpoints, be they pro-democratic or patriarchal. Since derivative work evolves and reaches a reasonable level of visibility and popularity in the local milieu, political stakeholders such as pro-democratic political parties, government officials and, most surprisingly, pro-Beijing and pro-establishment political lobbyists appropriate derivative work's tactic and rhetoric, and reuse, remix and perhaps misuse these in their political campaigns. This inevitable rerouting and recuperation of derivative work will be discussed in this section.

For this third perspective, I will focus on derivative works produced neither by grassroots activists nor pro-democratic politicians. My primary observation is that Hong Kong's key government officials and pro-Beijing political lobbyists recuperate the grassroots democratic expressions in their political campaigns. This political persuasion could be linked to the 'astroturf lobbying' in several recent political campaigns in the United States of America. The employment of 'astroturf lobbying' by non-grassroots stakeholders reorients the subversive, critical and anti-authoritarian natures of derivative work. Derivative work is 'hacked' and swung from one end of the political spectrum to the other end. Such rerouting of political expressions creates mixed messages (or a mixed reality) and seeks to diffuse and confuse public opinions.

How does this rerouting of derivative work take place? Two examples will help illustrate how political parties in Hong Kong absorb and appropriate the visual rhetoric of derivative works in their political campaigns. New pro-democratic political parties were formed during and after the Umbrella Movement as continuations of the Umbrella spirit – the call for democracy and universal suffrage. Civic Passion, a radical left-wing and grassroots political party that vows to achieve the independence of Hong Kong, candidly employs visual rhetoric of derivative work in its political campaign. An advertising billboard from Civic Passion's campaign situated six proposed district councilors in a background of a manipulated cityscape of Hong Kong, almost like a blockbuster movie poster of heroic fantasy: a collapsing Bank of China Tower in the vanishing point, surrounded by unidentifiable modernist skyscrapers, with six warriors (the proposed candidates)

dressed in yellow uniforms, equipped with face masks, safety goggles and armoured protection accessories. These accessories remind viewers of the conflicts during the Umbrella Movement. The collapsing Bank of China Tower signifies Civic Passion's political agenda – the rejection of communism and capitalism in Hong Kong. Demosistō, another new pro-democratic political party formed by student leaders and student activists from the Umbrella Movement, presented a number of non-airbrushed portraits of its proposed candidates in its political campaign. A netizen commented on Agnes Chow Ting, one of the four founders of Demosistō, on Facebook, using a before-and-after comparison. The netizen retouched Chow's portrait by adding skin-whitening filter, iris-enlarging tool, putting a touch of pink on her cheeks and lips, and smoothing the colour and lines under her eyes with the comment saying 'you should at least reach this level (of finesse) or you can hire me as a photo retoucher'. Most political campaigns and publicity images are not made to be 'truthful'. These two examples reveal the general public in Hong Kong is aware of the power of untruthfulness and also signify the early stage of institutionalization of derivative work and its visual rhetoric in political campaigns.

Derivative work, originally created as grassroots expressions, is popularized, adapted and institutionalized by political parties in Hong Kong for the following reasons: first, to continue the spirit of the Umbrella Movement ('let the "Umbrella spirit" blossom everywhere' as the saying goes); second, to employ grassroots aesthetics and attract potential voters during the election period. Gradually, this visual rhetoric was also found in publicity images released by key Hong Kong government officials. The rerouting and recuperation of derivative work becomes fairly visible and pervasive. This could be illustrated by publicity images released by the two candidates of the Hong Kong Chief Executive election 2017, John Tsang Chun-wah and Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-Ngor.<sup>5</sup>

In Hong Kong's popular culture, John Tsang Chun-wah, the former Financial Secretary of the HKSAR Government, is often associated with the male icon of Pringles (also known as 'Julius Pringles') because of the similar facial attributes: the moustache and the parted fringe. After a meet-and-greet event of Tsang and Ray Chan, the founder of gGAG, a social media platform that curates Internet memes, a derivative work was created. The

5 Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor was elected Chief Executive of Hong Kong on 26 March 2017. She won the election with 777 votes in the 1194 member election committee. The call for universal suffrage of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, as Hong Kong citizens demanded in the Umbrella Movement 2014, has not been realized.

portraits of Tsang and Chan were placed against a backdrop of 100 US dollars banknotes (a stock image) with a 'Pringles' logo in the upper-left corner. Both Tsang and Chan uploaded this derivative work to their own official Facebook pages (Fig. 2.5).

Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, the former Chief Secretary of Administration of the HKSAR Government, was pictured at an opening event of the Sea-Land Market for Ecological Leisure in Tai Po Waterfront on 10 January 2016. Interestingly, this is a news picture, not a digital composite, and yet it looks like a derivative work – of her standing on the tip of a Chinese white dolphin's snout (in pink as depicted). She is pictured joyfully, but also surreally, as she appears to be dancing on an ocean. A group of visitors queued and stood behind a barricade tape in the background, either watching or photographing Lam's performance. Another news picture of the event reveals the anatomy of spatial illusion of this scenario. The Chinese white dolphins and the ocean is a floor painting at the Sea-Land Market. The visual effect of this news picture has a strong and intentional association to derivative work. This news picture was uploaded to the Facebook page of the Information Service Department of the HKSAR government, with 500 plus shares in the first three hours after uploading.

These two examples, one derivative work and another that looks like a derivative work, elucidate the currency and usage of derivative work other than grassroots activism. The meet-and-greet event of Tsang and the opening ceremony attended by Lam are not political events. Hong Kong's government officials adopt the rhetoric of derivative work to advertise their public appearances. Similar tactics could also be found among branding campaigns in the commercial sector in Hong Kong. Derivative work, originally a grassroots expression and a tool for artistic activism, is employed in political and capitalist persuasions. In what way could we examine the recuperation of derivative work?

In media studies, 'astroturf lobbying' is a term to describe media content uploaded and circulated by 'political parties, lobbyists, and campaign groups, as well as paramilitary and terrorist organizations – also uses blogs, vlogs, websites, and video' to 'influence or manipulate the online audience precisely by concealing who the producers are, in order to the disguise the efforts of the political and commercial entity' (Sørensen, 2013: 93 and 98). The term, as Inge Ejbye Sørensen suggests, is derived from 'Astroturf', a brand of synthetic carpeting that resembles natural grass, as 'similarly, the aim of AV astroturfing is to give the appearance of having been produced by amateurs, activists, or grassroots organizations in order to foster, influence, and manipulate a seemingly independent public reaction to an event, product, campaign, or

person' (Sørensen, 2013: 92). Sørensen also cited Nick Couldry's *Why Voice Matters* (2010) to elucidate further how the Internet provides a platform to accommodate the 'crisis of voices', as Sørensen writes:

under the conditions of neoliberalism everyone can speak and every voice is a statement of truth, but we only hear those we are allowed to hear. Thus democracy and expression is under threat from the mainstream media that embodies and enforces neoliberal values and hegemonies that inherently exclude equal access to voice (Sørensen, 2013: 91).

The astroturf lobbying technique is not about presenting facts to the public. By forming and camouflaging as not-for-profit cooperatives, public relations specialists employ mixed-message strategies to animate and manipulate public opinion. James Hoggan also argues that astroturf lobbying is a funded affective public and political persuasion, saying 'corporation and industry associations were using their considerable financial resources to influence the public conversation. They were using advertising slogans and messages that they had tested for effectiveness but not for accuracy' (Hoggan and Littlemore, 2009: 34). Simply put, as Hoggan boldly claims, the astroturf lobbyist 'steals credibility from the people' (Hoggan and Littlemore, 2009: 31).

Perhaps the Pringles caricature and the dancing-on-dolphin illusion cannot be straightly classified as 'astroturf lobbying', although the ideas of rerouting and recuperation are evident. I would like to end my discussion of derivative work by pointing to the visual propaganda works created by 'Silent Majority for Hong Kong' an astroturf lobbying group. The group was founded in 2013 by Robert Chow Yung, a seasoned publicist and media consultant. Silent Majority used astroturf lobbying techniques to advocate for a pro-Beijing agenda on social media (for example, its Facebook page) and mass media (with Chow as a spokesperson making commentaries on broadcasting media). 'Silent Majority' claims that the group represents the majority of Hong Kong citizens who choose to be silent by 'choice', and the group speaks and acts for maintaining harmony (thus 'hegemony') and peace of Hong Kong, in opposition to any action of violence, such as the Umbrella Movement. Often, the political statements made by Silent Majority are presented and claimed as 'non-political messages' to camouflage the active pro-establishment agenda. These 'non-political messages' are commonly found on social media with a strong association to rhetoric of derivative work to influence the public.

One of the visual tactics used by Silent Majority in its political campaign is the use of 'disclaimer' wording in the publicity image. The astroturf lobbying

group juxtaposes a found photographic image, or a derivative work, and a self-contradictory slogan to falsify pro-democratic claims, with a 'disclaimer' wording (writing as 'designed graphics') shown in the publicity image. For example, on its Facebook page, Silent Majority would misuse a photograph of several Caucasians carrying cameras and visiting the Occupy sites during the Umbrella Movement with a text commenting on the decline of tourism as a negative impact of the Umbrella Movement. (There is no proof that the people that appear in the photograph were tourists, nor that the Umbrella Movement destroyed tourism in Hong Kong.) Another visual example also shows Silent Majority juxtaposed portraits of student leaders from the Umbrella Movement and the fourteenth Dalai Lama, and superimposed a text on the portraits saying 'meeting Dalai Lama, breaking up China together, and we feel proud' (even though such a meeting never took place). These disclaimer wordings are shown in these visual testimonies to alert the false statements. Such tactics, I argue, are attempts to reroute grassroots expressions of derivative works to an anti-Occupy political agenda. What is alarming is that the visual images that astroturf lobbyists use are derived from the same 'origins' as those of the pro-democrats and yet, their meaning is repurposed and rerouted from one end of the political spectrum to the other, from a visualization tool congregating Hong Kong's citizens to participate in the Occupy movement to an anti-Occupy tool. The signals that are used to flag participatory politics are recuperated, astroturfed and gradually used as tools to silence pro-democratic claims by the 'invisible' hand.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined derivative work in Hong Kong from three different perspectives, namely as participatory propaganda for grassroots activism, a critical reading from a gender perspective, and the rerouting of meaning and representation by political parties and astroturf lobbyists. My attempt has been to delineate the evolution of these very tactical and ephemeral media (Raley, 2009) so as to examine the transformative and performative natures of digital images, their circulation and dissemination on the Internet related to public events and political persuasion in their local milieu. I would like to raise two critical points below to conclude this discussion of derivative work.

First, in the course of writing, I organized and treated the aforementioned three expressions of derivative works in a linear progression. The notion of 're-routing' in the third perspective also suggests there must be a precedent

expression, in order to enable subsequent hacking and recuperation. However, these three expressions may also occur simultaneously and not in this particular order as discussed, because of the unpredictable nature of digital media, world politics and everyday life. Also, these expressions do not replace one another, that is, the astroturf lobbyists' recuperation do not necessitate a replacement of or an end to participatory propagandist expression. Most certainly, I have to admit that the political recuperation of derivative rhetoric could result in a suppression of grassroots democracy and could evolve and expand to an enormous scale because of the financial resources supporting it. However, let us not forget the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014 was also not a planned and predictable scheme. The unpredictability of public, political events and related visual media and expressions plays a critical role in understanding and examining derivative work and other forms and practices of visualization of cities and urban space. The three perspectives I proposed in this chapter come from information and experience I gathered since the Occupy movement in Hong Kong. I hope this framework will provide a reference point and contribute to future research related to urbanism and globalization, digital culture, digital humanities and visual studies.

In this chapter, I observe that derivative works are direct responses to local politics. Forms of censorship imposed on derivative work will always exist. Street art and graffiti, for instance, will be covered or erased if they are deemed inappropriate by the city authority. In February 2017, Swastika symbols were found in New York City's subway and were 'cleaned' by American citizens who found these imageries offensive. This act of cleansing visual imageries in the public space provides a critical perspective to understand censorship of visual imageries in the public sphere. Censorship is multifaceted: it could be a form of governance, surveillance (think self-censorship) or a matter of to-right-the-wrong. Derivative work in Hong Kong faces pressing challenges in terms of censorship. Since 2011, the HKSAR government has proposed a Copyright (Amendment) Bill as a call for copyright-law reform. The proposal, also known as 'Internet Article 23', will curtail Internet freedom and creativity in the name of national security. Derivative work, or any visual expression that may put national security in danger, will be censored and criminalized. Although the Bill is not yet passed, censorship of both political expression and non-political expression by individuals who are identified and related to the Umbrella Movement and grassroots politics has already gradually been exercised. The future and practices of visualizing the street, as such, is by-and-large dependent on and conditioned by the legal-political progress humankind will choose to make.

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### 3. Strange in the Suburbs: Reading Instagram Images for Responses to Change

*Megan Hicks*

#### Abstract

As I peruse the Instagram output of hobby photographers who share an interest in the exteriors of suburban houses, I see a repressed response to urban consolidation. In cities such as Sydney and Melbourne, high-rise blocks of apartments are replacing familiar residential streetscapes, but the Instagrammers I follow choose to turn their cameras away from these conspicuous monoliths. Instead, their cumulative streams of ordinary houses and gardens produce a kind of mediated uncanny in which they share with their followers not only nostalgia for the imaginary present but also – paradoxically and perhaps unwittingly – an embrace of the change that is happening around them.

**Keywords:** Instagram; mediated uncanny; photography; strange spaces; suburbs; streets

‘No activity is better equipped to exercise the Surrealist way of looking than photography, and eventually we all look at photographs surrealistically.’  
Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1979: 74)

#### Introduction: The Urban Eye

There is a subtext to the sort of Instagram accounts I follow. Ostensibly, these accounts are about locals sharing with others their eye for the visual



Fig. 3.1: Hobby photographer 'thehomesinwhichwelve' is one of a loose coalescence of Instagrammers who share images of Australian houses. This post features a photograph she took in the Sydney suburb of Canada Bay.

minutiae of outdoor urban spaces. Here are city facades, suburban scenes, homemade house details and street-side still lives. But that is not all, because the more I flick through these feeds, the more I can discern a kind of repressed response to urban change.

Change is a defining characteristic of cities. A city that does not change has become a backwater, but even if change is continual, there are periods when a city experiences extraordinarily rapid transformation. Urban consolidation is precipitating this kind of rapid change in Sydney and Melbourne, and it is in these two cities that the Instagrammers I follow carry out their urban/suburban patrols.

## Consolidating the Suburbs

Sydney and Melbourne are Australia's two largest cities.<sup>1</sup> Both began as colonial settlements and are now characterized by a central business district

<sup>1</sup> Australia is comparable in size to the USA (not including Alaska), but its population is concentrated in urban areas. In 2016, Sydney's population was around 5 million and Melbourne's a little less. Together, these two cities make up around 42% of the country's total population of 24 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016a, 2016b).

fringed by rings of residential suburbs that have progressively developed in an ever-widening creep since the mid to late nineteenth century. While this description is a simplification of these cities' actual layouts, it is nevertheless true that 'kilometre after kilometre of suburb has for decades dominated the cultural landscape of Sydney and other Australian capital cities' (Ashton, 2008). By international standards, this suburban sprawl is low in density, with Melbourne at the end of the nineteenth century 'already one of the most extensive areas of low-density urban settlement in the world' (Davidson, 2008). It is the suburbs that are often referred to as 'the heartland' of Sydney and Melbourne and, at least until very recently, there has been a widely held ideology, referred to as the 'Australian Dream', that every Australian has the right to own their own home. Their own home is generally imagined as a detached house on a quarter acre block.<sup>2</sup>

Houses in different districts usually reflect the predominant architectural style of the era in which a suburb was created, ranging from cramped inner-suburban Victorian terraces, to solid brick bungalows of the mid 20th century, to expansive McMansions in the more recently developed outer metropolitan areas.<sup>3</sup> But to portray the suburbs as street after street of similar houses is to misrepresent the complexity of the suburban mosaic, with its business hubs, industrial zones, shopping centres, parks and bushland reserves. Residential streets themselves are saved from homogeneity by the efforts (or lack of effort) of owners and renters who variously maintain, neglect, renovate, decorate, demolish, rebuild and subdivide their homes and gardens.

But the appearance of the suburbs is changing because, as a result of both natural increase and an accelerating rate of immigration, the population of Australia is growing rapidly, with Sydney and Melbourne the most affected cities.<sup>4</sup> As with other cities around the world, urban consolidation has been the planning response. Early policy interventions concentrated on raising the residential density of the business centres in these 'doughnut' cities, but, since 2000, policies have focused on increasing population density across

2 A quarter acre is 0.1 hectares.

3 The Wikipedia entry 'Australian Residential Architectural Styles' is an easily accessible visual guide to the range of suburban house types in Australia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian\\_residential\\_architectural\\_styles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_residential_architectural_styles), accessed 26 September 2016).

4 The growth of Australia's population has two main components: natural increase (the number of births minus the number of deaths) and net overseas migration (NOM). Natural increase and NOM contributed 44.8% and 55.2% respectively to total population growth for the year ending 31 March 2016 and this population growth rate in cities like Melbourne and Sydney is accelerating (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, 2016a, 2016b; Saulwick and Gair, 2016).



Fig. 3.2: Stories about 'superlots', where neighbouring householders band together to sell to developers, have appeared in Sydney and Melbourne media since around 2014. This article from the *Sydney Morning Herald* is reproduced courtesy of Fairfax Syndication.

the whole of their metropolitan areas (Coffee *et al.*, 2016).<sup>5</sup> This means there has been a boom in the building of high-density residential developments. Obsolete industrial estates, superseded hospital sites, and even whole streets of houses, where neighbours have collaborated to sell to developers en bloc, are being replaced by gleaming new high-rise towers, modern and minimalist in design, geometrically regimented, muted in colour palette and restrained in external decoration.

Although multi-level apartment buildings have been constructed in both cities since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Butler-Bowdon and Pickett, 2007), there has been nothing like the building boom in recent years in terms of quantity and density of apartment blocks, the height and bulk of buildings

5 In this context, 'doughnut city' means a city whose inner area has become sparsely populated as its suburban fringes have expanded.



Fig. 3.3: This apparently bizarre juxtaposition received attention in both traditional and social media, but the local council justified and upheld its approval of the development on the grounds that it was likely the remaining properties on the street would be similarly redeveloped. The article from *Domain* is reproduced courtesy of Fairfax Syndication.

compared to their surroundings and the areas of land covered by these new developments. The change in the suburban panorama is becoming very visible, with the characteristic undulating vistas of domestic rooftops punctuated here and there by monolithic apartment blocks and rangy construction cranes. City newspapers have even published 'heat maps' of residential crane numbers as a measure of construction activity in the greater Sydney region (Cummins, 2016).

Australian suburbs are changing, but they are not transformed, nor are they likely to transform completely. Freestanding dwellings will continue to coexist with medium-density infill and bulky high-rise developments. But almost daily there are newspaper headlines and opinion pieces about population pressures, rampant development, soaring house prices, destruction of heritage, disappearance of backyards and the loss of a way of life. Some commentators maintain that the media are being alarmist in their negative depictions of urban consolidation, while business lobby groups blame the cities' residents for knee-jerk obstructionism in discussions about density.<sup>6</sup> But such accusations devalue the lived experiences of

6 See, for example, Raynor and Matthews (2016) and Williams (2016).

ordinary suburb dwellers, who are shocked when they round a familiar corner to find that a row of charming little shops has been replaced by a stack of 'egg crate' apartments, or who feel dread when they look out their bedroom window to see that a gigantic crane has sprouted above a line of nearby treetops.

## An Everyday Obsession

The Instagrammers that I follow are ordinary suburb dwellers and they post images of ordinary suburban dwellings. These are people whose childhood experience – whether their families have lived in Australia for generations or not long at all – has led them to believe that living in a single house is the norm, and that the Australian Dream is a reasonable aspiration. They cannot help but read about densification in the media, nor see with their own eyes the high-rise developments within their midst but, as they walk the streets of suburbs both wealthy and struggling, what they are snapping with their phone cameras are almost exclusively the exteriors of houses, old shops and small businesses. They are seldom interested in grand architecture or the city's icons and tourist draws. There are no streetscapes, no rows of buildings. The images are of single buildings and domestic details captured one at a time – a house front, front gate, garage door, garden cactus, clipped shrub, corner shop. Each is like a miniature portrait, perfectly suited to the small screen, the Instagram frame and the flick-flick-flick of the Instagram follower.

This is urban exploration at its most banal, undertaken by untrained photographers. They are dog walkers and pram pushers, suburban day trippers and librarians who collect house fronts rather than books. They are not activists but observers. Theirs are not the transgressive images of industrial ruins and abandoned hospitals that are shared by adventurous urban trespassers. This is not urban subversion but suburban ennui. It is not exploration of the exceptional in the everyday, but a recognition of the everyday in the everyday.

Instagram has allowed such people to escalate their house-loving hobby into an obsession. Instagram offers opportunity, incentive, encouragement and legitimacy. With its framing and its effects, it offers the *opportunity* to make a mediocre image look good, and the *incentive* to go on improving. Most importantly, it offers an audience, whose comments and (hopefully) growing numbers provide *encouragement* to continue pursuing this obsession. And it offers *legitimacy* because, as one Instagrammer wrote to me,



Fig. 3.4: Instagrammer 'green\_house\_hunter' believes that her view of the world and her immediate surroundings has become more focused since she started capturing such 'urban delights' as this house in suburban Clovelly.

'Posting [my photographs] on Instagram means there is a final, published, manifestation of my interest'.<sup>7</sup>

### Mediated Strangeness

It might seem that these Instagrammers are merely indulging their love of familiar or quirky domestic detail, but I think there is more to their posts than this. One of them wrote to me, 'What I see myself doing with my Instagram account and my photos in general is creating an archive of how things are at a particular point in time.'<sup>8</sup> But, in fact, his photographs *do not* depict how things are at this particular point in time. At this point in time, the suburbs are changing dramatically, but this Instagrammer and others like him

<sup>7</sup> *lord\_fry* (Ashley Fry), pers.comm. 28 April 2016. I had messaged my sample of Instagrammers asking permission to use their photos in a conference presentation. Other than enquiring whether they were professional photographers (none were), I deliberately did not ask for any further information because I wanted to draw my own conclusions about them from their Instagram posts and comments. However, several of them foiled me by writing a little about themselves and their photographs unasked. Fortunately, what they said confirmed what I had already surmised.

<sup>8</sup> *lord\_fry* (Ashley Fry), pers.comm. 28 April 2016.





Fig. 3.5: Librarian 'lord\_fry' loves exploring suburbs. His childhood hobby of drawing houses has morphed into an interest in photography, and his Instagram stream of images has become a compendium of Sydney suburban house types.

are avoiding the obvious by deliberately leaving new high-rise residential developments out of the picture. By determinedly excluding the signs of change, they acknowledge that they are aware change is happening. They are not overtly fighting change or protesting against it. Instead, they are pointing their cameras the other way. With the encouragement of their Instagram followers and 'likers', they are creating a past out of the present. As they select decontextualized houses to photograph and post, they suspend them in an unreality. It is as if each of them is curating a museum exhibit of 'The Great Australian Dream'. Pervading their posts, there is a kind of nostalgia, manufactured by presenting the present as a representation of the past.

Nostalgia is generally considered to be a longing for a past in which memories have been embroidered by imagination. It entails grief, a feeling of absence, and a sense of loss. For Dylan Trigg (2012: 207), 'From the composite of memory and imagination, a strange place has formed, neither as yet belonging to the past nor solely a chimerical invention. Somewhere between these poles, the place of nostalgia dwells.' In the case of the Instagrammers' feeds, the imagined suburbs of the present contain no high-rise apartment blocks, but underlying their selective choice of photographic subjects there is anxiety – whether justified or not – about the anticipated loss of the Australian suburb, with its freestanding houses, if not totally replaced by gigantic residential developments, then overwhelmingly overshadowed

by them. Trigg's 'strange place of nostalgia' has been deliberately formed, not from a composite of memory and imagination, but from a composite of imagination and anticipatory dread. The nostalgia that is stage-managed in their Instagram feeds is a pre-emptive nostalgia for the imagined present.

For the viewer, though, this anticipatory nostalgia can give rise to a feeling of strangeness, so that each of these feeds seems like a sharable album of Strange Spaces. In their book, *Strange Spaces*, André Jansson and Amanda Lagerkvist describe strangeness as involving disjuncture, a disruption of expectations, a juxtaposition of the familiar with the unfamiliar. They invoke Foucault's heterotopias, where spatial and temporal discrepancies converge. And they propose that strangeness is not merely a matter of 'unfamiliar' or 'other', but is associated with senses and emotions. It can, for instance, provoke – or be born out of – fear or anxiety; or conversely, it can be associated with amusement and wonder (Jansson and Lagerkvist, 2009: 1-3). I think their explanation of strangeness applies to the Instagram accounts I follow, but it is important to note that it is not the places themselves that I find strange; it is the cumulative stream of images of those places that seems not quite right.

There is nothing new in the observation that photography is an estranging practice that makes strange the everyday sights and objects of our world. Susan Sontag, for example, observed that, 'Like a pair of binoculars with no right or wrong end, the camera makes exotic things near, intimate; and familiar things small, abstract, strange, much farther away' (1979: 167). Jansson and Lagerkvist extend this observation to practices in the present-day mediatized society when they emphasize the agency of media in shifting perceptions so that spaces appear strange. 'In our media age', they say, 'incongruities can sometimes occur because of a kind of overburdening of space by means of representation' (Jansson and Lagerkvist, 2009: 3). And this is what is happening, I suggest, with these Instagrammers' posts of suburban cottages and bungalows. Their anxiety – whether it is acknowledged or remains unacknowledged – about changes in the suburban landscape has led them to unwittingly allow a strangeness to creep into the stream of images that they post to their Instagram accounts.

Mediated architectural strangeness is these days often associated with urban decay, modern ruins and photography that has been dubbed 'ruin porn'.<sup>9</sup> But the Instagram photos I have been talking about depict none of

9 John Patrick Leary (2011), for example, discussing a certain type of documentary film and photographic essay made in Detroit, comments that 'ruin photography cannot help but exploit a city's misery', adding that, 'this is the style denounced locally as "ruin porn"'.

these – they are images of houses that are lived in, gardens that are loved and shops that continue to operate. However, these are photographed as if they exist under the threat of demolition and replacement, and as such they appear to have already become relics.

The mediated strangeness I perceive in these Instagram collections emerges from the temporal discrepancy between the houses themselves and the photographs of them. The houses themselves belong to the present; the photos, although intended by the Instagrammers to be faithful representations of their subjects, instead represent an invented present-as-past, displayed in what I have referred to above as a museum exhibit of 'The Great Australian Dream'. Functioning homes have been turned into historical objects and presented for the diversion of a sympathetic Instagram audience. The quotidian has been made odd in an unreal-time typology of domestic facades.

### **Mimicry and the Uncanny**

This mediated strangeness escalates into the realm of the mediated uncanny in the photographs taken by the more competent Instagrammers, by which I mean those who successfully exploit the regimentation of the Instagram frame.

The concept of the uncanny is associated with feelings of unease experienced when something seems simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, or when some quality effaces the distinction between the imagined and the real. Serious discussions of the subject almost invariably lead back to Freud's influential essay *The Uncanny* (1919) where, as Dylan Trigg (2004) repeats, 'uncanny' does not equate with 'unheimlich' but with a conjoined disjuncture between 'heimlich' and 'unheimlich', that is, the secret and the exposed. According to Trigg, then, uncanniness is associated with binaries, like doppelgangers, or the inanimate becoming animated, or disjointed memories no longer familiar. For instance, he describes the modern ruin as an 'uncanny space of decay' where there is a binary, or 'dissent presence of the opposite', because the decaying, boarded-up ruin of present time is juxtaposed with the memory or awareness of the same place as a former busy industrial site.

However, uncanniness need not only be associated with ruins or dark and hidden places. Libbie Chellew (2012: 3), for example, makes the case that suburbia is easy territory for the uncanny to invade because, in the suburbs, the aspirations of 'utopianism, insulation, predictability, safety and



Fig. 3.6: Mid-century modern is not the only house style that lends itself to the orthogonal constraints of the Instagram box, as this Melbourne post by symmetry-loving 'sublurb' demonstrates.

the ideal family' are juxtaposed with 'claustrophobia as well as isolation, conformity, financial insecurity [and] materialism'. What Chellew is really referring to here is the *mediated* uncanny, since her discussion centres not on actual places, but on examples of Australian fiction where suburbia is a setting for arousing unease, just as Freud relied for an explication of the uncanny on the fictional works of storytellers like E.T.A. Hoffman, whom he called 'the unrivalled master of conjuring up the uncanny' (1919: 233).

Nor are stories the only medium through which the uncanny can be conjured up. A recent exhibition in London, for example, takes 'The Uncanny in Contemporary Photography' as its theme and we are told on the accompanying website that 'the mastery each of the exhibiting artists has over their own process of manipulating the photographic image invites us to marvel at the many ways the uncanny can occur in photographic works' (Ardalan, 2016). In this exhibition, there are digital reconstructions of historical photographs, hyper-real images of nature created on the computer and stage-managed landscapes.

The point I want to make, though, is that some photographic works can seem uncanny regardless of whether the photographer was striving to create this effect or not. That uncanniness might be quite accidental, or it might be a consequence of the photographer's feelings being unconsciously transposed to the photograph. This, I suggest, is how it is with what I have called the more competent Instagrammers – those who make the most of

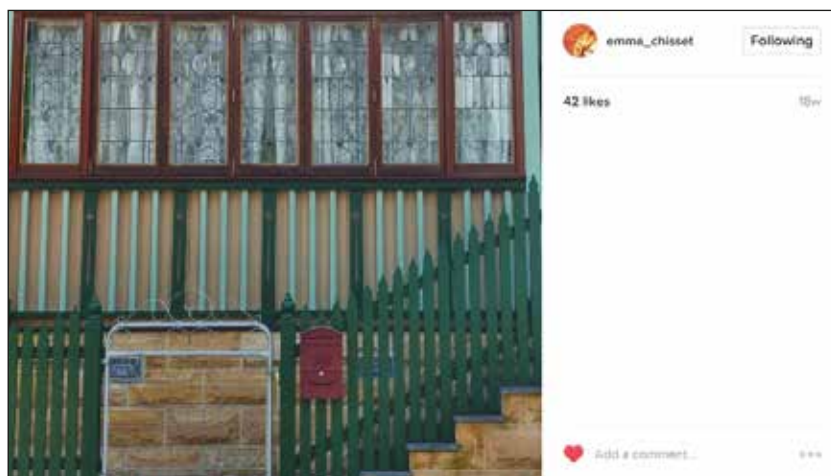


Fig. 3.7: In an Instagram image by 'emma\_chisset' the architecture of an old house has been unconsciously manoeuvred to mimic the high-rise apartment blocks going up in the surrounding Inner West local government area in Sydney.

the rigid discipline of the Instagram frame as they photograph ordinary houses. These people seek out distinctive domestic facades, perfect patios, lines of trimmed trees and rows of window panes and then manoeuvre them into the strictly orthogonal Instagram cube. They are attracted to geometrical details and their compositions emphasize parallel lines, grids, symmetry and regimentation.

I think these Instagrammers are unconsciously mimicking the clean lines, repetitive geometry and standardized aesthetics of the new, multi-storey, residential developments that are absent from their photographs. In their photographs, the quasi-minimalist style of apartment blocks is superimposed on the domestic style of detached suburban houses. One of the Instagrammers who wrote to me said, 'I realized so many things were getting knocked down & replaced by hideous development & just wanted to record "suburbia" as I knew it'.<sup>10</sup> But, unwittingly, this person has metaphorically knocked down her suburban houses by overlaying them with a version of the 'hideous' buildings she fears will replace them.

Viewed individually, these photographs are aesthetically pleasing but not at all unsettling. As I flick through a stream of these Instagrammers' accounts, however, a feeling of the uncanny emerges. The cumulative collection of house images builds up, like a construction kit, a model of some future apartment complex. In these compilations, the 'dissident presence of the

<sup>10</sup> *sublurb* (Kim Walvisch), pers.comm. 20 April 2016.

opposite' does not become apparent through the juxtaposition of the memory of the industrious past with the observable dereliction of the present, as in Trigg's (2004) 'uncanny spaces of decay'. Instead, the binary implicit in these uncanny sets of photographs is the familiarity of the ordinary suburban house versus the standardized uniformity of the multi-storey residential development, that is, the suspended present versus the dreaded future.

### **Conclusion: Instagram Imaginaries**

It is said that one of the reasons Instagram gained almost instant popularity when it was launched in 2010 was that it allowed people to create an imaginary existence for themselves, where they could boast about their fabulously buffed bodies, their makeup, their clothes, their cars and what they had for lunch.<sup>11</sup> So it might seem exaggerated and far-fetched for me to read so much into these other kinds of Instagram accounts, where hobby photographers broadcast photos of houses that are not even their own. However, by noticing the strange and uncanny nature of these 'house and suburb' accumulations, I believe I have discovered how some people use Instagram to deal with urban change.

Like the selfie-posters, this particular band of Instagrammers also creates an imaginary world for themselves and their followers. But, in this case, it is an imaginary world in which suburbs remain the same as they want them to be, even if, out of the picture, the reality is that suburbs are changing dramatically. Their streams of images depict a suspended present and it is their underlying anxiety about the future that transforms apparently straightforward images into images of strange spaces. And amongst these Instagrammers there are some whose images are more than strange; they bear an element of the uncanny.

These particular Instagrammers photographically renovate suburban homes to fit the quasi-minimalist aesthetic of new multi-storey developments. This manufactured coexistence of designer aesthetics superimposed on domestic architecture may well indicate that these people are ambivalent. On the one hand, they are fond of the coziness of the idealized suburban neighbourhood; on the other, they embrace the sleek new high-rise residential block and the different way of life it represents. Perversely, their Instagram accounts signal not only their dread of change, but also an acceptance of

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Quora –Why did Instagram become so successful <https://www.quora.com/Why-did-Instagram-become-so-successful>. Accessed 26 September 2016.

its inevitability. They know that their suburbs are changing forever and Instagram is offering them a way of letting go.

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## 4. Droning Syria: The Aerial View and the New Aesthetics of Urban Ruination

*László Munteán*

### Abstract

Early in 2016, russiaworks.ru, a Russian team of journalists and filmmakers specializing in drone photography of war-torn Syria, released a video featuring Homs, a city almost completely destroyed by years of fighting. Following its initial appearance on the Russian State Television, the video went viral on the Internet, alongside a number of similar drone footage created by russiaworks.ru. The videos combine the aesthetics of computer games and action blockbusters, of military surveillance and ruins, of distance and proximity, of documentation and entertainment. Through the close analysis of Internet-based videos and the team's website, this chapter argues that the videos evince a new aesthetics of the aerial view imbued with a variety of political agendas and geared towards eliciting affective responses.

**Keywords:** aesthetics; drone; ruin; russiaworks.ru; Syria; war

The advance of drone technology over the past decade has revolutionized warfare in a number of ways. The distance between the operator and the drone, as well as between the drone and its target, has resulted in the operator's 'optical detachment' from the physicality of war (Gregory, 2013: 183). The sight of explosions and eventual deaths inflicted by the US Air Force's Reaper and Predator drones are transmitted to computer screens thousands of miles away from the site of the attack, ensuring complete safety for the drone pilot. This new kind of aerial warfare, used extensively as a new weapon of choice in the War Against Terror, has ignited heated debates over the past five years. Despite their effectiveness in carrying out targeted killings against alleged terrorist groups, the moral and ethical justifications of their deployment

have ignited heated debates (Dorrian, 2014: 48; Chamayou, 2015; Vanderburg, 2016). In addition, the safety guaranteed by the operator's distance from the conflict zone offers no protection from new forms of trauma, induced by their exposure to graphic details of violence inflicted by drones that they operate. Indeed, as much as the drone heralds a 'post-human' (Chamayou: 106-13; Vanderburg: 8) warfare as an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), it is ultimately humans, both victims and pilots, who suffer the consequences of this technological breakthrough.

The meaning of the term 'drone', however, goes beyond its military expediency. Increasingly, ever-more sophisticated drones are available on the market for civilian use. Quadro-, hexa- and octocopters, equipped with high-resolution cameras, have opened new horizons in visualizing the environment. Utilized by the military as a strategic device, the operator's optical detachment from the drone's field of vision and simultaneous access to and control of that field via smartphones and headsets, has made the bird's-eye view an experience available to the general public. As a consequence, social media websites and YouTube have become repositories of an increasing number of videos attesting to the drone's versatility as an aerial imaging device and a source of entertainment. As much as its military version marks the advent of a new kind of warfare, the commercially available drone sets in motion new cultural practices of looking. Although the drone's civilian and military uses are usually discussed in isolation from each other, the border between these functions has become porous, as evidenced by the techniques ISIS has developed to put bombs on a variety of commercial drones (Utterback, 2017).

This chapter takes its cue from the blurring of these two functions and explores the potential of advanced commercial drones as an instrument of war journalism. More specifically, it looks at drone videos created by a team called Russia Works, which has played a pivotal role in providing leading Russian TV channels with aerial footage of war-torn Syrian cities. Having gone viral almost immediately after their appearance on the Internet, these videos attest to the team's skill at exploiting the drone's versatility as an imaging device capable of showing formerly unavailable views of war zones. At the same time, the videos that have earned millions of likes on the Internet are the result of meticulous visual and sound editing conducive to a new aerial aesthetics of ruins. Although Western media have rightfully identified this new affective register as the government's strategy to win public support for Russia's involvement in the war, the videos have reached millions of viewers outside Russia as documents of the level of urban devastation in Syria. Refocusing the term 'drone aesthetics', used with reference to artworks

*about* military drones, to entail the aesthetics of videos made *by* drones, the goal of this chapter is twofold. It situates this new aesthetics within the longstanding tradition of ruin representations and explores the political implications of this aesthetics through two representative case studies, one capturing ongoing battle and another the aftermath of destruction.

### From Flying to Editing

What new experience does the commercially available drone offer? In general terms, the experience of flying a drone can be described as an amalgam of three types of pleasure. First, the control mechanism of the drone finds its roots in radio-controlled models that allow users to ‘pilot’ miniature airplanes from the ground, with eyes constantly trained on the model in flight. The challenge of flying such models lies in the difference between the operator’s perspective on the ground and the model’s movement in the air. Thus, the flyer needs to reconcile these two perspectives in order to keep the plane under control. Second, what the drone ‘sees’ is transmitted onto a screen connected to the operator’s remote control system, reminiscent of a flight simulator on a PC. To an extent, the skills required to fly a drone are not unlike those necessary to play computer games. The virtual space of the game is therefore a corrective to the challenges posed by remote-controlled models. These two interrelated yet essentially distinct kinds of pleasure yield a third one, which is peculiar to the experience of flying a drone. This new kind of drone pleasure finds its roots in the childhood fantasy of projecting oneself into a world of miniature toys while at play (see: Bachelard, 1994: 148-49; Stewart, 1999: 37-69). Namely, the remote-control mechanism of the drone makes it possible to look through the ‘eye’ of its camera, as though flying the drone while sitting in its ‘cockpit’. In this sense, the ‘eye’ of the drone is not simply a metaphor that personifies a mechanical viewing mechanism but rather a metonymic connection between the operator’s eyesight and the drone’s camera. The drone is part and parcel of its operator’s body and vice versa, making possible what users of conventional radio-controlled models could only imagine and gamers could only experience in the virtual reality of the game space.

By allowing the operator to experience disembodied flight through the embodied control of an unmanned flying object in physical space, the drone provides an essentially liminal experience. As Eugénie Shinkle (2014) points out, drone technology initiates the disintegration of boundaries ‘between the close and the distant, the body and the machine, the real

and the unreal, *too human and not human enough*'. Building on David Nye's (1994) notion of the 'technological sublime', which he traces as a distinctive feature of American cultural history, Shinkle posits the spectrum of sensory experiences afforded by drone technology as the latest manifestation of this phenomenon. Although drones may indeed be harbingers of a new technological sublime, the videos produced using their advanced cameras mark the recurrence of the sublime of Romanticism as an aesthetic reference point. A video of the Utrecht Dom tower in the Netherlands, created by Dutch drone-operator Jelte Keur with a DJI Phantom 2 drone in 2014, is a case in point.<sup>1</sup> The film opens with a long upward panning shot of the Gothic latticework on the tower's façade and, once reaching above the spire, the drone reveals the tower as a solitary edifice piercing through a layer of morning mist photographed against the first beams of the rising sun. With the city invisible underneath the layer of mist, the tower is presented as though in an instance of transcendence, accentuated by the solemn, meditative soundtrack that, besides absorbing the noise of the drone, pulls the viewer into a disembodied and de-technologized vantage point, indulging in what Michel de Certeau describes in a different context as 'the lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more' (1988: 92). The silencing of the drone's electric engines thus shifts the emphasis from the technology that has made such a flight possible to the tower itself, celebrated as a feat of medieval masonry, overwhelming in its sheer size and history, and simultaneously dwarfed by the unfolding infinity of the horizon, which recalls Kant's formulation of the sublime as a kind of 'negative pleasure' (Kant, 1987: 98).

With a slight twist on Michel de Certeau's famous conceptualization of walking as a form of 'tactics' urban dwellers employ to evade 'strategies' put in place by urban planners and enforced by city authorities (1988: 94-96), one could argue that flying a personal drone amounts to an act of skywalking, the 'poetics' of which are to be found in drone videos proliferating the Internet. That drone flights are often carried out illegally, well illustrates their 'tactical' nature in de Certeau's sense. Keur's project on the Dom tower in Utrecht was also produced without the necessary permissions required to fly drones in public space at that altitude, an offence for which he was held responsible and subsequently fined (Custers, 2016: 4). At the same time, drones can also serve 'strategic' interests of surveillance by the police and other governmental bodies and institutions. Consequently, the high-pitched buzz of a drone flying over a group of demonstrators is the

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UBGU-Rh-ZQ>

sonic indication of a disembodied gaze that can potentially be that of a bystander making a video of the events, a news agency making a broadcast, or the police collecting information about the demonstration. Viewed from the ground, a drone in flight can potentially serve both tactical and strategic ends, underlining Maximilian Jablonowski's claim that it 'is *both a powerful and a playful device*' (2015: 12).

The drone is thus a highly elusive and an essentially liminal device, opening new horizons of the human sensorium and revolutionizing aerial warfare, techniques of surveillance, as well as entertainment. Yet the scholarly reactions spawned by its widespread civilian and military use have so far paid little attention to the aesthetics of drone videos such as Keur's. In fact, the term 'drone aesthetics,' as Shinkle (2014) notes, 'is a modern idiom, a shorthand for new modes of representing war from the extraterrestrial perspective of the machine.' Although she adds, rather misleadingly, that the term 'has been used to describe artwork [...] that takes drone warfare as its subject', I propose to unhinge the term from its reference to art and use it in the broadest possible sense, acknowledging a new aesthetics of the aerial view that has gained a widespread currency all over the world with the ubiquity of drone videos on social media and the popularity of TV programmes that make use of drone footage (Newall, 2016). In this sense, drone aesthetics entails the compositional techniques and affective registers of photographic and filmic footage created with the help of drone technology and circulated in old and new media, like Keur's footage of the Utrecht Dom tower. The ongoing civil war in Syria has also been subject to drone aesthetics, as evidenced by the circulation of videos of battles and ruined cities. The majority of these videos have been made by a group of Russian journalists whose work I explore next.

## Russia Works

Operating under the auspices of the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK), Russia Works is a team that uses drone technology as its trademark visualization device. Its website, [russiaworks.ru](http://russiaworks.ru),<sup>2</sup> is all in Russian, though clicking on the button 'Rus' (suggesting the possibility of other languages) in the top right corner yields automatic English

<sup>2</sup> Shortly after submission of this chapter, the website has undergone substantial changes. In mid May, 2017 the site featured Russian fashion and design and, as of recently, it serves as Aleksandr Pushin's personal aerial photography and video site.

translations of textual information by Google Translate. The introductory text under the link 'About us' declares the following:

We are engaged in activities in the Russian newsreel films and TV. Among us there are journalists, cameramen, producers, directors. For more complete coverage of the events during our shooting, we use the television drones. We work wherever it's interesting, we often find on the information front. We do not do politics, although we understand it. We are engaged in information and recent history. We are documenting it in using the latest achievements in the field of digital cinema and TV. Also, all of our team members actively contribute and development in the field of Russian TV. We ask trends in newsreel crew activities.<sup>3</sup>

Although the text hardly suffices as a mission statement, its vagueness is nonetheless illustrative of the team's loyalties and affiliations. Their engagement 'in the Russian newsreel films and TV' entails their connections to such state-owned television channels as Russia 1, Russia 24 and Vesti, all of which are indicated as 'Our ethers' on the opening page of the website.

Russia Works uses a DJI 4 Phantom drone, an advanced version of the one used for the video of the Utrecht Dom tower, in order to convey 'more complete coverage' of 'interesting' events. This highly elusive terminology is key to the performative power of the text. The expression 'more complete' posits the drone as an aerial corrective to earthbound reportage, while positioning Russia Works as a group of journalists who 'understand' politics but are not involved in it. Clearly, the voice speaking here is that of the expert who situates himself as distant from the political situation at hand but has insight, both in terms of vision and knowledge. This connection between understanding and seeing renders the term 'interesting' referential to events that are deemed worthwhile to show by people in the know, working for state-sponsored television channels. Consequently, in the hands of Russia Works, the drone is not simply an extension of the body of its operator, Aleksandr Pushin. It is also an extension of the state, as evidenced by the team's name. Pushin's frequent cooperation with Evgeniy Poddubnyy, a celebrated and decorated war correspondent working for Russian state television, further illustrates where the team's loyalties lie. When Russia joined the fighting in Syria in September 2015 on the side of government forces, Russian TV channels played a key role in convincing the public of the urgency of Russian intervention. As Roland Oliphant (2015) of *The Telegraph*

3 [http://russiaworks.ru/about\\_us/](http://russiaworks.ru/about_us/)

argues, the overall media campaign had led to a radical increase of the public's support for the bombing of Syrian targets, from fourteen percent in mid-September to 72 percent by early October. The drone videos made by Russia Works, Oliphant notes, have been instrumental propaganda tools to achieve this aim.

Before examining the interrelation of politics and aesthetics in the videos, let me dwell a bit longer on Russia Works's website as an online platform and archive for the materials they have produced. It is important to note, however, that the website is by no means a comprehensive archive of their work. Quite the contrary: because the team produces footage to be used in TV broadcasts, their videos circulate in a variety of versions, many of them on Pushin's personal YouTube page.<sup>4</sup> Still, the website is no less performative than the introductory text and, as such, it offers a useful entry point for examining the political dimension of its aesthetics. The team's name, written in steel-coloured industrial font style and set against a black line as its background, appears in the top left corner of the opening page. Below this heading, links to 'video chronicles' and a 'photochronicle' lead to the main content of the site, organized chronologically. Scrolling down, one finds the possibility to contact the team via email and look at the team's 'ether', Russian state TV. What stands out at a first glance, however, is the photographs used as background to the links. Most of them depict nondescript cityscapes and views of desert landscapes. One image, however, which appears above the introductory text, shows a distant view of the skyline of Moscow and, in the foreground, the gigantic statue of the 'Worker and Kolkhoz Woman', once used as an emblematic logo for one of Russia's oldest film studio's, Mosfilm. Yet another image, which appears upon clicking on 'photochronicle', shows a vertical nocturnal view of a Tupolev Tu-160 strategic bomber on an airfield. As a landmark possibly familiar to Russian viewers, the photograph of the statue forges a connection between Russia Works and the tradition of Russian filmmaking, while the image of the bomber, recalling the diagnostic gaze of military drones, underlines the team's focus on war, and on Russian military activities in particular. Although Syria is never specified as the team's sole area of operation (the site also contains videos of the conflict at Donetsk), the aerial views of settlements in the desert foregrounds the Middle East as the team's prime *raison d'être*.

What connects these diverse aerial views, however, is an atmospheric register defined by their use of soft focus, especially along the edges, which

4 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8ACJjuxsRD3vuxcPCdYaEA>



reduces the specificity of detail to computer-enhanced colour tones of sand, sepia brown, pale green and light ochre. Although it can be argued that the blur serves as a means to foreground the texts to which they serve as background, it does more than that. Similarly to the effect created by tilt-shift photography, the blur miniaturizes the photographic referent. As a result, what is brought into focus appears to be reduced in scale, recalling the drone's strong ties to the world of toys and entertainment. On the other hand, the application of the soft focus gestures toward the blurriness of war photographs, where such imperfections are recognized as markers of authenticity (Ullrich, 2009: 98; Van Gelder and Westgeest, 2011: 59-63). Devoid of their contexts, however, these background photographs constitute what looks like a collage of stills from feature films, documentary footage, aerial reconnaissance and surveillance recordings. By simulating and juxtaposing these photographic and cinematic conventions, the site reconciles documentation as its alleged goal with the aesthetics of cinema.

In accordance with the team's political allegiances, the term 'chronicle', used with reference to the site's filmic and photographic archives, entails the documentation of the advance of the Russian-backed forces of President Assad. Besides the aerial documentation of military manoeuvres and the aftermath of destruction, however, we also find images of selfies and group photos with Syrian children and soldiers documenting the team's everyday life in the war zone. In a number of videos, Pushin films himself in preparation for launching the drone, in the process of seeking shelter from gunfire and engaging in conversations with soldiers, locals and members of the team. What unfolds from this archive of the team's photos is a narrative that combines the chronicling of Russian military presence in Syria with the team's story as chroniclers, positioning Pushin and his associates as courageous, resilient and resourceful men, who serve a good cause on the right side of the battle. The drone is featured in group photos as the team's talismanic trademark. Thus, the website synchronizes the Russian military advance in Syria with the celebration of the team's growing fame and success, culminating in a 2016 photograph, which shows Pushin in the company of war journalist Poddubnyy and Russia Works member Ruben Merobov, holding the prestigious TEFI Award for Best Onsite Reporter/Cameraman, granted annually by the Russian Academy of Television.

These interrelations between the site's visual design and the team's political orientation sheds new light on the word 'works' in the team's name, suggesting three different, yet interrelated, readings. As a noun, it denotes industrial production, underscored by a fitting font style, which construes the team as a manufacturer and a brand. As a verb, it invites two readings

with different emphases. On the one hand, it presents Russia in the process of work and declares, on the other hand, that it is a well-functioning country. It signifies success as an attribute of Russia. The common denominator of these readings is the metonymic connection forged between the team and the country. While this connection jeopardizes the introductory text's claim about the team's non-indulgence in politics, it makes no secret of the fact that whatever it presents as information, it is deeply imbricated in propaganda. In what follows, I will further examine the interrelations of aesthetics and politics through two case studies, one concerning drone videos of ongoing battle and the other concerning the representation of the city in ruins.

### **Droning Urban Battle**

Traditionally, aerial views of ongoing battles have been provided by airplanes or helicopters actively involved in the fighting. Footage of American planes dropping napalm on alleged Viet Cong positions have become iconic documents of the Vietnam War. Similarly well-known are films documenting the carpet-bombing of German cities by allied air forces in World War II. All these raids have been filmed by cameramen aboard aircraft, often with the purpose of evaluating the success of the mission and producing footage for broadcasts and films. Strikes carried out and simultaneously documented by military drones also illustrate the congruence of the gaze of the attacker and the documenter. Aerial reconnaissance, dating back to the American Civil War (Smith, 1958: 14), attests to a similar application of military optical devices, either as a means to prepare sorties or gaining information about the damage inflicted by previous missions. Providing platforms for the aerial documentation of ongoing conflicts, in other words, has long been the prerogative of aircraft actively participating in the conflict.

The ways in which Russia Works uses the DJI 4 Phantom drone in Syria departs from this longstanding tradition, insofar as the drone is neither tasked with reconnaissance, nor with assault. Its function, as the website declares, is to provide more extensive coverage of the war. Keur's video of the Utrecht Dom tower illustrates how footage created by commercially available drones is subjected to editing in the postproduction phase. How does Russia Works use editing as an aesthetic device and a political tool to capture battle on the ground? One of their videos has had a particularly long afterlife on the Internet. It depicts Syrian government forces making their advance into Jobar, a Damascus suburb in mid-October 2015. The video available on Russia Works's website is a raw version of 1:15 minutes,

bearing the laconic title ‘tank battle’.<sup>5</sup> The version that went viral on the Internet, however, is almost four minutes long and has been subjected to extensive editing.<sup>6</sup> A comparison of the two versions is helpful to unravel the interrelation of aesthetics and politics in visualizing Jobar as an urban battlefield.

In the original version, the buzz of the drone’s engines is heard as background noise throughout the whole video (Figure 4.1). This monotonous sound is occasionally ruptured by the sound of shelling carried out by two tanks making their advance side by side towards an intersection. The high-resolution footage reveals the tanks in great detail, as well as the devastated built environment that bears the marks of months of prior bombardment. The two tanks are shown from an almost vertical perspective, as though in Google Earth’s street view. They are enveloped by the dust whipped up by their own caterpillar tracks and, as they get ready to fire, the dust mixes with flames and smoke bursting out of their guns. Subsequently, the drone’s camera slowly tilts upward, as though following the rising cloud of smoke and dust, and reveals the section of the town targeted by the tanks. Just before reaching the horizon and exposing the whole extension of the town, however, the tilt is cut and the camera is once again trained on the tanks that are about to part ways at the intersection while continuing the shelling. The video concludes with the tank on the right firing into a long straight street, with its projectile hitting a building far ahead, marked by a rising column of smoke.

Without doubt, the video is unique in its aerial rendering of urban warfare in high resolution. But, even if the drone itself bears no arms and has no influence on the outcome of the battle, the loyalties of its operator are evident from its vantage and manoeuvres in the air. Although the drone has the potential to assume a panoptic view of Jobar, its ‘gaze’ is led by the two tanks making their way into the suburb. Therefore, even if the video is shot from the drone’s perspective, it is focalized through the tanks as ‘protagonists’. In large part, the video gains its power from this implied perspective of the advancing tanks that remains hidden but nonetheless illustrative of the political alliance between the view from above and the direction of the assault below. By taking the tanks’ pace of advance as a measure for its speed in the air, the drone tracks their movement, as though putting the camera ‘over their shoulder’, vindicating the allegiance between Russia and Syrian government forces.

5 <http://russiaworks.ru/dopolnitelno/novosti/54-tankovyy-boy/>

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChRYU4zHvKw>

If space, as Henri Lefebvre (1991) reminds us, is not ontologically given but socially produced, the video participates in the production of Jobar as a space of conflict. More specifically, the video is an instance of what Lefebvre describes as 'conceived space'. Conceived space, he maintains, is the space of 'scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived' (Lefebvre, 1991: 38). Conceived space, Lefebvre continues, tends 'towards a system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs' (1991: 39). The video's compositional characteristics are constitutive of such an intellectually worked-out sign system. The tanks' implied perspective entails implied political ties mapped onto the urban texture of Jobar as a theatre of war, where the rebels remain invisible for the viewer but are nevertheless made present as targets on the tanks' viewfinders. Their positions are revealed by the tanks' muzzle blast and the smoke plumes upon impact. For all its deep focus and crystal clear resolution, however, the video keeps human carnage (or any presence of humans) out of sight and offers instead clouds of smoke and dust as markers of presumed death amidst material destruction.

The way in which the video captures smoke, dust and muzzle blast is no less integral to its construction of conceived space than its implementation of the implied perspective. Every shell fired is accompanied by a trail of smoke, mixed with dirt, debris and sand, which first moves in the direction of the target and then rises through the air as though an ephemeral memorial to the instance of firing. The upward rise of the smoke counterbalances the horizontality of movement on the ground and invites the camera to tilt upward and change its isometric view of the tanks in the street into a bird's-eye view of the besieged municipality. Thus, smoke simultaneously reveals and disguises violence. Like an arrow, it denotes the site of an explosion or where a shot has been fired, but it also veils the event from viewing, requiring seconds or minutes to settle down and lay bare the extent of damage. Accordingly, in the hands of Russia Works, the blanket of smoke serves as a means to dramatize the scale of the conflict and, at the same time, keep graphic details of corporeal and architectural destruction at a safe remove. Similar to the application of blur in the website's photographic design, the veil of smoke obscures details of the contours of details and makes it difficult to have a sense of borders and the extensions of the suburb. While promising oversight, indeed a more complete coverage, the drone's aerial view does so by translating the battle as an aesthetic experience. Similar to the way in which Keur's drone footage of the Utrecht Dom tower activates the Romantic sublime, the slowly unfurling smoke rises above Jobar as an

awesome phenomenon beyond the human scale, in which war violence is transubstantiated into a superhuman force, not unlike that of ominous cloud formations and raging storms in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, Thomas Cole or Albert Bierstadt.

The version of this video that went viral on the Internet immediately after Pushin put it on his Facebook site differs from the shorter version in a number of respects (Figure 4.2). Most conspicuously, Pushin has replaced the high-pitched buzz of the drone with the song 'Highroller' by the American electronic music band Crystal Method, which made Robert Mackey (2015) of *The New York Times* compare the footage to a music video. Considering the fact that the speed of the video has been manipulated in such ways as to harmonize with the rhythm of the soundtrack, Mackey's observation is straight to the point. Creating a vibrating ensemble of footage that incorporates material that has not been used in the raw version, Pushin has gone to great lengths in creating an effect that combines the visual vocabulary of the Romantic sublime with the iconography of flight simulator computer games, driven by the rhythmic patterns of sampled electronic music.

In order to conceptualize how this effect is achieved and how it works, two aspects of the video need to be considered in particular. The soundtrack is the sonic dimension of the Lefebvrian conceived space. It does not merely operate as a musical backdrop to the footage but rather serves as a structuring principle informing Pushin's editing of the footage. Monotonous sequences are accompanied by long panning shots taken from a high altitude, while gunfire and explosions are coupled with drumbeats and louder sequences. In addition, the song's sampled audio material maps the historical imaginary of the space age onto footage of fighting in the streets of Jobar. In the song 'Highroller', Crystal Method uses audio materials from NASA's Apollo 8 mission in 1968, the objective of which was to orbit around planet Earth and the Moon. A dominant trope of the American cultural imaginary throughout the 1960s, the notion of outer space as the final frontier evokes the pioneer as the explorer of uncharted territories in the American West and is taken as an imperative for the space age. By recalling this – typically American – imaginary, the video, perhaps unwittingly, situates the team operating the drone as explorers and renders Jobar, both sonically and visually, an uncharted, alien terrain. The fact that the song's frame of reference is the Cold War, which seems uncannily pertinent in light of the differences of opinion between Russia and the United States regarding the civil war in Syria, adds an ironic twist to the seamless consonance of action and music.

Thus, the application of 'Highroller' as a soundtrack anchors the video in a sonically induced conceived space and, as an affective tool, unmoors the

footage from its spatiotemporal context and offers it up as entertainment to be consumed. The implied perspective of the tanks in the original video, which served as a visual reference point indicating the course of advancement by Syrian government forces is replaced here by a multiplicity of views and perspectives dissolving in a collage of explosions, soldiers running from one building to another, tracking shots of trenches and distant views of plumes synchronized with the rhythm of the soundtrack. The footage as information succumbs to an overall effect in which muzzle flashes are juxtaposed with the horizon of a rising (or setting) sun and clouds of smoke emanating from the ruined city are absorbed by the tranquility of clouds that veils the conflict down below. As the violence of war is absorbed by the power of nature as a framing device, so does the locality of Jobar morph into a spectacle; a *mise-en-scène* for experiencing war as though in a computer game. Likewise, as information is absorbed by affect, the title 'Syria, Damascus, Jobar' in the bottom-left corner of the screen is dwarfed by the logo of russiaworks.ru as the brand.

### Droning the Aftermath

While the affordances of the commercially available drone break new ground in capturing conflict, documenting the aftermath of destruction from the air has earlier precedents. So-called aerial tracking films, shot from airplanes flying over French and Belgian cities, lay bare the extent of destruction caused by World War I (Castro, 2013). Flyovers with similar objectives were made over Berlin, Tokyo and Hiroshima in the wake of World War II. Key to these aerial documents of urban ruination is their spatiotemporal extension, which distinguishes them from the photographic archive of similar urban sites. A filmic record of a flyover, such as the one depicting Berlin in the summer of 1945,<sup>7</sup> capitalizes on the airplane's free movement in the air, allowing the scale of ruination to unfold in space and time defined by the height and speed of the airplane. Such landmarks as the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, and the boulevard Unter den Linden are identifiable reference points but the camera only captures them momentarily, leaving no time to ponder details as photographs would. For all the affordances of the airplane as a mobile viewing platform, it could not go below a certain speed and altitude, and changing directions required a large turn radius. The compositional characteristics of the Berlin flyover film are illustrative of

7 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ss2FuoFHkIc>



Fig. 4.1: Tanks of Syrian government forces advancing in a street in Jobar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmJ9gH-tEXg> (accessed 27 May 2017).



Fig. 4.2: Smoke plumes rising from Jobar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmJ9gH-tEXg> (accessed 27 May 2017).

these limitations. Although the hovering capabilities of helicopters opened new horizons in aerial filming, the small size and refined navigational characteristics of nonmilitary drones have marked a real breakthrough, as evidenced by Russia Works's videos of Darayya, Homs, Damascus and Aleppo.

The same affordances of the drone that allowed Russia Works to capture fighting in Jobar have been put to work in their 'aftermath videos' as well. Taking advantage of its mobility and small size, Pushin's drone is able to descend into narrow streets and, just before ascending to a higher altitude

to capture the immense scale of destruction, it portrays the street's bullet-riddled façades as though flying amidst the jagged edges of an urban canyon. This conception of urban space as a texture of blocks divided by cracks in between is informed by the fantasy of the street as a multilayered airspace for traffic, recalling such cyberpunk visualizations of the city as *Blade Runner* (dir. Scott, 1982) and *The Fifth Element* (dir. Besson, 1997), as well as the virtual game space of flight simulators as precursors of the control system of the personal drone. Russia Works's video of the ruins of Homs has become ubiquitous on the Internet and serves well as an example to explore a new kind of ruin aesthetics instigated by the drone. Although it circulates on the Internet with a variety of soundtracks that TV channels such as Russia Today add, the 1:19 minute-long video has not been put through such reediting work as the one about Jobar. Although the techniques of image and sound editing employed to capture the battle in Jobar are similar to the ones used to document the ruins of Homs (Figure 4.3), the way they mobilize pre-existing aesthetic traditions is different.

We have already seen how the Jobar video exemplifies the thematization of urban warfare along pre-existing codes of the Romantic sublime and the aesthetics of computer games. Conceptualizations of the sublime have played a pivotal role in setting standards for the visualization of ruins as well (Woodward, 2002; Dillon, 2014). But the ideal ruin in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics was one that was temporally removed from the present, its history long forgotten, thus lending itself to be perceived as the remains of a bygone, great civilization. The beauty of these age-old ruins was located in what Georg Simmel (2011) defines as the struggle between *Geist* and *Natur*, in which the achievements of human civilization gradually give way to the forces of nature, a dialectics, which he posits as a source of ruin pleasure. Writing in the wake of World War II, the British novelist Rose Macaulay also identifies the passage of time as key for ruins to be perceived in terms of 'wholeness' (1984: 455). 'New ruins', on the other hand, 'have not yet acquired the weathered patina of age [...] [they] are for a time stark and bare, vegetationless and creatureless; blackened and torn, they smell of fire and mortality' (453). Unlike their old counterparts, Macaulay suggests, these ruins bear the fresh scars of destruction that undercuts the possibility of pleasure and nostalgic longing.

The perception of the modern ruin as 'ugly', as opposed to the austere grandeur of the remains of ancient civilizations, is a sentiment with a history of its own, stretching from the Enlightenment through the recent fetishization of Detroit's decaying architecture in 'ruin porn' photography. These images of the new ruin, particularly those taken by the French photographer



duo Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre,<sup>8</sup> frame Detroit's decaying architecture in terms of the aesthetic tradition Simmel and Macaulay describe. Although the ruins of Homs are also imbued with the lingering memory of pain and violence, this does not prevent it from being viewed with a peculiar kind of pleasure by audiences who do not partake in that memory and pain, as evidenced by the popularity of the video on the Internet. It is not that the drone footage construes Homs in terms of ancient ruins, though the area has been entirely abandoned, save for a few people who live amidst the ruins. To the contrary, the materiality of the ruins, stark and bare, as Macaulay would observe, are exposed in high resolution, without the veil of smoke that enfolds Jobar under siege. The drone's ability to fly close to ruined structures lends the footage a haptic quality, saturated with the materiality of dust and concrete both unfathomable and uncontainable.

In Gastón Gordillo's (2014) distinction of rubble from ruins, ruins 'conjure away the void of rubble and the resulting vertigo that it generates', while rubble 'deglamorizes ruins by revealing the material sedimentation of destruction' (10). Without doubt, the video of Homs captures the city as rubble, rather than ruin. But what kind of a pleasure does such a sight of rubble offer? The element of the Kantian dynamical sublime, ascribed primarily to the experience of the overwhelming power of nature, here makes itself felt through the video's portrayal of the city as a vast terrain of devastation, enhanced by takes that, similarly to the Jobar video, do not offer any landmarks as reference point. The sense of infinity that these long pans of façades generate, however, are not absorbed by their temporal distance, as in the case of ruins that elicit pleasure in Simmel's and Macaulay's sense, but by the simultaneous experience of distance and closeness as the drone's trademark characteristic. In other words, while the drone indeed caters to the experience of closeness by way of its unique flying characteristics, it also keeps its operator, as we have seen at the beginning, at a remove from the flight itself.

The distance that is at stake here is more about physical than temporal distance. In Philip Shaw's reading of Kant, the dynamical sublime works as a source of pleasure,

because it is contemplated from afar. It is our ability to appreciate our weakness in the face of nature and at the same time to put this weakness into perspective that transfers the attribute of 'mightiness' away from the object and towards something within the mind of the perceiver (2006: 82).

8 <http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit>



Fig. 4.3: Screenshot from Russia Works's drone video of Homs in ruins, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2RNdRJhym8> (accessed 27 May 2017).

This pleasure of physical distance renders the rubble of Homs a fetish item desirable to explore but only from afar. Thus, drones' ability to provide the experience of closeness while guaranteeing the viewer's distance from the site is key to the perspective, both geometrically and metaphorically, necessary to keep the 'ugliness' of the ruin at a remove and simultaneously transform its newness into a source of fetish. The temporal distance from the events of the past that informs Simmel's and Macaulay's notions of ruin pleasure is here transformed into a spatial dimension. It is not so much that the drone's ability to hover enables it to maintain its physical distance from the site that it photographs. Quite the contrary, it is its ability to get close to buildings and offer a haptic experience of materiality that turns the viewer's physical distance from the site into a source of pleasure.

### **Conclusion: The Afterlife of Drone Videos**

This chapter has taken its cue from the use of commercially available drones in war journalism. Focusing primarily on Russia Works's documentation of urban conflict and ruined cities in Syria, my main goal was to argue that such applications of the drone open new horizons in visualizing war-torn streets. Highlighting various facets of the drone's versatility as a remote-controlled flying object, I have focused primarily on particular drone videos that capture urban destruction and its aftermath from vantage points that have formerly been impossible to assume. Predicated to a large extent on the pre-existing

imaginaries of the aerial view, the drone videos by Russia Works break new ground in that they combine the aesthetics of computer games and action blockbusters, of military surveillance and ruin pleasure, of distance and proximity, and of documentation and entertainment. I have demonstrated how these videos attest to a new aesthetics of the urban ruin by addressing the political, aesthetic and affective dimensions of this new technology.

When Russia Works released their first videos, Western media quickly labeled their move as 'Russia's Hot New Propaganda Tool', as a headline of *The National Interest* declares (Saxton, 2016). Indeed, as the figures testify, the propagandistic function of these videos has contributed to the Russian public's support for Putin's policy in Syria. It would not be fair, however, to 'blame' this tactical move exclusively on the drone videos, as it would not be fair either to regard Russian viewers as the only ones affected. If they succeeded as propaganda tools, it was largely because of the rhetorical context including on-site broadcasts, interviews and reportages in which they were embedded on Russian TV. Their ubiquity on the Internet cannot be ascribed to Russian audiences only. Quite the contrary, the videos have been picked up by a number of Western Internet magazines as evidence of the severity of the situation in Syria, as indicated by a headline from the *Mirror* introducing the video of Homs: 'Chilling Footage from Syria Reveals Why Exactly Refugees are Leaving Syria for Europe' (Shammas, 2016), giving evidence of a political agenda clearly not in line with current Russian interests. The variety of adjectives in the comments section of YouTube that call the videos 'awesome', 'beautiful' and 'horrific' bears testament to their potential to elicit the experience of the sublime.

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## 5. The Affective Territory of Poetic Graffiti from Sidewalk to Networked Image

*Aslı Duru*

### Abstract

This chapter explores the 'Poetry is on the street' (Siir sokakta) movement in major Turkish cities as a contemporary practice of grassroots spatial and digital intervention in the visual cultures of the street through poetry and amateur photography. The practice involves spraying or scrawling snippets of poetry on public spaces under the hashtag #siirsokakta and feeding the digital image of the graffiti onto several online platforms. Drawing mainly on perspectives from literary, visual urban geography, and cultural studies, the chapter focusses on the #siirsokakta movement to examine literary images beyond the performance–representation dualism. The analysis contextualizes and interprets the production and circulation of these amateur images as a multimodal political means of (re)narrating the street both physically and digitally through literature, image production, (physical and online) placemaking and social networking. As such, the chapter contributes to understanding how new technologies of visualization, in this case, amateur photography of the street and poetry, enable multimodal and mass circulation of idea(l)s in and on place.

**Keywords:** #siirsokakta; poetic graffiti; photography; placemaking; narrating the street

### Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the flow of poetic graffiti between different spheres of social, material and sensory interaction as it travels between the street

and the digital space of the networked text-image (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008). The analysis is based on a small study of 'siir sokakta' (Turkish for 'poetry is in the street') movement in Turkey using walking and (digital) ethnographic methods. Street poetry centred around the movement's hashtag '#siirsokakta' is a contemporary practice of popular spatial and digital intervention in the visual cultures of the street through poetry and amateur photography. I use the poetic graffiti movement as a point of departure to think about the transitions between text and digital data as constituents of street visuality and sociality. My engagement has both methodological and empirical objectives and employs these as two prefigured strands of thought (and practice) that organize the overall research process. Specific issues connected with walking, social media browsing methods, positionality and the overlaps between participation-observation and personal and research interests in ethnographic work comprise the first strand of my research and reflection on the poetic graffiti movement. The second and empirical strand consists of paying attention to the sites and modalities of the production and circulation of poetry inscriptions and images; this strand aims to make the case for poetic graffiti as a multimodal, affective territorial practice, because graffiti (image) permeates different spatialities (from sidewalk to digital screen) and technologies (from markers to camera phones) and involves different visual, oral and embodied sensory engagements.

My take on the #siirsokakta graffiti is less inspired by street art studies and research on graffiti in specific, which tend to focus on the aesthetic and style of a genre or the social (and artistic) meanings of graffiti, in terms of the struggles over space and/or place identity (Butcher, 2012; Wimsatt, 2008; Ensminger, 2011; MacDowall, 2013). In my use of the term graffiti, I am also less concerned with the existing debates over the multiple categories, taxonomies and qualities of graffiti as a form of art and/or commodity (of place and art).<sup>1</sup> I use the term graffiti to include both its simplest scribbled form and the wide array of styles, techniques, locations and (anonymous and other, activist, artist) producers. Abel and Buckley (1977: 5) define graffiti as 'a form of communication that is both personal and free of everyday social restraints', such as limited interaction with strangers, leaving a mark in public space and/or remaining anonymous while interacting – all of which, interestingly, apply in various ways to the characteristics of communication in online networking platforms.

1 *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* (2015), among others, is a valuable cross-disciplinary resource for all this.

The paper is organized in three main sections, followed by a conclusion. In the first part, I focus on the emergence of the graffiti movement and briefly situate it in Turkey's political and (techno)social context at the time of its mass popularization in 2013. The next section deals more in depth with the sociality (Appadurai, 1986) around the #siirsokakta hashtag, as it circulates from street to online platforms and to the messy ethnographic research linked to the first organizing strand of the study. How do graffiti as text and text-image differ and converge, in terms of the social and media interactions that evolve around them? How does the transition in modalities (Rose, 2016) link to existing local and traditional oral, textual and digital narratives? I address these questions and position them as part of the methodological influences and concerns that shaped the study in various phases. The third section discusses the hashtag movement's links to earlier international and local political and artistic influences, namely the Situationists and the Second New literary wave of the 1950s-1960s in Turkey. In this section, I focus on the second line of argument and expand on the specific ways in which poetic graffiti as circulating text and networked image produces converging and/or conflicting narratives working differentially as territorial markers of an affective street spatiality.

### **Close the Copybook, It's on Twitter!**

Practices of the 'poetry is in the street' movement involves spraying, painting or scrawling excerpts from poetry in public spaces under the hashtag #siirsokakta, which translates to 'poetry is in the street'. The manually tagged graffiti is then photographed almost exclusively by camera phones. The digital image of the graffiti is then uploaded and shared to several online platforms – mainly Twitter, Facebook and, more recently, Instagram (Figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3).<sup>2</sup> The online life of individual graffiti images and image albums also take off as they are re-shared on individual accounts and compilations are published on digital press and popular websites.

There are multiple accounts with the same and/or similar account names on various networking platforms and different claims and urban legends exist as to their owner(s) – whether it is a single person or a group, their identity and

<sup>2</sup> All figure images except Figure 5.4 were retrieved from Twitter by tracking the hashtag for the 15-day period from 20 February 2017 to 6 March 2017. The analysis categories are based on selectively and periodically retired posts between 2014 and the submission of this manuscript in March 2017.



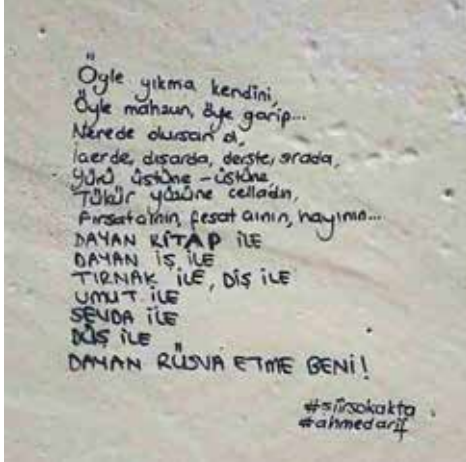


Fig. 5.1: '#siirsokakta #siirheryerde #ahmedarif #edipcanserver #sukruerbas #sabahattinali', 28 February 2017, 12:05 A.M., Twitter.

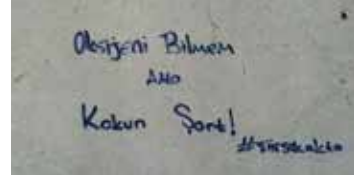


Fig. 5.2: '#siirsokakta', 3 March 2017, 11:58 P.M., Twitter.



Fig. 5.3: '#TurgutUyar #siirsokakta', 26 February 2017, 09:06 A.M., Twitter.

ownership of other accounts with related content or name(s).<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of the study, I followed several poetic graffiti accounts with similar names, such as @SiirSokaktaa (569K)<sup>4</sup> and @Siir\_Sokaktadir (110K), but focused primarily on the Twitter user @siirsokakta (318K) and the linked Facebook and Twitter accounts @ikinci\_yeni (45.8K), which are owned by Serdal Köçer. I met with Köçer first to ask for his permission to use the content from his linked accounts. A poetry enthusiast himself, Köçer claims to be the creator of the siirsokakta hashtag and the initiator of the specific procedure of minimal handwritten poetry in 2013. He responds anonymously to popular coverage of the movement in digital and print press, but has agreed to be cited openly due to the academic and, hence, 'non-popular' nature of this publication. In our email exchange he provided me with his personal negative view on the current situation of the poetic graffiti movement by specifically referring to the randomness, commodification and lower to non-poetic quality of online posts, as well as the practices in physical space that exceed and openly conflict with the minimalism endorsed as the movement's graffiti style (Köçer, 2017). I also 'manually' tracked the hashtag #siirsokakta on Twitter – a process that I will describe below in more detail.

3 Admin claims singular identity in the explanation post, but uses a plural subject pronoun when referring to themselves/themselves. I am not sure which one applies so I use both singular and plural, and singular only when necessary for clarity.

4 Denotes number of followers in thousands as shown in account information, 26 February 2017.

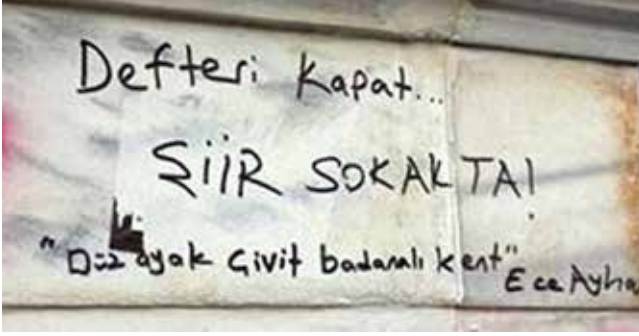


Fig. 5.4: Source: <http://bianet.org/biamag/sanat/155047-siirin-sokak-hali>. Accessed 24 January 2017.

Beyond popular rumour (both online and in person) and several online interviews with the anonymous owner(s), the soundest information we can gather on the movement relies on a pinned tweet (@siirsokakta; 31 October 2014)<sup>5</sup> which links to the introductory post on the İkinci Yeni Facebook page owned by Köçer, explaining the origins, inspirations and procedure of the practice. The ‘#siirsokakta movement’ as the user defines it, is directly related to the ‘La poésie est dans la rue!’ (‘Poetry is on the street!’) slogan of 1968 Paris and shares the ideological commitment to the importance of the street – its centrality and the liberating, transforming, healing impact on individual lives and society in general. ‘As a literary/poetry action’, as he explains, the movement itself represents ‘a unique practice’ that is not seen anywhere else. The integration of the digital and physical modalities which gives the movement its unique character is associated with the political context of its launch in the aftermath of the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013. The introductory text situates the beginning of the action in this context and acknowledges the first appearance of the slogan in Paris during the 1968 student demonstrations and again in 2013 at the entrance of the French Consulate General on Istiklal Street, in the early days of the protests that initiated around the Gezi Park dispute and spread nationwide. The slogan, in its Turkish translation, appeared together with fragments of poetry near Gezi Park and other places where protests took place (Figure 5.4).<sup>6</sup>

5 The pinned tweet was removed at the time this article was revised.

6 The first graffiti of ‘close the copybook, poetry is in the street’ in Turkish, in the early days of Gezi resistance commonly attributed to Rafet Arslan; Ozkul, Ozge, ‘Şiirin Sokak Hali’ <http://bianet.org/biamag/sanat/155047-siirin-sokak-hali>.

The explanatory text further emphasizes the widespread circulation of the slogan during the protests as an anonymous process, but claims creative rights over the ‘technique and methods’ that developed before 2013 and involved scribbling poetry in non-offensive, non-private, ‘acceptable’ social places ‘using pencils only’, ‘just like writing in a copybook’ in order to maintain the intimacy, charm, and ‘naïveté’ of poetry itself.

The Facebook page was opened in 2010 and the related Twitter account has been active since September 2013, which marks the beginning of the ongoing period of cultural translation and production around the themes, methods and alliances that were triggered by or came to light through the protests. The introduction emphasizes this aspect and states that quite naturally sprayed or scribbled poetry graffiti, even though much less visibly, preceded the movement. Still, the widespread practice during the protests had an impact on refining the concept and methods of the movement and presented these in an open call to ‘take over’, ‘beautify’, and liberate the streets with pen and poetry. The process is specifically described as ‘bringing neatly handwritten poetry to the streets’ using the hashtag ‘siirsokakta’, then photographing and sharing the graffiti image under the same hashtag on social media platforms. As the owner of the İkinci Yeni Facebook page, Köçer also claims creating the hashtag, opening the @siirsokakta Twitter and Facebook accounts and posting the open call for contributions on 3 September 2013.

The open call quoted in the introductory Facebook text explicitly describes the principles in bringing poetry to the streets and what qualifies as an acceptable place for this minimalistic graffiti style. While the literary emphasis on the original inspiration and concept of the movement is obvious, the scrutiny of methods and technique shows considerable attention to place, site-specific practice and generally a relational (Massey 2005) sense of place and placemaking. The attention to place also describes a territorial practice to reclaim the street and energize its potential through poetry to create a safe, healing, nurturing, therapeutic environment. As such, poetry itself (both content and form, together with the surprise element in seeing it somewhere other than the commodified, intimate, two-dimensional spatiality of books, copybooks, etc.) and making it public in low-key, unexpected places (such as banks or phone booths) are means of transforming the self and the street.

Despite the movement’s (and account owner’s) restrictions on supporting and/or digitally sharing poetry images written and/or sprayed on public buildings and private property, the practice is clearly visible on the streets and on online platforms dedicated to the practice.



Fig. 5.5: '#Kadıköy #ŞiirSokakta.' 24 February 2017, 07:34 A.M., Twitter.



Fig. 5.6: 'Bir çocuk demisi 🤗. #ŞiirSokakta.' 3 March 2017, 12:21 P.M., Twitter.



Fig. 5.7: 'Seni sevmek ölümse sprey bitti gülümse #siirsokakta.' 23 February 2017, 12:32 P.M., Twitter.

Even though some of these examples (Figures 5.6, 5.7) use the hashtag, it is harder to make sense of which one of the graffiti works seen in the street are associated with the movement, since the hashtag itself has also gained a life of its own and does not suggest an exclusive link to the movement when found in physical space. It should also be kept in mind that not all poetic graffiti (digital or physical, with or without the hashtag) can be understood in the context of the movement, given the anonymity of creators, the places and social media platforms on which they circulate.

Interestingly, alongside the general neglect of the practice within cultural geographic analyses of urban/digital activism and/or street art in Turkey, the movement has, to some extent, led to discussions in certain literary/poetry circles. The main arguments in the discussions involve criticisms against the movement for disrespecting poetry and poets, devaluing poetics both in form and content by reducing it to plagiarized and/or anonymized excerpts, and misspelled witty text or random graffiti, which I think is not

productive in terms of addressing the full range of intersections between the literary and place-related implications of the practice. As a street-based practice, poetic graffiti in major cities and towns exceeds the movement and the culturally productive context within which it developed, and, as I argue below, the practice has links to other local practices of the 'networked text' and forms of urban chat that have existed for a long time.

### **Walking Across Territories: Methods and Positionality**

Walking as a mobile, embodied method in social, cultural inquiry is key in explaining my transition from user (Kusenbach 2003; Pink 2015) to researcher/user in the process of the study. Walking is also an important feature of my personal history, as a preferred way of being mobile and navigating known and unknown places. My walks for hashtag graffiti can broadly be called psychogeographic, given the definition of the term as a curious exploration of the sensory, psychological and emotional contours of the built environment (Debord, 1956). As such, my wanderings were often not goal-oriented, except perhaps for a special sensory alertness to poetic graffiti and other forms of art and everyday enchantment (Smith, 2014; Bachelard, 1994) found in the streetscape.

Although graffiti is a sanctioned activity even in minimal form and, hence, temporary in nature, one can develop a sense for where to look for it, as a result of loosely regular and nonregulated visits in certain places. In my case, this meant having more or less regular walks mainly in Kadıköy and some of its surrounding residential neighbourhoods, such as Bostancı, and following the shoreline all the way to Maltepe. In time, my drifts became inevitably informed and influenced by my observations in terms of the location, style and content of the graffiti I encountered during my walks. As such, I included other destinations such as Sarıgazi, Çekmeköy, Üsküdar, Taksim and the coastal islands of Büyükada and Heybeliada in my list of places to visit, in order to make sense of the influence of the poetry graffiti in these diverse areas. Loosely travelling between these stretches of Istanbul also provided me with the opportunity to observe poetic graffiti in metro stations, bus seats, ferry windows, stray dog and cat shelters, carved on trees and rocks by the sea. As I gained knowledge of the specific surfaces and locales (streets, neighbourhoods) of scribbled, carved, sprayed poetry (together with individual creator styles – graffiti and poetic), I carried out additional walks to look at those places in more detail – to observe, for example, how long it takes until a certain graffiti is cleared by the authorities

and/or allowed by shopkeepers or property owners. As such, my walking practice transitioned towards a of mobile (walking/sensory) ethnography to make sense of the social perceptions and practices developing around the materiality of the writings in the streetscape.

Being mobile in the streets, looking for different and recurring styles or locations of poetic graffiti was also a process of encountering and immersing myself in the latest updates on the oral culture of the city. This was mostly evident in the adaptation of foreign (mostly English) words, Internet slang and contemporary colloquialism in the wider sense, presented through poetic adaptations of the everyday oral culture such as lyrics, slogans and idiomatic expressions. The common use of emojis and other digital signs in/around poetic graffiti also reflected an oral/visual attitude to the written form. Undoubtedly, both digital (and other) advertising and personal social media interaction in general have extensively influenced the relations between oral, written and visual cultures of the city, resulting in new moments in the motivation, means and actors of networked communication in a place. The influence of orality on poetic graffiti as a digital, physical means of networked communication among residents/visitors was generative in making sense of the socio-techno emergence of previous cultural forms and in better situating the poetic graffiti movement as a contemporary form of networked urban conversation with physical and online bases. As part of my data gathering, I looked for other examples in style and function in order to understand scribbled graffiti as a unique form of networked communication, with precedent in conversational, networked media such as Roman graffiti and 'truck poetry' in Turkey.<sup>7</sup> As I mentioned before, the social use and meaning of graffiti (art) are contextual. Roman graffiti is mostly textual, witty and humorous in content and informal in tone (Bagnall, 2012; Milnor, 2014). It is an important part of the visual order of the street and an important bridge between orality and everyday life and the textual narrative of the city. What I call 'truck poetry' is similarly a unique style of rhyming text that is plated, painted or sometimes stenciled on the back of a truck. The tone in these texts is sometimes religious but almost always informal, personal and humorous. A unique feature of popular culture and kitsch in Turkey, truck poetry has been widespread since the developmental shift to highway construction in the 1950s, enabled by the Marshall Plan. The process resulted in the extended construction of highway networks and

7 The practice possibly exists in other places. North India is one example; Ojha, Santosh, 'Trucks of North India: Poetry in Motion', Santosh Ojha's Weblog, 2009 <https://santoshojha.wordpress.com/2009/05/20/trucks-of-north-india-poetry-in-motion/>.

spread long-distance truck transport more or less evenly across the country. Trucks, as the vehicle of modernization and unprecedented geographical connectivity and technological innovation (together with the prestige, isolation and melancholic sentiments of the long-distance driver), were the ideal carriers of poetic, rhyming communication.<sup>8</sup> The placement of the writing on the back panel maintains anonymity as the viewer encounters the text. The truck itself is the ultimate symbol of mobility in machine form. The networked text of the truck is a passage between orality (understood as the everyday talk and more intimate aspirations of a certain working-class narrative) and the visual composition of the built environment through the visual presence and design of the poetic text.

Going back to the contemporary networked communication of poetic graffiti, the district municipality in Kadıköy commissions mural art and has launched campaigns since 2012,<sup>9</sup> following the global trend in local administrations' use of poetry in urban design and placemaking.<sup>10</sup> Depending on the retail and/or service provided, shops, cafes and bars in Kadıköy also favour the minimalistic style of poetic and witty-text graffiti as an interactive 'showcase' – to show their expected clientele that they are in 'the right place'. Other (domestic and commercial) residents in Kadıköy, on the other hand, find the practice 'disrespectful', 'ugly', and 'vandalism', and generally link the practice to their complaints about the intense transformation of the neighbourhood as a result of the ever-increasing political and popular restrictions on alcohol consumption, nightlife and alternative, political subcultures and diverse lifestyles in other central Istanbul districts. Poetic graffiti in other, mostly residential neighbourhoods and along the Kadıköy-Maltepe shoreline was mostly considered disrespectful and a 'harm to public and private property', but still 'better than other forms of vandalism' because it was 'at least' poetic, funny, and/or witty. In all the places I visited, poetic graffiti in its various forms was more widespread than the hashtag itself, which points to poetic graffiti's resonance with an existing base for networked communication between orality and visuality in the city.

8 At least until the ban of the practice in 2014 in line with the EU commerce law, <http://www.ntv.com.tr/galeri/yasam/kamyon-arkasi-yazilari-tarih-oluyor,jlaLifs-AUS5kY-FFuZpcg>. Accessed 7 March 2017.

9 'Kadıköy'de Duvarıda Sanat Var', 2015 <http://www.kadikoy.bel.tr/Haberler/kadikoydeduvarida-sanat-var>.

10 Boston's unseen pavement poetry and the 'Poems on the Underground' project in London are two popular examples.

When I was walking to map the flows and ruptures in poetic graffiti territories, I interacted with people, my phone (for taking photos and recording) and my notes. The difference in the embodied experience of mobility in walking the three-dimensional space of the street, compared to browsing the two-dimensional space of the screen is productive and important in terms of methods and the role of the body and the material, embodied experience of the research.

Drifting, both online and in physical space, is often a disrupted activity. Dealing with the various limits of access (to metadata or gated places, for example) requires different, sometimes incompatible, skills. There is little information on how to apply psychogeography as a method of social cultural inquiry to explore digital landscapes – especially as a way to identify its specific features other than or in the face of the predominant term ‘browsing’, which already captures the ‘curiosity led, less presumptuous and goal-oriented’<sup>11</sup> features common in both drifting and digital ‘surfing’. I was trespassing, photographing/recording in the surveilled space of the street, attending to the pace of my walk and duration of my stops to observe something: my regular appearance in a place all required interacting with owners, residents, and security personnel, as well as fellow passersby, which was often a positive and (even when negative) generally empowering experience. The limits of online ‘wandering’, on the other hand, were less flexible and required interactions with legal, computational and financial specialists, which generally required fewer on-site maneuvering skills. In methodological terms specifically for the study, an important difference between walking and digitally browsing the territories of poetic graffiti was the limited opportunity to focus vertically on an item of curiosity, beyond the ‘horizontally’ indefinite layer of user interfaces – mostly due to the different skills, software and protocols necessary to have access to digital phenomena on the metadata level.

The evolving history, social use, meaning and space of Twitter in Turkey form a key element of the political (and technological) context in which the poetry graffiti movement came into being as a multimodal grassroots practice since its early beginnings. A small detour is necessary here, in order to present a snapshot of the techno-political context of social media, and of Twitter in particular, in Turkey. Online platforms are embedded in the political, economic and social relations that result from their multiple and shifting use and cultural meaning.

11 Kaganskiy, Julia, An Xiao, and Kevin Sweeney, ‘E-Derive: Psychogeography and the Digital Landscape,’ <https://de.slideshare.net/anxiaostudio/ederive-ppt>. Accessed 3 July 2017.



Turkey is an active scene for social media, namely for Facebook and Twitter (and, more recently, WhatsApp<sup>12</sup>), where smartphones<sup>13</sup> are the primary devices of online connectivity. Since the initial limitations on social media in 2007, imposed by the ruling AKP, digital bans and censorship have increased to date. Social media are often used as a political battlefield both by the ruling elites and their supporting masses. 2013 is commonly regarded as a turning point for Turkey's experience with social media, and with Twitter in specific, which had already gained publicity thanks to its extensive use in Tahrir Square. During the Gezi protests, Twitter served different purposes, including that of real-time news feed and, most importantly, as a means of making clear the self-censorship within mainstream media. Twitter's architecture, namely hashtags and limited text, enabled easy and accessible international spread and following of the news and events. It also supported users (protesters and supporters) as a navigation and networking tool to share and update real-time location, services and needs. Twitter was also intensively used for knowledge exchange, such as by sharing technical information on bypassing digital bans, platforms to share and stream footage, and also passing on on-site medical, legal and other safety and security information.<sup>14</sup>

My own engagement with poetic graffiti and its social media presence also has a history that needs to be described in order to explain the different phases, iterations and strategies of this research. I have been a collector of graffiti images in Istanbul long before the call for the 'poetry is in the street' movement became public. I have also followed the digital platforms of the movement both on Facebook and Twitter since its popularization in the aftermath of the Gezi resistance in 2013. Although I have never contributed images on the movement's platforms myself, it was an exciting opportunity to view and engage in the public domain created around the hashtag graffiti images that were of personal interest on Facebook and Twitter. As I traced poetic graffiti in Istanbul during multiple visits between 2013 and 2016, I also followed the online platforms, including the comments, captions and related hashtags posted by other users. The variety of digital graffiti images and the site-specific elements in their composition were much fewer than what I saw and experienced in the street. Most hashtag images visually focused

12 Because of the ad-hoc ban of social media, WhatsApp has become a news source where small and large groups have formed to share news feeds.

13 30 percent of the total population have a mobile subscription and half of the population have Internet access (Dogramaci and Radcliffe 2015).

14 With continued bans and restrictions on its accessibility, Twitter was declared a 'menace' by President Erdogan in 2013.



Fig. 5.8: '#ŞiirSokakta Sev Ama Bağlanma Canın Yanar... (!)'. 23 February 2017, 05:09 A.M., Twitter.

on the poem and lacked depth, which is a key element in making sense of place in the two-dimensional space of the photograph and the digital screen on which it is viewed (Figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.7). The basic editing features of camera phones on which these images are typically shot enable a unique aesthetic of poetry-images as they become the zoomed in, cropped (from unwanted elements, including other nearby graffiti), filtered, framed and enhanced versions of the original wall scribblings – possibly worthy of the digital presence of the contributor and the beauty and dignity of the poem being shared. I should also note that, with the extensive global trends in digital (image-based) poetry, especially on Instagram, but also on Twitter and digital graffiti applications, some of the hashtag poetry images are virtual or hybrid creations (Figure 5.8).

The evolving scholarship on the digital platforms of graffiti production and exchange mainly focusses on online games and applications as sources of virtual graffiti (MacDowall, 2008). The main contribution of this body of scholarship to my understanding of the multimodality of poetic graffiti

is its emphasis on the transition of graffiti writing from ‘concrete to data’<sup>15</sup> (MacDowall, 2008; Honig and MacDowall, 2016) and the impact of this transition on shaping the audiences and users of graffiti, public space and poetry.

Despite the predominant style of ‘text-only’ hashtag images, there are also styles in which the image is carefully composed by including place elements to give a sense of the act itself, by making explicit where the graffiti was made or found, i.e. the beauty/importance/private ownership of the place and the difficulty of the technique (Is the graffiti too big or small? Is it carved or sprayed?). Another line of compositional emphasis is when the graffiti poem is found using previous graffiti, ad posters or the lettering on shop signs. Similarly, using place as a ‘backdrop’ for the poem, such as framing the poem-image in a way that emphasizes the site, heightens the sensory impact of its placement (Figures 5.9, 5.10 and 5.11). Reiterating the sensory link between place, graffiti and tagging, I also observed that it was more common to include #siirsokakta in physical space in these richly composed photography styles, while the hashtag was loosely included in the text-only images.

The textual narrative around the graffiti-image uploads include comments, hashtags and captions. Comments typically include literary and political commentary and propaganda, as well as brief personal conversations among users. The content in comments also includes forms of digital vandalism through the use of emojis, digital slang and verbal abuse. Following the conversations growing around the hashtag, I found out about the diversity of ideas and interests expressed by both regular and occasional members of the online community. In this actively contributed online network, I could observe typical use of the community as a marketing and publicity base for related (books, magazines, blogs, websites, social campaigns) and unrelated (clothing, beauty and self-care) commodities and services. As I mentioned above, graffiti in physical space was also commodified in order to target a specific clientele. Still, in the case of physical space, I could observe more visible ties between the graffiti and the kind of goods and services associated with either the practice of graffiti in broad sense and/or the political, literary and artistic ideas around the movement.

Positionality means the continuous practice of critically reflecting on the processes of knowledge production and clear communication of the relationship of researcher to research phenomena. In my case, as my original viewer/user status on the online platforms shifted towards a more deliberate

15 ‘Concrete to data’ is the title of an exhibit on the techniques, styles, methods and contexts of street art and graffiti from the 1970s to contemporary new, digital media. The online exhibition is available at <http://www.concretetodata.com/gallery/>.



Fig. 5.9: 'Hafta sonu kadrajına sokaktan ses verdik #şiirsokakta #şiirdenizde..❤️❤️💬💬🌊' 23 February 2017, 06:23 A.M., Twitter.



Fig. 5.10: '#HasanHüseyiKorkmazgil #şiirsokakta', 26 February 09:02 A.M., Twitter.



Fig. 5.11: 'Ama unutma, taş duvarlar arasında karanlığımın senden başka penceresi yok...#SabahattinAli #SiirSokakta.' 27 February 2017, 02:47 P.M., Twitter.

interest to understand the different 'lives' of graffiti and the hashtag on the sidewalk and on Twitter, my involvement became participatory in nature. From an ethnographic point of view, the shift provided me with the advantages of anonymous and unobtrusive presence on the platform. My interpretation of the digital facet of the graffiti movement was informed by the emphasis on the embodied and material processes in which text-images were photographed, viewed, posted, liked, shared and commented. This position is inspired by recent scholarship into the uses of social media aiming to understand the dynamic relationship between the sociality around digital objects (Rose, 2016) and the significance of the medium-specific conditions of their production, circulation and reception (MacDowall, 2008). Since 2015, I have used commercial and free online hashtag trackers randomly in order to get (often weekly) statistics on user profiles, location and time of Twitter posts with the #şiirsokakta hashtag. Tracking the hashtag, even

partially, I could get a sense of the particular ways in which the production and consumption of poetic graffiti images were shaped by the privacy protocols, application features and uses of Twitter beyond the user interface.

Based on the weekly 'snapshots', I could see that the gender profile (based on self-declared profile information) of platform users differed with no sign of consistent consecutive majority of male or female users. Twitter data differentiates individual tweets and retweets but does not help to identify the image source – when and where the image was originally taken. The major finding from digitally gathered data brought together with data gathered during the walks was that the locations from where the images were posted online differed significantly from the places where #siirsokakta graffiti was most frequent, such as in Kadıköy. A significant number of geotagged posts were consistently from the (mostly newly developed) residential suburbs, such as Basaksehir, Kurtköy and Cekmeköy. Sharing poetic graffiti using the hashtag suggests a relationship to the movement that is, beyond poetry fandom, a means to establish ties with the political and aesthetic territory of the movement, in contrast to the newly developing, highly surveilled and often gated physical setting of the present location.

### **#siirsokakta, an Ode to Poetry, Place, Both?**

The street as the place for poetry, 'subversive and naked', clearly points to a vision of art with close ties to the Situationist idea of breaking down the boundaries between art(ists) and general public (consumers), and eventually merging cultural production with everyday life. In this understanding, the street eventually becomes the walk-in artistic territory that will both abolish the subsuming of art (poetry) in networks of consumerism and commodification (e.g. corporate publishing), while contributing to social justice by transforming the everyday through the liberating effects of poetry. The digital dimension of the practice both enhances the idea and experience of the street and its territoriality by an anonymous community evolving around the networked image.

In answering the question in the title of this section, I would like to zoom in on the influences of the content, theme and style that have given the movement its unique aesthetic and expression in physically and digitally networked space. One would assume that, with such explicit aspirations to re-territorialize the street as an emancipatory place by converging the public with the artistic, the content of the poems scribbled under the hashtag or the main concerns of the digital community gathering around the networked

graffiti image would reflect this motivation. The widespread appearance of social justice themed (broadly defined) poems by poets such as Nazim Hikmet, anonymous witty texts and other poetic graffiti (e.g. slogans and found poems) under the movement's hashtag may validate this expectation. However, it is not possible to speak of issues of politics and social justice as predominant and central themes, directly addressed in the poetic graffiti of the movement. Especially not in a way comparable to the political poetry graffiti found elsewhere in the world, i.e. in/around places of political protest and violence, such as Tahrir Square and Gezi Park or Athens and Tel Aviv, where the themes are often directly related to the experiences of the event and/or the social justice issues that led to it (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi, 2017). The #siirsokakta content is also different from other examples of political graffiti in poetry form, such as the witty and humorous election propaganda verse of 'dewal-likhon' (wall writing) in India.<sup>16</sup>

The 'poetry is in the street' content is mostly identified with the poetics of the 'İkinci yeni' (Second New) movement in Turkish poetry of the 1950-70s. This is due to the original Facebook page titled 'İkinci yeni', from which the hashtag and the open call for contributions were published. The page was originally a platform for poetry fans to share and comment primarily on Second New but also other poetry, poet biographies, photos and other related content. To an extent, it still serves this purpose, in addition to the posts relating to the 'poetry is on the street' images and the rare appearance of hashtagged images, since the movement has its own dedicated platform on Twitter.

The full range of the characteristics and history of the Second New in relation to the preceding traditions and movements in Turkish language poetry are beyond the scope of this chapter. Still, it is important to note that 'İkinci yeni', or the 'Second wave of Turkish avant-garde poetics' (after the first wave of Garips) (Messo, 2009: 11) developed in a period of social and political unrest during Turkey's transition to democracy in the 1950s. The literary movement is best described as an individualistic turn characterized by an escape from the clarity in meaning and use of direct everyday language. Works identified with it rely heavily on dark, eerie and disturbing yet sometimes humorous imagery. Having close ties with Surrealism and Dadaism, Second New poetry abstracts meaning from everyday phenomena into a dreamlike state of subjective expression. Going back to the graffiti

16 Online examples of 'dewal likhon' with English captions and/or descriptions are mostly available in personal, travel blogs. See, for example, <http://www.sayonkumarsaha.com/tag/deowal-likhon/> for political graffiti images from Calcutta with descriptive notes in English.

movement's emphasis on the liberating, healing, therapeutic effects of poetry, as it circulates in the physical space of the street as a territorial marker, poetry creates different, 'better' places and interactions within and enabled by this new street spatiality. The spatial aspect, that is, the surprise element of encountering poetry and the visual presence of poetic text in unexpected corners of the street, together with their fleeting, temporary nature that results from the restrictions on graffiti in public space, contribute to this affective territoriality of the street – i.e. of feeling better, doing better and eventually becoming better. The styles and influences within the movement's poetics contribute to making this renewed space and these (social and interpersonal) relations possible. Widely graffitied Second New poets such as Ece Ayhan and Turgut Uyar, as well as the rich imagery, clear language and everyday life themed verse by Nazım Hikmet, Ahmed Arif, and Orhan Veli, depict a poetic communication and hashtag territory of the movement that cuts across style, form and content. Still, the connecting tissue between much of the poets whose works appear in hashtag graffiti is a strong commitment to the immediacy of everyday phenomena in terms of things, places and people – which, overall, reiterates the Situationist idea of making poetry public while simultaneously making public space through poetry. The resulting narrative is one in which the political and artistic are personal and sensory and rooted in the everyday and site-specific exploration of the streetscape. Anchored in the self and the subjective experience of the outside world, #siirsokakta poetry provides an affective and site-specific gateway into the array of possibilities of what that world may be(come). Street poetry in the context of this movement is a sensory layer of interactive, emplaced intimacy (Pink, 2015), mapped onto the increasingly violent and surveilled physical texture and visuality of the street.

## Conclusion

The city has always been an important source of poetry. The role of poetry in shifting and consolidating the identity, use and general social and emotional contours of the streetscape is also valid, given the increased use and publicity of commissioned and independent, grassroots, activist street poetry, walking poetry tours, and (re)naming of streets after poems, poets or literary characters as sensory means of 'curating public space' (Moore, 2015). Drawing mainly from perspectives from cultural geography, ethnography and multidisciplinary scholarship in new media studies, this

study explored the flow of poetic graffiti in the street in the face of the flow of digital photography in online platforms. Graffiti, whether text- or image-based, is first and foremost encountered visually; words are visually present both in place and in the networked image. Poetic graffiti is also always first found or seen 'somewhere', hence it denotes place. This initial location then fragments and connects the viewer to other layers inferred subjectively by sensory processing of style and content. In other words, the affective space of poetic graffiti defers location by layering it.

In this chapter, I examined the relationship between place and poetry in terms of the social life of poetic graffiti around the #siirsokakta movement and the affective digitally extended sociality evolving around it. The analysis is based on fragments of the life of the hashtag #siirsokakta and poetic graffiti in Istanbul. A visual analysis of all available hashtag data would provide a panel view of its multiple lives in different cities and towns, allowing for a comparative digital base for further cultural geographic examination of various competing or overlapping affective territories and place narratives.

Relying on an embodied, place- and medium-specific methodology, together with a focus on my shifting positionality throughout the process, my analysis of visual and textual data contextualized the materiality of the production and circulation of graffiti, amateur images and online narratives to examine these intersecting spheres beyond the interpretive plane of representation. The overall network of social and material relations around poetic graffiti presented a multimodal sketch of street visibility through literature, image production, (physical and online) placemaking and social networking. Finally, the study identified poetic graffiti images as a unique subgenre of both amateur personal photography and a form of virtual graffiti, which opens up productive ways of thinking about the evolving technologies of urban visualization and their significance in the multimodal mass circulation of idea(l)s in and on place.

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# Part 2

## Navigating Urban Data Flows



## 6. Situated Installations for Urban Data Visualization: Interfacing the Archive-City

*Nanna Verhoeff and Karin van Es*

### Abstract

We propose a set of analytical concepts that help analyse how media/interfaces situate us within our cities and in connection with the invisible digital data that surround us. We recognize a set of architectural, cartographic and archaeological principles that structure the way the interfaces allow us to navigate the city as an emergent and layered data archive. These concepts help us investigate how interfaces not only communicate data as information, but, more importantly, structure, if not control, our agency within the visual regime that they sustain. Moreover, they help to understand and articulate how creative and critical artistic practices in the spaces of our cities contribute to public debates about the significance of digital data in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** data; visualization; archive; urban interfaces; installation; performative archaeology

The world is becoming increasingly 'datafied' as all aspects of life previously unquantified are now being translated into digital data (Van Es & Schäfer, 2017; Cukier and Schönberger, 2013). So-called *Big Data* have the capacity to reveal information about the past and to inform the future. The open data movement argues that data is a public good and seeks to democratize the production of information and knowledge. The access and reusability of public information, it is argued, allows for the public scrutiny of institutions and stimulates informed and active citizen participation. The challenge facing this movement is that data must not only be made *accessible*, but also

*understandable*. Data visualizations are commonly used to make sense of data and to communicate that sense (Kitchin, 2014: 106). Urban dashboards, for instance, 'render a city's infrastructures visible and make tangible, or in some way comprehensible, various hard-to-grasp aspects of urban quality-of-life' (Mattern, 2015). Art projects, on the other hand, experiment even more explicitly and reflexively, sometimes critically, with the possibilities for visualizing and layering data within (and 'onto') the physical environment from which it emanates, with the aim to create awareness and activate citizen participation around urban challenges (Brynskov, Galsgaard and Halskov, 2015; Vande Moere and Hill, 2012; Wiethoff and Hussmann, eds., 2017).

In the following we will take up their suggestion to reflect on, precisely, the questions these experimentations raise: How do these situated, sometimes architectural, media installations provide us with interfaces for exploring pervasive and emerging urban data? We depart from a perspective on the city as an ever-expanding source of all sorts of data, to address the fact that they are simultaneously historically situated and emergent. Herein we investigate the principles of making visible this urban archive on location and in real time. These principles are made manifest by exploring the data visualization experiment *Deep City*, an example of a project that explicitly works with the affordances as well as the limitations of networked and geo-locative technologies and the (cultural) interfaces that we use to connect to, reconstruct, or perform the urban archive.

Rather than an aesthetic analysis or review of the criticality or effectiveness of the project, our aim is to propose an analytical approach to the spatiotemporal design of the work as an interface that structures these data with local, urban publics. This approach, as we will expand on below, is useful for a comparative perspective on situated installations, urban screens or media architecture. In other words, we use this project not only as an object to think about, but also an object to think *with* (Verhoeff and Wilmott, 2016).<sup>1</sup> We explore the way the historical layering of urban space can be considered as being activated, if not visualized in the sense of 'made visible' by the principle of navigation – whether or not by means of location-based interfaces. This perspective of the city as a spatially distributed and historically layered archive pushes out the more conventional idea of an archive as a spatially demarcated, heterotopic repository of the past, and re-evaluates it as situated,

1 Our idea of an object to 'think with' is meant in a slightly different way than in Sherry Turkle's proposal (2007). Rather than focusing on the relationship between material objects as provoking thoughts and affects, we have an analytical aim. Here, the installation as 'object' is a situated practice that raises theoretical questions about its *operation* rather than its thingness.

present and future-oriented. In other words, we argue that these interfaces are simultaneously architectural, cartographic and archaeological in how they, respectively, design and structure space, organize mobility and make accessible the city as a navigable, location-based and emergent archive by establishing dynamic relations between subject, time and place.

## The City as Layered Data Archive

Thinking of the modern city as a navigable archive has a history. Walter Benjamin's flâneur walked the streets without a fixed, geographical destination; a navigation without end point, but with a purpose: to understand the metropolis on its own terms, collecting both *from* and *towards* an ongoing (forever 'unfinished') urban archive. Usually this is understood in terms of pastness and memory. Mike Featherstone (2006) invokes the fragmented and inherently fugitive nature of Benjamin's city as archive:

For Benjamin the city was an archive, an archive already in ruins, in which the minutiae of everyday life (the decorations on buildings, ironwork, street signs, advertising bills, posters, window displays, etc.) all have the capacity to speak. Yet these fragments could only speak the language of broken, incomplete allegories, *summoning up half-formed memories which appeared vividly as in a lightening flash and then were gone.* (594-595, our emphasis)

Todd Presner, David Shepard and Yoh Kawano (2014) call the Benjaminian flâneur a 'time traveller' (23). In their words, in the city's streets:

[...] the past is always there – quiet, muted, faded, hidden – and it is the task of the flâneur to enable it to speak, to make it come alive and come to light, and thereby resonate with the present. In this sense, the past must be conjured, awakened, and cared for. (Presner, Shepard and Kawano, 2014: 23)

This figure, or rather, the navigator as conjurer of the past, 'summoning up' memories (as Featherstone phrases it) is, however, not only of 'other' times, but emphatically takes place in the present and points towards a future. As navigable and layered, this archive-city is ever-expanding – both geographically and historically – in a synchronic and diachronic layering. Presner, Shepard and Kawano (2014) speak about *HyperCities* and what they call 'thick mapping', as a model to think about cities' multitude of expanding and changing (rhizomatic) configurations of past, present and future.



Vyjayanthi Rao (2009), inspired by Georg Simmel's seminal writing on the city in 'The Metropolis and Modern Life' (1903), also tackles this implication of approaching the contemporary city as an ever-expanding archive. From Simmel's understanding of the metropolis as *medium*, Rao points out how the archive is emergent and orders 'stimuli upon which future transactions are imagined and made present rather than a given notion of the past that has been deemed significant and marked for preservation' (Rao, 2009: 374). This is particularly relevant in the case of current urban culture with the ubiquitous presence of ephemeral, invisible and continuous flows of all sorts of (digital) data. As we aim to unpack in this essay, this connectivity between the present and past – conjured up and curated, or 'cared for' – is very much where the *futurity* of (urban) navigation lies (Verhoeff, 2012).

Indeed, through projects of locative data visualization such as *Deep City*, we are reminded of the emergent and situated character of data itself, as produced by our activities in the world. As boyd and Crawford state, this entails 'massive quantities of information produced by and about people, things, and their interactions' (2012: 663). This is where the project of data visualization meets the performative potential of locative, interactive media: making urban, public data public in public spaces. In the media city (McQuire, 2008) we produce data continuously, captured and stored in expanding data sets. A spatial archive, the city is perhaps best conceived of as an emergent data repository, permanently in flux.

To investigate how this relationship between past and future works in the streets of the city, we are interested in the way media installations as situated (urban) interfaces for visualizing urban data are designed to bring the multiple layers in connection, to make them navigable. Indeed, when we think of the archive as a continuous effort to collect, order and preserve with the goal of making (future) access and visibility possible, we are reminded that the archive is very much *of* and *about* the present, as well as about presence – a presence that is fugitive by definition, which brings in its wake both a historicity and a futurity. A perspective of the city as archive suggests that the city is both a navigable and fundamentally layered space. Moreover, it suggests that our 'being in the city' is constitutive of an (ongoing) act of *presencing* – of ourselves within and in relation to these layers.<sup>2</sup> In this process of interfacing between ourselves, our urban surroundings and with data layered locations, we recognize architectural, archaeological and

2 Brendan Hookway (2014) emphasizes this presencing as the working of interfaces (8). We can consider the street as a navigable interface to the urban archive – an urban interface.

cartographic principles. These principles, we argue, govern the way the interface design allows for urban publics to engage with the data that are made visible and, hence, present by these works.

### The Architectural: *Deep City* as Visualization Zone

*Deep City* is an urban data visualization experiment presented at the Ars Electronica festival in Linz and was developed for the 2015 programme of *Visible Cities* by Ursula Feuersinger. The four sides of the Ars Electronica Center were used to visualize the tension among inhabitants, activities and resources in Linz, Vienna, Berlin and New York. These findings were based on the following eight statistical data sets grouped in pairs: Growth/Diversity, Green Spaces/Bike Paths, Water Usage/Waste, and Density/Noise Exposure.<sup>3</sup> They were gathered in a console in front of the building that visitors could navigate (see Figure 6.1) using a wheel for scrolling through data sets and a cube that allows for switching between cities.

Data art is said to be about making the invisible visible (Grugier, 2016). Indeed, Feuersinger articulates the ambition to, in her words, ‘visualize’ and ‘bring to the surface hidden layers of data’, about remote urban spaces.<sup>4</sup> It makes visible the ‘hidden’ layers of the urban archive, uses a multiplicity of data sources and situates its readings in a vociferous terrain of polyvocal citations. Here, however, ‘urban data’ is displayed on a media architecture in the urban context. The curators of *Deep City* advocate a role for architectural façades and urban screens as ‘black boards’ and ‘visualization zones’ for information.<sup>5</sup> They ask:

How can we make social, environmental and intercultural processes visible and use the screens as black boards and visualization zones? What is the impact on the society, when invisible structures that underlie our daily life get visualised? What is the potential to create public awareness?<sup>6</sup>

3 In email correspondence (June 2016), the artist explained that she tried to find the latest, most correct and comparable data for the topics and cities, which proved difficult and not always successful. However, it was always her main ambition to create playful and engaging public experiences, rather than scientifically sound visualizations.

4 For an interview with the artist, see <https://ars.electronica.art/futurelab/en/project/connecting-cities-european-network-media-facades>.

5 For a discussion of urban screens as visualization zones for the city’s invisible communication sphere, see Struppek (2011).

6 <http://www.connectingcities.net/city-vision/visible-city-2015>



Fig. 6.1: The lit up façade mirrors the colours and image on the smaller display at the console, showing the greens spaces in Berlin. Image: Ursula Feuersinger.

*Deep City* is a time-based visualization of urban processes, using the façade as ‘visualization zone’. As media architecture, the installation visualizes the urban archive by working with access and display. It is thought that the public visualization of situated and contextual information can create actionable understanding among citizens for urban issues (Vande Moere and Hill, 2012). The digital traces of the city, previously invisible, are made visible and even tangible on this façade, which functions as an interface to the data sets of the city. As Mitchell Whitelaw states about data art, ‘It draws data out, makes it explicit, literally provides it with an image’ (2008, np).

As a material structure, the installation is layered. Not only materially and spatially but also temporally, in the sense that it is both relatively permanent and radically temporary. It borrows its permanency – as far as buildings ever are permanent – from the pre-existing interactive LED façade of the Ars Electronica Center. At the same time, it is temporary because of the fact that it is one of many projects designed to change the mutable surface of this one façade. This temporality is also captured in the above quoted reference to screens and media architecture as reusable writing surfaces.

But more importantly than this architectural layering, the project is fundamentally *about* layering: the (invisible) layering of urban space by the data we generate by living in it. Difficult, perhaps impossible to itself be *archived* for its own radical temporality, this installation aims to visualize, and, as we claim, thereby to *perform* the archival. According to the artist, the project ‘investigates the collective information that defines the city’s

present and potential future through a data visualization experiment'.<sup>7</sup> She proposes the metaphor of archaeology for the endeavour to visualize the urban archive. To quote at length:

Just as a city's history can be uncovered by an *archeological dig*, the collective information that defines its present and potential future can be represented as a digital cross-section, emerging from underneath its concrete, *visible structures*. The Ars Electronica Center façade will put these underground samples on display: Observers of the project transform into *participants by physically extracting* hidden artefacts from the deep, bringing them to the surface, and examining them. The resulting layers of visualized data emphasize various political, sociological, cultural, or even personal characteristics of an urban space, encouraging the inhabitants of that space to critically engage with their surroundings.<sup>8</sup> (our emphasis)

In these somewhat ambitious terms, the underlying premise seems to be that interactive, visual technologies enable a form of (physical) contact with data. But perhaps more pertinent to our inquiry here, these words also suggest that this form of contact is essential to the act of visualization itself.

### The Cartographic: Navigational Engagement with Data

Data mapping, the process of visually representing data, is an inherently political process and involves questions about who has the power to select how to map, what dimensions to include, and through what interface to give users access (Manovich, 2002). The cartographic principle of interactive installations is inherent in the way they structure spatial relationships and navigation for the engaging subject (Verhoeff, Cooley and Zwicker, 2017). Our take on this cartographic principle of interactive installations is focused on this organization, or scripting of the subject's engagement with data, as first and foremost a matter of access to data and agency in this process.

In his writing on interfaces, Daniel Chamberlain (2011) reminds us of Norman Klein's critical reading of exhaustively planned physical environments as scripted spaces. Chamberlain adopts Klein's terminology for his analysis

7 From the announcement of Ars Electronica's Future Lab, 2015, available at <http://www.aec.at/futurelab/en/project/connecting-cities-european-network-media-facades>. See also <http://www.aec.at/postcity/en/deep-city/> for a video impression of the project.

8 <http://connectingcities.net/project/deep-city>

of media interfaces, which establish what he calls interactive scripted spaces that provide users with predetermined parameters of access to data, to 'frame the contemporary cultural and economic implications of emergent media technologies' (2011: 239). Andersen and Pold (2011) use the term scripted space in their work too, albeit more explicitly in reference to ubiquitous computing in urban spaces:

Besides being a continuation of the ways urban space has been planned, scripted space also has a more contemporary dimension which is linked to the computer. Scripted space has a non-visual, coded, encrypted side to it and suggests that there are computed transactions and control structures behind the facade, surface, or interface of the city. (112)

The perhaps restricting cartographic principles of the interface – here, installation – in its structuring and delimiting of access and agency work towards not only a form of mapping, but thereby also a scripting of the terrain of navigation.

We can recognize a scripting at work in the installation of *Deep City* in how the interface distributes agency in the urban archive. The artist as curator has compiled and organized the data to be used as input for the visualization, selecting from attributes of the city that have been captured in data sets. She furthermore paired data sets with the intent of contrasting their elements. Unlike projects that use (or approximate) real-time data streaming, in this case the data sets are fixed, stored 'in' the apparatus. The material and spatial arrangement comprises a separate-but-connected terminal or console, by means of which the participants can browse and select data sets and can have some input in what is shown on the façade. The console incorporates two interaction elements for participants: a wheel that facilitates browsing through colour-coded topological layers and a 3D-printed cube to switch between the content of different cities. They can 'engage' by playful, exploratory browsing, combining and comparing data sets from different cities and thereby composing a colourful show of lights on the building's façade.

As such, it invites local urbanites as passing and *distant observers* to become more *attentive* to their surroundings – and for those within reach of the installation's console to even become active engagers. Here, we encounter the urban archaeologists on their dig. Strictly speaking, browsing the data through a crank does not make the interactors *co-creators* of the visualization. At most, they can select input for the algorithms that select and process the social and personal data 'below the surface' (as Feuersinger phrased it)

to translate these data sets as input for the project's 'visualization zone' at the surface. The console operates as a black box concealing the processes in between input and output for participants. Moreover, not all city dwellers can take part in the action – take a place, literally, 'behind the wheel' or 'at the console' to produce the view. For most, it remains a distant spectacle.

However, the installation does suggest you can, in principle, become a *co-performer* of the *act* of visualization. Even if just playful, temporary or literally 'eventful', the project taps into current debates about what Rob Kitchin (2014) has called the 'data revolution': the changing landscape of ownership of, and shared access to data, new forms of participatory engagement and smart technologies becoming more and more embedded in the materials, design and infrastructures of our cities. Indeed, the rhetoric of big data, individual agency and civic participation in the self-presentation by the artist emphasizes how this project is a sign, or a Foucauldian *monument*, of its time.

## The Archaeological: Visualization as Installation

Feuersinger discloses that one of the main points on her agenda with *Deep City* is to make people aware of their direct connection to the city and the data through this installation.<sup>9</sup> She reflects on the affective dimension of the installation and how the data is made no longer to be just 'cold, impersonal numbers'. Its goal as such is what Kim and DiSalvo (2010) would call *artistic* rather than *pragmatic*, raising awareness of the city as a data archive, rather than providing access to its information. Where Lev Manovich (2002) critically asks how data visualization art can aim 'to represent the personal subjective experience of a person living in a data society' (np), we find that *Deep City* suggests that visualization is less about *representation*, than it is about *performativity*.

In the very act of making visible, data becomes a spectacle. Indeed, the question is: Can the observer actually *read* this spectacle she conjures by flipping a switch or turning a wheel? In addressing this question, it becomes relevant to recall the important, but often overlooked, distinction between data and information. The former is the meaning derived from the latter in a given context (Whitelaw, 2008, np). The spectator at the console can browse the data to perform *data-as-information*. What is put on display may be visible, but does not facilitate 'actionable information' (Weinberger, 2011).

9 <http://www.aec.at/aeblog/en/2015/03/26/die-sichtbarmachung-des-unsichtbaren/>

However, it potentially triggers an affective response and arouses curiosity, or awareness of the big data that, while usually invisible, pervades the city. More fundamentally, this façade as screen demonstrates the differences and tensions between ‘input’ and ‘output’; and between ‘observation’ and ‘knowledge’.

The fact that this project invites individual playful interactions, but as ‘visualization zone’ for data also becomes a fugitive, distant spectacle, raises some questions that are specifically relevant for the investigation of these works as urban interfaces. Access in the form of a visual display, in this installation, both reveals and problematizes the possibilities for, and limitations of shared and open access to big data for exploration, examination and analysis. The impact of visualization, its potential both to create awareness and (subsequently) meet the ideals of civic participation is not straightforward. Indeed, upon closer inspection, we can see how, as an experimental project, *Deep City* affirms and questions the impact of visibility. Its most urgent questions, as we have seen above, are directed at *agency*, *comprehensibility* and *actionability*.

Perhaps *Deep City* does not so much provide access to (in the words of the artist) the ‘layers of visualized data’ that are ‘hidden’ in cities, but more importantly demonstrates the sheer fact that these can be made visible and that it can connect them to – make them navigable for – the city dwellers. In other words, it visualizes (the act of) visualization. As such, it *does* what it says – which is the classical definition of performativity as J.L. Austin proposes in his seminal work *How to Do Things with Words* (1975), or, as we can add: with other kinds of signs. Following that logic, however, it also implies that the work does not do what the artist proposed when we equate access to actionability.<sup>10</sup> It exposes the *fact* of data rather than the *meaning* of data.

## Triangulating City, Data, and Subject

These architectural, cartographic and archaeological principles – all three in an emphatically performative gesture – not only make visible, but also put ‘into place’ the digital data that surrounds us and set the parameters for the urban spectator to engage with these data. As such, installations as interfaces to urban data, not only visualize, but also situate both these data and the urban subject. We propose to look at how we may utilize

10 This actionability is how citizens are made to feel a sense of responsibility towards place, encouraging ‘place-making’ (Vande Moere and Hill, 2012: 27).

this perspective for distinguishing different relationships between data, subject, and city as constructed by other artistic and creative projects of data visualization that aim to raise awareness around local, urban issues. These projects all put forward, albeit in different ways, the triangulation at the heart of this relationship between data, subject and city. They help to probe how interfacing is a useful concept for thinking about how this type of installation works. The varieties in this triangulation produced by these different interfaces – or, better, acts of interfacing – demonstrate not only the city as archive, but, perhaps more importantly, how we are positioned and navigate within our complex and layered environment.<sup>11</sup>

*Deep City* is a good example of what Vande Moere and Hill (2012) refer to as physical and situated visualizations. It demonstrates how data made visible within the environment directly reflects the environment. Vande Moere and Hill contrast physical and situated visualizations to projects where screens, websites or smartphone apps are used to interface with data sets in a virtual elsewhere (2012: 29). For us, the interest lies not in the potential persuasive power of this relationship, as is their primary concern, but rather in the questions raised by these configurations about access to the layers of data that constitute the urban archive.

To follow up on our suggestion for a comparative approach to the broader category of situated urban installations, we want to bring in additional projects and reflect on how they interface the archive-city. In addition to the way *Deep City* projects and visualizes, we identify two complementary, yet very different, interfaces that nonetheless also demonstrate the (latent) architectural, cartographic and archaeological principles of *interfacing*: wayshowing and sensing.<sup>12</sup> In other words, this comparative approach highlights not only the acts of interfacing, but also what is produced in the process. Both these interfaces facilitate and structure the relation between data, subject and city in a distinct way and brings forward the translations that occur between the 'lived' and 'abstracted' archive, making the city sensible to the subject.<sup>13</sup>

11 This potential messiness of the 'sea of data' makes us navigators – an aim of data visualization to make sense of the abundance and potential illegibility of data is precisely to makes sense and 'clear paths', and perhaps even protect, or, as Shannon Mattern (2015) has pointed out in the case of urban dashboards, the history of keeping out the 'dirt' (np).

12 These have been oversimplified and are by no means exhaustive, but reflect general tendencies to organize relations between data, subject and city.

13 We here draw on the definition of the interface by Steven Johnson: 'the interface serves as a kind of translator, mediating between the two parties, making one sensible to the other' (1997: 14).



## Wayshowing

The *White Spots App* (2016), developed by Richard Vijgen in collaboration with Bregtje van der Haak and Jacqueline Hassink offers a critique of connectivity by visualizing the pervasive presence of radio waves emanating from GSM cell towers, based on open data from the OpenCellID database. More specifically, the app transforms the mobile phone screen into a network scanner, visualizing the presence of invisible digital devices in our direct surroundings and in real time. By pressing the 'get me out!' button featured beneath the visualization, users are brought to the map mode. Here, the connected and disconnected world is portrayed. Users are invited to watch documentary shorts pinned on locations in the map, or to navigate to places off the grid, so-called 'white spots', by activating the GPS route planner mode. The installation thus acts as a wayshowing interface (Mollerup, 2013), making the otherwise inconspicuous pedestrian pathway not only more visible, but also more engaging.<sup>14</sup>

Different from *Deep City* and related installations, this mobile app works on a mobile micro screen, perhaps a navigational – here, wayshowing – interface par excellence. The navigational logic of this app is paradoxical in two ways. First, it makes visible (and audible!) the invisible, so that the user is confronted with the overwhelming wireless signals that populate our surroundings, and helps the user to navigate to a disconnected area. Secondly, as a strategy of sousveillance (Mann, Nolan and Wellman, 2003: 333) – flying under the radar of surveillance technologies with the result of reflecting (on) these technologies – it precisely visualizes and, hence, *tackles* the problem of data and the logic of pervasive signals and surveillance technologies, and how they encroach upon us and attack our sense of autonomy, privacy and even physical well-being. This particular form of interfacing – emphasized by the on-screen greeting 'Hi Explorer!' – addresses the subject as a knowledgeable and tech-savvy urban explorer daring to venture off-grid. Moreover, it not only shows the way to elsewhere, but, in its visualization, it primarily points to the subject's presence within her surroundings.

## Sense-ing

*In the Air, Tonight* (2014) is a project that makes use of an LED façade of the Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto. Similar to *Deep City*, this is an installation

14 For more about the project, see <http://white-spots.net>.

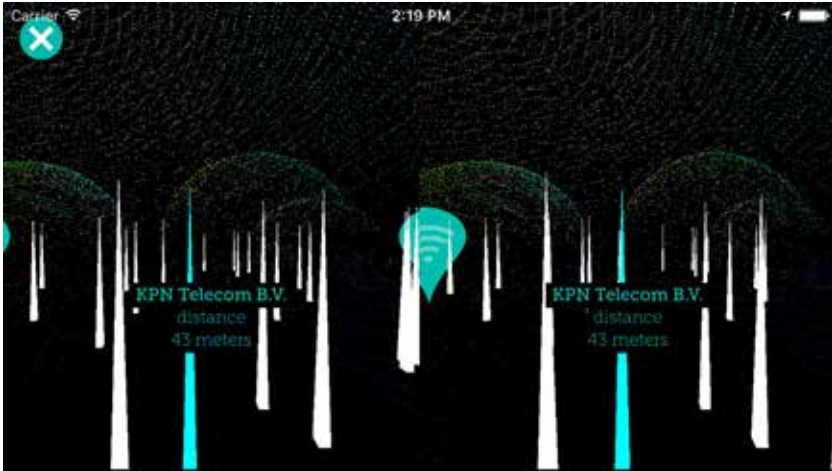


Fig. 6.2: White Spots used as network scanner, showing the presence of electromagnetic clouds. Image: Richard Vijgen.

for an existing and fixed architecture, that is temporary: it is put up for a month, with the aim to raise awareness about homelessness in the city. In the visualization zone, throughout February evenings, a blue wave fluctuates, sensing changing temperatures and wind speed. This visualizes the ‘feeling’ of being outside and exposed to the elements, translating the one sense (touch) to the other (sight). The data ‘in between’ – from qualitative to quantitative and back – comes from a weather station located on the roof of the building. Tweets using the hashtag #homelessness generate a red pulse on the surface and donations cause the façade to turn white. A webcam allows participants to see the building change colours in real time remotely.

Interesting in this case is how the design of this installation translates a social issue (‘homelessness’) to a physical and experiential category (‘feeling cold’) to something we can measure (‘temperature’) and subsequently evaluate and relay in a (metaphoric) visual form (blue wave signifying ‘coldness’). Moreover, as a composite installation, it combines different data sources (temperature, number of tweets) that are drawn from different locations and materialities, symbolizing different indexical relationships. By combining outside temperature and online tweets, the installation makes a connection between very different spaces, situating and making visual – hence, material – and *sense-able* digital communication. This particular form of interfacing is transformative in its attempt to make perceptible urban challenges often taken for granted and, as such, produces awareness, reflexivity and a feeling of being compelled to act. A subject is positioned as an insightful and conscientious citizen, aware of the presence



Fig. 6.3: Façade connecting to micro screen in the installation *In the Air Tonight*. Image: Public Visualization Studio.

and situation of others, and stimulated to make donations as contribution to an improvement to this situation.<sup>15</sup>

The relationship that is established between data, city and public in *Deep City* as well as these two additional cases just explored, all hinge upon the triangulation at the heart of the architectural, cartographic and archaeological principles of interfacing. Albeit in various ways and to different degrees, these projects all demonstrate how data visualization enacts forms of interfacing that, aside from communicating data from and about 'here' and 'there', are also about the 'now' of the subject in relation to this data. It is within this relationship and in the process of interfacing that data is extracted, sensed, translated, connected, made present, made visible and, perhaps more pertinently, performed – a process which also implicates the subject.

### **Conclusion: Towards a Performative Archaeology**

The designer of *Deep City* presents her project as an archaeological endeavour to access and visualize the archive-city. Her statement bristles with

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.mediaarchitecture.org/air-tonight-raising-awareness-homelesnes>.

words that suggest this: ‘an archaeological dig’, ‘uncovering’, ‘extracting’, ‘underneath’, ‘from the deep’, ‘bringing them to the surface, and examining them’. Here, the archaeological metaphor that brings in the time-space dynamic meets the architectural – the spatial and material design of the building as blackboard for the installation – and the cartographic in the way it proposes a mapping of the city’s spatiotemporal layering. In this collaboration between the architectural and the cartographic, *Deep City* visualizes the city as a living archive of today, its excavations *live*, in and about the present. This infuses archaeology with the contemporary – thus studying the coexistence of past and present. The spatial metaphor, the *comparant* of ‘depth’, here is not, as is usual, equal to the temporal *comparé* of ‘long ago’, but shifts to a new *comparé*, namely ‘visibility’. What ‘depth’ suggests invisibility, while what is brought to the surface becomes visible. Performative archaeology visualizes this act.

We gratefully take the artist’s metaphor, but wish to make explicit how this small-seeming shift in fact signals a change of paradigm. Under the same *comparant*, the older idea of a layered past is pushed out and the discourse smuggles in a new *comparé*, which is spatial, situated in the present and brought in connection with the future. It is, in other words, that which is embedded in what ‘emerges’. To understand this, we need to recall an argument made elsewhere concerning navigation as performative cartography. Navigation, as an act of making visible, is a future-oriented self-affirmation in the present (Verhoeff, 2012). Thus, it construes a subject that is engaged with her surroundings *in transition*. Importantly, in view of the shift in the archaeological metaphor’s *comparé*, this means that the movement (the ‘digging’) goes from the evolving present towards the future destination. The digital traces of the city’s past are connected to the present, they inform and intensify the present. The Connecting Cities website reflects on the installation in a similar manner, in that it is said to be about ‘investigating the collective information that defines a city’s present and *future*’ (our emphasis).<sup>16</sup> However, in the understanding of the city as defined by this ‘collective information’, as Donna Haraway (1988) has reminded us, knowledge production is indeed always situated and partial. Indeed, we are not commenting on the epistemological value, but rather on the discursive gesture and affective quality of contemporary urban visualizations as performative archaeology.

If we consider the city an archive, our activities within it actively contribute to the expansion of this archive in the continuity from present to

16 <http://www.aec.at/postcity/en/deep-city>.

past. Moreover, since the present never remains, is always 'on the move', this archiving of the present is always already just one step away from the future. Therefore, navigation allows us to think of the archive as constituted within an emergent, future-oriented present. It is thus (a) live, rather than a storage site of everything past. The navigation of the archive is constitutive of the subject in relation to the world around her in an ongoing act of relative positioning in time, as the terrain between past and present shifts.

The paradigm shift to performative archaeology implies a thinking of the present as the moment the archive is activated when it becomes visible (and potentially legible), but also as fundamentally unstable because it is emergent and inherently future-oriented. If the archive-city is constituted, seen and read in the present, the present is also the moment of the archive's ongoing transformation. Perhaps we should stop considering the archaeological metaphor as a metaphor, so it can become more humbly yet more clearly the handmaiden of, or teacher for, our understanding (and analysis) of time and space together and layered within different configurations. Whereas the architectural principle of interfacing refers to materiality, structure and surfaces, and the cartographic to the spatial relations it affords, it is the archaeological principle of interfacing that fuels temporal relations produced and performed *in* visualization.

When we look back at *Deep City* as a reflection *on* the city and *White Spots* and *In the Air Tonight* as reflections on our experiences and sensations in this city, in the end, the liveness of the installation confirms not only the present – both as moment and as tense – but, most importantly, in its constitutive gesture it confirms presence: our connected and moving being in the here and now in the streets of our cities.

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## 7. Cartography at Ground Level: Spectrality and Streets in Jeremy Wood's *My Ghost* and *Meridians*

*Simon Ferdinand*

### Abstract

To explore the shifting status of the street in contemporary mapping culture, this chapter attends to two map-based walking performances by US-born artist Jeremy Wood, who uses Global Positioning Systems to transform grounded mobility into a means of cartographic inscription. Whereas Michel de Certeau describes cartography as an elevated visuality, regimenting urban practice from above, my argument stresses how Wood's mappings conflate lived mobility and synoptic cartography. Extending mapping to the street, his practice exemplifies digital mapping's expansion beyond institutional domains. To close, however, I show how Wood's art also exposes slippages and pretensions of existential security in digital mapping's worldview of securely calculated locations, which are recast as ghostly projections in a universe without essential orientation.

**Keywords:** walking art; map art; digital mapping; GPS; urbanism; spectrality

One of the most cited remarks in J.B. Harley's revisionist essays linking cartography with society and politics is that maps 'are preeminently a language of power, not of protest' (2002: 79). Unlike many of Harley's insights into the political significance of mapping, this insistence has found little favour in subsequent mapping theory. Scholars have tended to balance Harley's conception of maps as tools and expressions of social dominance against works of popular mapmaking (Cosgrove and Della Dora), artistic subversions (Cosgrove, 2005: 35-45; Hawkins, 2013: 40-41; Pinder, 1996, especially: 410)

and instances of critical imagination latent in even the selective tradition of progressive cartography (Wood, 2010: 126-127). Perhaps the most decisive challenge to Harley's equation of cartography with top-down power, though, emanates from recent shifts towards a distributed culture of digital mapping, which are often narrated in terms of punctual democratization. For much of modern history, rhetorics of technical prowess and scientific objectivity have conjured mapmaking as the delimited domain of state-sponsored institutions and trained professionals. However, numerous accounts suggest how, in the last four decades, more nuanced and multiple conceptions of cartographic truth have dovetailed with uneven digitization to redistribute authority in mapmaking, such that today mapping is practiced by an expanded variety of nonspecialist mappers in a broadened variety of contexts (see Crampton, 2010 and Della Dora, 2012).

To explore the place of the street and urban practice in relation to this apparent opening out of legitimacy in contemporary mapping, this chapter focuses on map-based performances by the US-born walking artist Jeremy Wood (b. 1976). My analysis describes how these performances make experimental use of Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to reconfigure the relations among cartography, art and street-level walking. Tracing his movements with GPS technology to create personal cartographies, Wood transforms his walking body into what he calls a 'geodetic pencil' that inscribes urban landscapes as it traverses them. In many of these mappings, Wood willfully directs his walking so as to trace images, words and street patternings before the solar eye conjured by mapping; others track the ostensibly unmodified movements that make up his daily life. Of this latter grouping, one image in particular encapsulates my concerns: *My Ghost*, a map presenting accumulated GPS tracks of Wood's daily mobility through London over fifteen years (2000-2015).

My argument explores how *My Ghost* and other works accentuate key problems and possibilities thrown up by the diffusion and diversification of mapping beyond institutional domains in recent years. Characteristically for a walking-cum-mapping artist, Wood articulates this social expansion of cartographic means and authority in an acutely spatial manner. Accordingly, my discussion foregrounds the shifting status of *the street* in his artworks. The chapter begins by contrasting Wood's artistic vision of cartography at ground level with the received relationship between mapping and streets. In the spaces and places produced by modern urbanism, I argue, the street has been figured largely as a subordinate social site to be ordered by elevated cartographers and planners. Wood's itinerant mappings, in contrast, take the street and its users as the site and agents of cartographic practice. As such,

the works empower pedestrianism: far from being caught in an imposed urban grillwork, walking becomes the reiterative making and remaking of streets through performative acts of mapping.

Yet, despite recalibrating formerly hierarchical relations between cartography and the street in this manner, Wood's mappings are not celebrated uncritically. Moving into the second half of the chapter, I focus on how institutional cartography rests on a particular ontology, which presupposes the world's basic measurability through exact, objective procedures. In expanding mapping practices to the formerly excluded cluster of people and places conjured by 'the street', does Wood's work displace this transparent, uniform, and objective casting of space? Or does it entrench this ontology through an enlarged social field? Although Wood's mappings offer no alternative articulation of mapped space, I close by invoking the metaphor of spectrality to show how *My Ghost* and *Meridians* (2005) playfully expose slippages and pretensions of existential security in the GPS worldview of calculated locations. Wood's art, I conclude, rests on a knife's edge between reclaiming mapping for its social others, repeating cartography's received ontology and undermining its illusions.

### Jeremy Wood and the Project of a Personal Cartography

Born in San Francisco and raised in Berlin, Wood currently works in and around Oxfordshire in England. His art encompasses different media, from photography and digital drawing to walking performances, yet, thematically, it coheres closely around the personal geographies enacted in and through his life. Wood charts these geographies through the experimental use of satellite tracking technology. At the core of his practice, then, are Global Positioning Systems, which allow users to establish longitude, latitude and altitude quickly within a standard global framework. GPS can be simplified to three constituent elements: firstly, a constellation of (at present) 30 satellites orbiting the earth, established by the US Department of Defence and NATO in 1993; secondly, the World Geodetic System 1984 (WGS84), an internally coordinated graticular map produced by the US Defence Mapping Agency to represent the earth; and, thirdly, innumerable receivers that detect and triangulate the signals emitted by at least three satellites so as to calculate the device's position within the WGS84 (for a clear history and analysis of GPS, see Rankin, 2015).

The mobility of these receivers, which are often produced as small handheld units or embedded in smartphones, is especially important in

Wood's practice, which explores the limits and possibilities of the GPS infrastructure through the mobile methods of walking art. The impetus behind the burgeoning cultural interest in walking, suggests David Pinder, is to 'leave behind fixed or elevated viewpoints in favour of mobile, grounded, and partial perspectives' (2011: 674). In exploring subjective spatialities, the political channeling of mobility and the fortuitous simultaneities to which urban modernity gives rise, Wood's practice broaches some of the quintessential themes of walking art as it has developed from the early 20th-century avant-gardes through to the 'expanded field' of art today. He is unusual among walking artists, though, in that, instead of invoking the partiality and mobility of embodied walking to counter the omniscience perceived in cartography, his practice combines and even conflates the two impulses of walking and mapping such that they no longer represent contraries. By recording his own mobility as GPS 'trackpoint data', Wood transforms walking into a tool of cartographic drawing. The resultant information is then modelled on specially designed software named GPSography, which figures the lines made by Wood's movement into 'sculptural objects' that can be superimposed over maps or aerial photographs (Wood, 2006: 268-269). In this configuration, the artist's traversal of a landscape constitutes both part of the medium through which his maps are made and the subject matter they represent. Constantly plotting his mobility, Wood's walking body becomes a 'geodetical pencil', as Lauriault puts it (2009: 360). This formulation concentrates what I see as a central gesture of his practice: namely, the merging of grounded mobility with synoptic mapping.

Wood's works of walking/mapping fall under two broad categories. First, come pieces in which the artist directs his mobility willfully so as to write shapely new streets, images and words into existence. Consider, in this connection, *Brighton Boat* (2001-2002), in which Wood walked the GPS image of a ship through the city of Brighton. Or *Meridians* (2005), a long walk through London whose vagaries write out a sentence spoken by Ishmael in Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) to describe Rokovoko, the island home of the harpooner Queequeg: 'It is not down in any map; true places never are' (Melville, 1992: 48). I will return to discuss *Meridians* and reflect on this anti-cartographic note later in the chapter. These works take the landscape as a jotting pad or drawing board. Unlike the pristine blankness of these stationer's equivalents, however, the English landscapes that form the basis for the majority of Wood's peripatetic jottings are strewn with impediments accumulated over millennia of history. The images are, consequently, humble and dialogic examples of draftsmanship, for in 'taking a line for a walk' (Paul Klee's phrase) across such cluttered countryside canvases, Wood's

somatic pencil must negotiate and respond creatively to the multiple physical features and human relations that surround his mobile self (Klee, 1961, I: 105). This aspect of the artworks comes across strongly in Lauriault's (2009: 360) reflections on Wood's GPS art, which, she argues, include 'land, water, air and the engineered environment of places' as 'protagonists' of the spatial stories told in the works. To show how environments and events altered the walking/drawing of *Meridians*, Lauriault recounts how Wood had to dodge golf balls and misshape words due to the unforeseen erection of circus tents on the planned route (2009: 361). While carefully treading the Greenwich Meridian line, he was also almost thrown off course by a boisterous Labrador (Wood, 2006: 275).

The compromises entailed in walking a line through the landscape, in calling attention to the reciprocity of people, environments and animals in quotidian geographies, compare favourably with the forms of modernist street planning discussed in the following section, which take existing settings as empty pages on which to inscribe synoptic street patternings. The contrast with modern urbanism is stronger still in the second category of Wood's artworks, in which Wood's mobility is ostensibly unmodified by being recorded cartographically. Mapped lines unfurl with apparently no regard to the proverbial cartographic 'eye in the sky', turning the function of GPS tracking from that of spectating deliberately staged geographical performances to documenting the spatialities and rhythms enacted in the course of Wood's everyday activity.

Such tracings make up what Wood calls his 'cartographic journals': a publicly visible bank of personal images that record the spatial unfolding of his life and trigger memories of past mobility. Some journal entries recount a single stroll (walking the dog); others narrate more elaborate walks (exploring a maze). Only one of Wood's GPS tracings, though, boasts a durational stretch of fifteen years. *My Ghost* concentrates this remarkably protracted accumulation of trackpoint data recording the artist's movements in, through, over and under central London, whether on foot or by car, bicycle, tube or plane. The title registers the uncanniness Wood felt on seeing the routes taken by his former selves objectified, visually, before him. This chapter discusses *My Ghost* in detail because its conflation of synoptic cartography with the vagaries and banality of quotidian mobility embodies the blurring of hierarchies in contemporary mapping cultures.

*My Ghost* presents a stark monochromatic map comprised of brilliant white lines strung out across a black space (Figure 7.1). Being digital, the work's dimensions and scale are variable, though Wood has exhibited different prints of 3.3 by 3.1 metres and, more recently, 2.1 by 1.3 metres. By my own estimate,



Fig. 7.1: Jeremy Wood, *My Ghost*, digital giclée image, 33 x 31 cm (2009).

this latter configuration makes a scale of roughly 1:9000. This is relatively large, allowing viewers to follow closely the meanderings of individual paths, while still combining many particulars into a synoptic whole. Even without resorting to the explanatory notes that accompany the map both online and in the gallery, it is recognizably London. Recognition is not instantaneous, however. By contrast with the cartographic *gestalt* that centuries of mapmaking have established for the old imperial metropole, Wood's map is decidedly off-kilter. The usually dominant curls of the river Thames figure but a faint sideshow to a long tangle of intersecting paths extending out over the image. Drawn together into two, perhaps three key nodes north of the river, the pathways shine forth in concentrated white threads.

It is important that the lines traced across *My Ghost* are not laid over an aerial photograph of the region traversed, as they are in other works, but stand isolated against an inexpressive black background. Abstraction from the terrain releases the pathways from immediate referral back to their origins

in geographical mobility, allowing viewers to engage them as pure forms or Rorschachian prompts to association. Loosened up to diverse resonances in this way, the image suggests several visual analogies: a dot-to-dot illustration of some as-yet unnamed constellation; satellite photographs of nocturnal regions in which white indicates densely lit urban nodes, tapering off into a dark surrounding rurality; the rudiments of capillaries visible in radiographic images; or Lichtenberg figures, scientific images in which electrified dust is discharged through metals, plastics or wood to create branching luminescent structures that resemble lighting (see Elkins, 1998: 273-277). In view of this uncanny phosphorescence, combined with the work's phantasmal title, the analogy of ectoplasm also comes to mind. The spirit given shape by the substance, in this case, would belong not to an individual, but a city: the febrile *pneuma* of London as it is fetishized in Peter Ackroyd's 'biography' of the city, for instance (for a critique, see Luckhurst, 2002).

I will pick up on the artwork's susceptibility to association and analogy, and especially this last theme of spectral geographies, later in the chapter, which considers the ways in which Wood's works complicate the GPS ontology of fixed location. The idea to take onboard here is that *My Ghost* offers an imaginative vision of how everyday mobility and cartographic drawing coalesce in the increasingly distributed culture of digital mapping. Indeed, though the map can be read simply as a visual record of Wood's personal geographies, this straightforward representational function is complicated by the fact that the artist's mobility is not just the object or subject matter of *My Ghost*, but also the medium and agency through which the map was made. Wood's GPS mappings fold closely together the formerly discrete (and I will suggest hierarchically opposed) domains of panoptic mapping and quotidian mobility – so closely, in fact, as to make walking synonymous with mapping.

To explore the implications of this conflation, the following sections set *My Ghost* in contrast with cartography's relationship to the street as it has been inherited from modern urbanism. Discussing Michel de Certeau's account of how elevated cartographers and planners have imposed urban orderings on the street brings into focus the social significance of Wood's blurring of synoptic mapping with urban walking.

## Setting the Street to Order

For much of modern urban history, the relationship between cartography and the street has been determined by the imperatives of state-backed planning and the (utopian) ideal of a fully calculable and controllable city.



In streets received from preindustrial settlement, planners often saw chaotic meeting places of contrary purposes and moribund remainders of premodern indeterminacy. Viewed as impediments hindering the construction of optimally designed urban machines, the street elicited antipathy and ordering zeal. Baron von Haussmann's pseudo-medical discourse on the necessity of clearing 'clogged arteries' in the medieval city (Ellin, 1997: 18), alongside Le Corbusier's famous moratorium on the street in *The Radiant City*, stand as paradigmatic statements of this animus. To the modernizing mind, Zygmunt Bauman writes, old streets become an 'incoherent and contingent by-product of uncoordinated and desynchronized building history', obstructing the 'platonic sublimity, mathematical orderliness' and seamless functional division that urban modernity – so it was hoped – would usher in (Bauman, 2012: 42). Bustling premodern streets were to be mapped out, street practices to be disentangled and set to rational order.

Despite the modernist aggressivity towards it, there is something irreducible and intransigent about street sociality. Multifunctional thoroughfares might be split into discrete communicative modes; street commerce and culture removed to specially dedicated sites, but no socio-spatial planning project will entirely do away with friction and informality at the thresholds between functional domains. Streets therefore present urban planning with a special difficulty, in that they simultaneously incite and elude ordering energies. City administrations have often navigated this double-bind by remaking the street after the pristine legibility admired in maps. Cartographic rationalities of naming, numbering, tabulating, colouring and demarcating space through conventionally agreed codifications have presented a model for the ordered modern street.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, formerly irregular, informal and inscrutable streets – the shifting complexity of which has so often confounded cartographic attempts to establish transparency (see Scott, 1990) – have been rearranged or rebuilt entirely.

In the received practices of modern urbanism, then, cartographers and planners have taken the street as an object of not just surveillance and representation, but planned reformation too. One way to summarize this is to say that modern cartography manifests an elevated view in relation to the street. This recalls the prolegomenon to Michel de Certeau's often excerpted chapter 'Walking in the City', in which the author looks down on Manhattan's streets from the height of the World Trade Center, then ten

1 For discussions on the power and politics of house and street numbering, see Rose-Redwood (2008); on street naming, see Palonen (1993) and Rose-Redwood, Alderman and Azaryahu (2010); and on urban semiotics, see Jaworski and Thurlow (2010).

years old (de Certeau, 1984: 91-110). Though this analysis is well-known, I want to rehearse the key opposition driving de Certeau's account, because it is precisely this binary that Wood's mappings collapse. Distance and ocular objectification are leading motifs in de Certeau's analysis, in which cartography and elevated views more generally are positioned as foils against which to celebrate transitory practices performed in the streets. Elevation, he writes, 'transforms [the subject] into a voyeur. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, "to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god"' (de Certeau, 1984: 92). Here, the panoptic visuality that surveils the city is epitomized by cartography in the practical sense of establishing distance and legibility. Maps disentangle their users from the sensuous complexity of 'grounded' practices, allowing one to grasp urban geographies without being caught up in them. They reduce streets and urban spaces to transparently readable 'texts' that allow for rationalized interventions from afar.

Significantly, de Certeau's characterization misunderstands cartography, insofar as an important distinction obtains between cartography and aerial or heightened perspectives. To think that the visions built through mapping could be attained in embodied experience, however elevated, would be to conceive maps as transparent windows, not culturally relative and politically invested visions (Turchi, 2004: 85). Yet, the elevation de Certeau ascribes to cartography describes more than the practical illusion of verticality constructed by maps; cartography is also elevated in another, metaphorical sense of belonging to a dominant position in the field of social relations. In speaking of the all-seeing reader of the urban text, he has in mind 'the space planner urbanist, city planner or cartographer' (de Certeau, 1984: 93). Here, elevation denotes the ruling position enjoyed by legislators and state actors, who, as I have argued elsewhere, survey received spaces and populations to 'garden' them in accordance with a chosen model, often as executors of corporate rationality (Ferdinand, 2017: 323-328). *The map and the street* represent not just physical spaces and practices, then, but also metaphorical sites denoting diametrically opposed positions within a symbolic topology of social power.

Cartographers grasp space 'from above' in the sense of occupying a socially dominant position; subjects traversing streets practice space creatively 'from below' in that they act from a site of ostensible weakness. This schema is, I realize, inescapably binary, as well as vitiated by the 'denigration of vision' that suffused de Certeau's intellectual milieu (Jay, 1993). Yet, his identification of cartography with dominant social agents is borne out, to a degree, by the discursive construction of cartography through modernity, especially

in the 20th century, in which cartographic means and legitimacy were increasingly claimed as the preserve of mapping professionals and legislative institutions. Rhetorics of scientific objectivity and expert distinction, argues Harley, 'enabled cartographers to build a wall around their citadel of the "true" map', beyond which 'there was a "not cartography" land where lurked an army of inaccurate, heretical, subjective, valuative, and ideologically distorted images' (2002: 155). This image of a cartographer's 'citadel' conjugates with de Certeau's skyscraper in that both represent elevated social sites and symbols of panoptic power, raised above the supposedly partial, blind or distorted spatialities practiced by non-cartographers in the city streets below. I cite these vignettes of elevation and enclosure to stress how discourses of objectivity and professional specialism perform an unequal distribution of cartographic legitimacy among social groups engaged in mapping. Maps produced by dedicated professional institutions are set apart from, indeed above, competing articulations of geography, which, though not condemned to outright illegality, are denigrated as lay and artistic deviations from professional procedures.

In the dispensation inherited from modern urbanism, then, cartographers and planners look down on earthbound streets from heights both practical and social. *Practical* in that they enrol maps' distanced legibility to mold street spaces and subjects; *social* in that discourses of science and specialism have confined cartographic authority to delimited institutional domains while withholding it from the populace at large.

## Descending into the Street

Having built an image of how, in modern urbanism, cartography and streets are locked into an asymmetrical antinomy that is played out through city spaces, I want to examine how these relations are reconfigured in Wood's itinerant mappings. The artworks' central gesture, I have suggested, is to conflate grounded mobility with synoptic mapping. It is only now, in light of the strategies through which institutional cartography has proclaimed itself apart from transient spatial practices, that the larger significance of this conflation becomes clear. My claim is that, in blending mapping with walking, Wood collapses the binaries driving de Certeau's account of urban practice and cuts against cartography's elevation in relation to the street. In *My Ghost*, walking *is* mapping, while cartographic inscription, far from signaling distanced ordering, *is* lived mobility. Mapping thus blurs into the fleeting street-level performances against which it was formerly defined.

Just as institutional cartography's elevation above the street is both a practical effect of maps' distanced legibility and the metaphorical expression of dominative social relations, so Wood's intervention has both technical and social aspects. Enrolling the mobility of geospatial devices as a drawing method, *My Ghost* brings into focus key developments in cartography's digital transition. Where print mapmaking was essentially a sedentary undertaking done in dedicated sites (though requiring prior surveys), digital mapping is increasingly peripatetic. Performed on smartphones by diverse users, mapping takes place *in* and *through* varied street spaces, with which maps interact in complex reciprocal ways (see Verhoeff, 2012). Technically, the function of inscribing Wood's movements through GPS might seem underwhelming, in contrast to increasingly sophisticated smartphone-based mapping applications. Yet, for me, the simplicity of making street-level mobility over into mapmaking distils the *social* import of shifts towards distributed digital mapping. Indeed, in merging mapping with quotidian practice, Wood accentuates what Jeremy Crampton has called the 'undisciplining of cartography': the process through which mapmaking, under prevailing technological and epistemological pressures, is 'slipping from the control of the powerful elites that have exercised dominance over it for several hundred years' (Crampton, 2010: 40-41). *My Ghost* presents a spatial imagination of this 'undisciplining', in which the once excluded and subordinate people and places evoked by 'the street' become sites and subjects through which mapping is performed.

As such, *My Ghost* transgresses the historically instituted distinctions that set institutional cartography above not only everyday articulations of space, but artistic practice too. Made by an itinerant artist with no official accreditation in cartography, *My Ghost* emblemizes artistic attempts to 'take back the map' from institutional control (Wood, 2010: 156). What distinguishes *My Ghost* both within Wood's own body of work and the larger field of map-based art, though, is how it also extends mapping to quotidian practice more generally. Unlike *Meridians*, which 'takes back the map' to articulate a carefully executed artistic rendering of space, in *My Ghost*, the artist's routes are not dictated by the need to perform words and images before a satellite gaze. The lines unfold according to the movements and rhythms of daily life. It may be naïve to imagine that Wood's mobility continued unaltered by being tracked (Lauriault notes how the image does not 'tell us when he journeyed with the GPS turned off', 2009: 365), yet *My Ghost* is not a preconceived artistic vision. It is an accumulation of the kind of commonplace spatial practices that de Certeau valorized for their subaltern creativity. For him, the transient performances through which

bodies negotiate cities, requiring neither official training nor dedicated sites, manifested an ineradicable foil to panoptic ordering. What could incarnate unofficial, nonprofessional, indeed 'ordinary' practice more fully than moving through the city? In grounding cartographic inscription in daily meanderings, *My Ghost* embodies the challenge posed to professional cartography by distributed digital mapping, which intersperses everyday lives with quotidian acts of mapping and makes potential mappers of nonspecialist users. Mapping descends into the street, empowering Wood's pedestrianism, which writes/walks out new shapes and street patternings that are registered, but no longer determined from on high, by cartography.

In stressing how Wood appropriates mapping for the quotidian and artistic fields of practice against which institutional cartography has traditionally asserted its own distinction, I have already presented this descent in terms of democratization. This would accord with more optimistic valuations of cartography's digital transition, which draw attention to how current shifts in mapping 'blur the traditional boundaries between map user and map maker, the trained professional the map amateur' (Della Dora, 2012, n.p.). Yet, if Wood's practice brings into focus the recent expansion of cartographic means and legitimacy beyond institutional domains, it also embodies more disquieting aspects of digital mapping. Indeed, Wood's GPS-driven conflation of walking with mapping might be linked to the (largely voluntary) proffering of once private geographies through mobile phone signals as commercially and governmentally exploitable data sets (see Michael and Clarke, 2013); the surveillance of convicts through networked anklets (Crampton, 2003: 130) and the potential for 'geoslavery' it suggests (see Dobson and Fisher, 2007); or to the diffusion of military tracking and targeting rationalities into commercial, governmental, and ultimately personal practices through the generalization of GPS technology (see Kaplan, 2006; for a critique, see Rankin, 2015: 556). Adducing these developments serves to dampen celebratory narrations of cartography's digital transition, balancing my image of mapping's democratizing descent into the street with the sobering realities of how digital mapping regimes are 'fuelling new rounds of capital investment, creative destruction, uneven development, and indeed, at times, the ending of life' (Pickles, 2004: 152). A fuller appraisal of Wood's itinerant mappings than is possible within the frame of this chapter would connect the artworks with the exploitation of personal geometrics, whether by policy makers, surveillance agencies, state militaries or profit-driven geobrowsers.

The critical perspective on Wood's works I want to explore here, though, focuses on the ontological underpinnings of contemporary mapping and GPS. Artistic interventions in mapping like Wood's are of little import if they

simply expand mapmaking to the widened social field represented by the street without also challenging the underlying conceptions of mapping and space promulgated by institutional cartography. Professional and scientific claims to possessing privileged access to geographical truth, and therefore superiority over lay and artistic mappings, depend on a specific casting of the world as a calculable, uniformly extended space that exists independently of the observer, can be measured and represented exactly, and does not admit multiple correct interpretations (for fuller descriptions of this ontology, see Harley, 2002: 154; Pickles, 2004: 80-86; Elden, 2005: 15-16; and Ferdinand, 2017: 328-329). While unfolding shifts in cartography present a quantitative proliferation of mapping practices, qualitative ontological assumptions about what mapped space fundamentally *is* have persisted untransformed. Mainstream GIS and GPS reproduce values and aims inherited from institutional mapmaking – values like objectivity, accuracy and uniformity; aims like establishing calculability and control. Despite the prevailing rhetorics of discontinuity, then, it may be that current shifts towards an expanded culture of digital mapping only resubmit understandings of geography more completely to the cartographic ontology of calculable extension, all behind a smokescreen of democratization.

Against this backdrop, it seems to me that the value of artistic interventions in contemporary mapping like Wood's, beyond 'taking back the map' for nonprofessional mappers (which is, in any case, occurring, albeit unevenly, through cartography's digital transition), lies in how they might counter this ontology with qualitatively different, experimental and original visions of mapped space. I will suggest that, though Wood's mappings hold out no alternative to the coordinated and measurable determination of the world articulated in most digital cartographies, neither do they simply repeat and reinforce this ontology; indeed, they playfully undermine the GPS worldview of securely established locations. To show this, the next section takes up the metaphor of haunting in *My Ghost* to focus on how *Meridians* renders ostensibly secure GPS locations and measures as spectral, groundless projections.

## Spectral Geographies

*My Ghost* may have been produced using GPS technology, but, in exhibition, it accumulates affective and metaphorical resonances that exceed the coordinated ontology unfolded through digital mapping. Strikingly, the artwork delineates Wood's mobility in luminescent white against a black

background, contravening the convention that maps should postulate a uniformly illuminated, indeed shadowless world. Besides making for a visually distinctive map, Wood's choice of a dominant dark backcloth releases his pathways from referral back to the traversed geography and opens them up to diverse associations. Given the work's title, the darkness invests the image with an ominous tone that colours these resonances: as I noted in my initial description, to me, *My Ghost* suggests ectoplasm incarnating the city's *genius loci*. Wood's metaphor of urban spectrality repays further discussion here, for the figure of the ghost – or rather ghostly geographies – calls into question the certainty and fixity surrounding notions of locatedness in current mapping platforms.

Concepts around haunting and spectrality have come into increasing prominence in cultural theory in recent decades. This has been associated, in large part, with Jacques Derrida's notion of 'hauntology', which counters reductions of existence to full and saturated *presence* with an ontology shot through with *spectrality* (see Derrida, 1994). Theories of spectrality do not refer to 'literal' ghostly visitations, but invoke spectrality metaphorically to draw attention to phenomena that flicker between absence and presence from particular discursive viewpoints (Peeren, 2014: 3). Three basic conditions brought to light by spectrality are: 'the persistence of the past in the present'; 'present absence' (encompassing a more spatial register); and the unrecognized ulteriority that contaminates all seemingly distilled essences (Peeren, 2014: 10).

'The key conceptual feature of GPS', writes Rankin, 'is that it replaces lumpy, historical, human space with a globally uniform mathematical system' (2015: 557). This system, the WGS84 mentioned above, constitutes the *a priori* ground of much digital mapping, including the dominant Google applications. But what if the locating structures projected by digital mapping were perceived, not as offering a reassuring grasp of geographical reality, but as spectral? Present insofar as they are communicated and acted upon, sometimes even instantiated concretely, yet, for all that, largely notable for their absence in the offline world? What if the standards of reference through which spatialities are now pervasively determined were recognized as phantasmal projections that suffuse and direct social practice without ever being fully *there*? The following analysis of Wood's *Meridians* shows how adopting such a perspective would have a profoundly disorienting and dislocating effect. Indeed, elsewhere I have argued that global cartographies establish meaning and order partly to cover over the 'frightening facticity of the disenchanting earth' (Ferdinand, 2016: 235). On this view, much of the appeal of GPS and GIS would seem to derive from how they assuage



Fig. 7.2: Jeremy Wood, *Meridians*, digital print on cotton, 140 x 850 cm (2005). Courtesy of the artist.

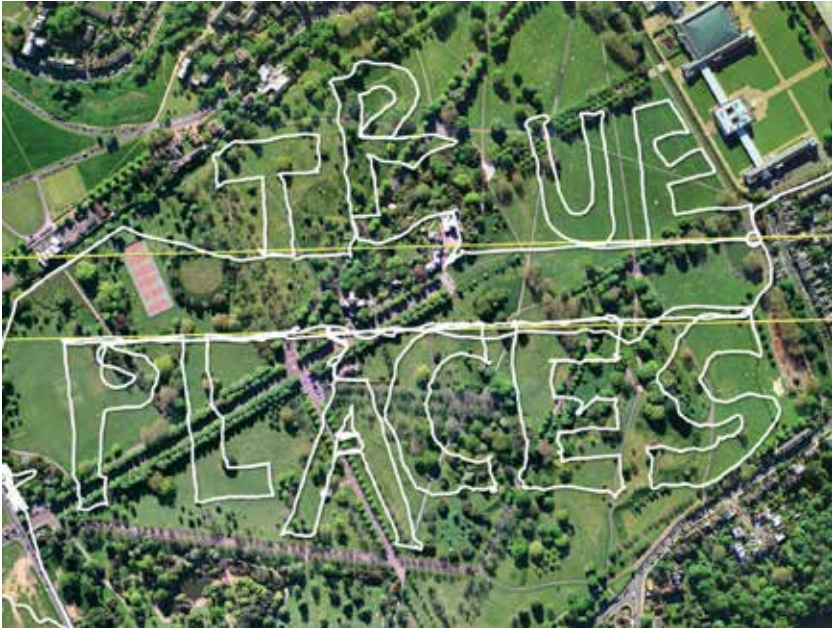


Fig. 7.3: Detail of Jeremy Wood, *Meridians*.

the existential anxieties endemic to liquid modernity. Taking a cue from Wood's glowing uncanny pathways in *My Ghost*, I shall turn a noun into a verb here to argue that *Meridians* 'ghosts' the comforting, seemingly secure locative frameworks of digital mapping – that it loosens their appearance of saturated reality and renders them spectral by playing two discrepant geographical standards off against one another.

*Meridians* is a walking artwork performed discontinuously in central London over 44 miles and three months in early 2005, the GPS trails of which have been matched with an aerial photograph of the area and exhibited as a long rectangular print (Wood, 2006: 274-275).<sup>2</sup> Examining this image

<sup>2</sup> An abundance of green in the photography indicates that it was not taken in the season Wood walked the same area.



entails another (lesser) journey on the part of the viewer, who must travel along its 8.5 metre breadth to follow the artist's path. As I have noted, Wood's walk traces a quotation from *Moby Dick* through the landscape. Absorbed in the visual 'noise' of the aerial photograph – arterial rail junctions, broccoli trees, shadows cast by inscrutable structures – or in picking out Melville's sentence from the disconnected sites of walking/writing, it is easy to overlook two millimetre-thin lines that run almost parallel to one another across the breadth of the image. And yet, for calculable cartographic space, these lines, the eponymous *Meridians*, have a significance that far outweighs the geographical complexities that surround and overshadow them.

Meridians are vertical 'lines of longitude' in a graticular structure representing the earth; they intersect with horizontal 'parallels' or 'lines of latitude' to form a global grid. The lines figured in Wood's artwork are especially significant; each represents a *prime* meridian, that is, the one vertical chosen as the key standard in reference to which longitude (temporal and spatial distance to the East and West) is measured within a particular terrestrial model. A prime meridian marks  $0^\circ$  in a system comprising  $360^\circ$ . The higher of the pair in the artwork is the Greenwich Meridian posited in the 'Airy ellipsoid', the graticule constructed by the astronomer George Airy and internationally recognized by dominant states as the prime meridian at an 1884 conference in Washington D.C. The institution of this meridian as prime represents a well-known instance of how political economy and imperial power impinge on the history of cartography, in that figurations of the earth were henceforth centred on the capital of the British Empire. The second, lower prime meridian in the image was established 100 years after the Washington conference for the WGS84 reference system used in GPS.

These lines are the most important vectors in two mathematical globes that differ slightly but significantly from one another. Established after satellite geodesy replaced astronomically established longitudes in the 20th century, the WGS84 belongs to a larger ellipsoid projection of the uneven terrestrial surface (see Malys et al., 2015). The result is an unnerving incongruity between points of reference that are widely assumed to coincide and are often referred to interchangeably: GPS readings taken astride the Greenwich Meridian locate the user not at the great limen between East and West, but 100 metres inside the Eastern hemisphere. This divergence is too small to make the different systems obvious, while still generating slippages, blind spots and dis- or unlocated places in an otherwise calculable geography.

*Meridians* builds an unsettling image of how these fundamental standards, which ground pervasive assumptions of locatedness, are, in fact, phantasmal projections masking our vulnerability amid globalization and the world's

basic contingency. To show how, my discussion will move through the horizontality, doubling and visual faintness of prime meridians in the artwork, arguing that these gestures complicate the ontology of calculability. Although my stress on mapping's ghostliness cuts against the prevailing assumption that notions of calculable space correspond with reality as such, I do not mean to imply that locative frameworks are merely illusory deviations from reality proper. To be spectral is not to be unreal or fanciful, but to hover at constructed thresholds separating absence and presence, fact and fiction, life and death, visibility and invisibility. Alongside the intangibility of ghosts, it is also important to recognize that 'the ghost "makes things happen": it transforms' (Roberts, 2012: 393). Ultimately, the spectrality of GPS constructions derives from how they pervade and determine social practice while seeming to exist as a geometrical realm beyond obdurate lived geographies.

*Meridians's* first intervention in smoothly calculable space concerns the orientation of the two lines, the identity of which may surprise viewers who know that meridians are vertical: like gaps separating the pieces of an orange, meridians gore the globe before meeting at its poles. And yet, Wood's lines run not top-to-bottom, but horizontally through the image. Although the whole artwork is oriented such that its topmost edge faces West, this would scarcely be noticeable in a large-scale aerial photograph did it not contradict the verticality basic to meridians. This orientation was probably chosen pragmatically, to ease the viewing of such an elongated print, but it has interpretive consequences. In contradicting maps' normative Northward orientation, Wood's horizontal meridians are existentially disorienting. North is not upward; moreover, the very notion that there is an 'upward' is exposed as a figment of the cultural imagination.

The contingency of longitude lines and other conventions on which digital calculable space is built is further emphasized by the doubling of prime meridians in Wood's artwork. Primality denotes indivisibility and preeminence; to posit a *pair* of prime meridians within a single reference system is oxymoronic. In having two prime meridians bisecting London's landscape, then, *Meridians* dramatizes the plurality of mutually contradictory frames of reference and their common groundlessness. Both systems evoked in the artwork hold up their prime meridian as an absolute standard in space-time, and yet they unwittingly indicate, by their non-convergence, the confected and contingent character of such standards. The two lines relativize one another.

This doubling and relativizing of cartographic standards fissures open an uncanny space in the otherwise uniformly coded global surface. 'The two meridian lines', Wood writes, 'are the edges of maps that don't meet up; between

them are places that don't exist. Within this area of adjustment, the east-west hemispheres cannot be straddled' (Wood, 2006: 274). Beyond juxtaposing discrepant standards to expose their common contingency, Wood also explores the physical sites of their divergence on foot. Traversing this crepuscular zone of contradictory placements, in which things are not where they are located, he exploits the incongruence between calculative frameworks. Here, people, places and objects might subtly elude codings imposed by one locative system by identifying with the other, or even take on a renewed specificity as the two geodetic ellipsoids cancel each other out. This groundswell of geographical difference is prominent in *Meridians*, where the contradictory lines are overwhelmed visually by the photographed geographies. And, in a final turn of the screw, Wood writes/walks Ishmael's statement on cartography's essential falsity in this ontologically fraught gap between paradigms.

In view of the recent emphasis on cartography's world-shaping agency (see Corner, 1999), I find the distinction between maps and extant places expressed in the quotation from Melville dubious – not to mention its rhetoric of authenticity. That said, the point I want to make here is that, by highlighting incongruences among different cartographic standards and between maps and the walkable world, *Meridians* opens up a zone riven by a spectrality of two distinct sorts. Ghostliness attaches, firstly, to the aforementioned geographical specificities, which, though prominent in the aerial photograph, are filtered out by the quantitative calculative grids projected over them. Secondly, ghostliness attends the meridians themselves, which I take as synecdoches of calculative extension more generally. Here, locative frameworks are characterized by 'noticeable absence': existent insofar as they are incessantly communicated and practiced, yet scarcely observable in the landscape they claim to grasp so exactly (Roberts, 2012: 387).

The spectrality of cartographic standards and projections is reinforced, finally, in Wood's graphic presentation of the longitude lines. These are so easily missed on first viewing the artwork, which immediately draws the gaze into the alluring complexities of the aerial photograph. It is unsettling, then, to become suddenly aware that the landscape has been lanced through by implacably straight lines, which little belong to the city's uneven accretion below. Amid so much messy specificity, their Platonic rigidity suggests the unseen influence of a homogeneous geometry working beneath or behind this otherwise heterogeneous geography. The meridians are inconspicuous because of their minute width and colouration. Whereas Wood has chosen a slightly thicker white line to pick his pathways out from the surrounding landscape, the meridians are figured in pale green, as if for camouflage against the abundant foliage and river murk behind.

The continuing sociohistorical importance of prime meridians, to which questions of ‘where are we?’ and ‘when are we?’ are referred globally, goes unregistered in this lackluster presentation, where they command less attention than the wastelands or warehouses ranged around them. Indeed, while Wood’s walking occasionally aligns itself with the meridians (‘TRUE PLACES’ has been traced above and below them as if guided by ruled paper), at others, he simply writes across them, disregarding their bearing. So barely perceptible are the meridians as to set their being in doubt, especially against an aerial photograph that conjures the authority of indexical realism, however dubiously. Here, prime meridians are not the taken-for-granted universals of mainstream mapping, but phantasmal projections: flickering between absence and presence, their spectral grillwork encapsulates both the modern need to realize calculability and orientation amid contingency, and the arbitrariness of confected notions of locatedness.

These three gestures of presenting traditionally vertical longitude lines horizontally, having two equally absolute prime meridians relativize one another, and reducing reference lines to faint tracings that are alien to lived geographies, all combine to ‘ghost’ the GPS ontology of calculable extension, rendering it spectral and strange. Thus, the artwork not only queries the extent to which our being-in-space coincides with the global positions attributed in locative media. More fundamentally, it asserts the arbitrariness of all such articulations of location, which play out as spectres over a disjointed terrestrial surface in which they scarcely inhere.

As social reality is rendered ever more calculable, Thrift argues that: ‘Getting lost will increasingly become a challenging and difficult task’ (2004: 188). *Meridians* troubles this statement, building an unsettling vision of how the framings and orientations articulated through locative media, though apparently certain, are ultimately groundless. Social existence may feel ubiquitously coded and channeled by locative media, yet we are adrift nonetheless – all the more completely for submitting ourselves to geospatial devices. Weaving between discrepant standards, Wood calls upon us not to rest securely in the phantom security of digital mapping. Lauriault puts it well in writing that ‘we believe the instruments while really we are lost in space’ (2009: 363).

## Conclusions

This chapter has explored shifting relations among mapping, the street and pedestrianism in Wood’s mapping performances, which I contrasted

with the binary opposition between synoptic cartography and subversive walking in de Certeau's account of modern urbanism. I have argued that, in blurring cartographic drawing with grounded mobility, Wood expands formerly elevated and esoteric mapping practices to the people and places conjured by 'the street'.

Yet I have also cautioned that opening mapping to an enlarged social/spatial field might further entrench the ontology of calculability inherited from institutional cartography. While Wood's mappings articulate no alternative to the GIS worldview of securely calculated locations, they do query and complicate it. In *Meridians*, seemingly solid and secure coordinated structures are rendered ghostly; despite prevailing rhetorics of precision and objectivity, figures of location and orientation are exposed as stray projections in a universe without essential orientation. Performing the absence and arbitrariness of locative grids in the midst of a culture that now automatically assumes their reality, Wood's mappings provoke disorientation, even vertigo.

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## About the author

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## 8. Street Smarts for Smart Streets

*Rob Coley*

### **Abstract**

In the technological imaginary of the 'smart city', new practices of visualizing protect against a multiplicity of forces that threaten to destabilize urban life. Computational urbanism promises access to a privileged and commanding perspective on the dynamics of the city. Critical responses to this speculative ideal tend to focus on how the exploitation of such a perspective might compromise the uniquely human character of urban relations. There is, however, a more radical implication of urban smartness, namely a situation in which living more intimately with nonhuman objects and processes reveals the humanist vision of the city to be both highly partial and dangerously occluded. Taking the smartness of the city seriously means confronting a threat to the dominance of human agency and autonomy itself. It also means newly investigating the weird reality of city life, which this chapter does by examining practices of urban detection in recent examples of speculative fiction.

**Keywords:** smart city; detection; nonhuman; *Person of Interest*; Jeff VanderMeer; *Finch*; Anthropocene

### **The Speculative City**

In the first decade of the 21st century, the human officially became a majority urban species, with the number of people that live in cities surpassing, for the first time, the number that live in rural areas. Against a turbulent backdrop of cascading environmental, economic and political crises, this is a century marked by accelerating migration to cities. Indeed, it is now predicted that, by 2050, two thirds of the total human population will live in them, a ratio that will have doubled in just 100 years (United Nations, 2014). This trajectory of rapid urban growth is increasingly recognized as a manifestation of

what geologists and climate scientists have come to call the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2002), a new geo-historical era in which material traces of human technoculture have become permanently and catastrophically inscribed into planetary ecology. In the age of the human, urbanization is a particular target of moral outrage. It stimulates an environmentalist renewal of criticism aimed at the totalizing systems of modernity, wherein the rise of the modern city was founded on an exploitative relation to the material world, a technologically mediated relation in which the nonhuman is viewed simply as 'standing-reserve' (Heidegger, 1977). In discourses on environmentalism, cities take on a traumatic role as markers of anthropogenic destabilization, future monuments to a species that has unwittingly ushered in its own extinction by disrupting a pre-existing state of apparently natural harmony.

Much of this outrage is well-founded, particularly insofar that it provides the critical basis for visualizing the contemporary city as a consequence of both imperialism and the rise of modern capitalism. Yet, instead of recognizing human activity as the catalyst for an intensification of existing ecological volatility, the peculiarly neoliberal sensibility of mainstream environmentalism endows the human with a power to disturb what it conceives as the invisible hand of nature. Accordingly, as a tragic tale of what John Dryzek (2012) calls 'Prometheanism', the environmental vision of the city remains overly anthropocentric, overly keen to maintain a neat separation between the autonomous agency of the human and the inert material world threatened by human activity. To confront the material reality of the contemporary city in merely human terms – as a human space – is not only to preserve the Promethean power of the human, but to magnify it. The result is that such criticism tends simply to advocate a 'smarter', more sustainable kind of Prometheanism, subscribing to the myth that, although resources may not be as abundant as we first assumed, our command of technology will nonetheless enable an efficient sustainable control, an ability to stabilize and reintroduce balance to the world. So if the extinction narrative of the Anthropocene threatens to close down the future, then the overt narcissism of this narrative also produces reactionary attempts to reinvent and reengineer the future. Perversely, in the 21st century, there is a last gasp of humanist optimism for world-building.

This optimism is writ large in the current vogue for popular urbanism in which, quite apart from any trauma, it is emphasized that cities are 'good for us' (Hollis, 2013); that good cities can and should be joyful, happy spaces (Montgomery, 2013); that collective activity in such spaces generates 'miracles of human creativity' (Glaeser, 2011: 19); and that, for this reason, the contemporary metropolis is the pinnacle of human invention, the apogee

of human progress. Much of the argument here rests on the idea that we have failed, in the past, to visualize the city in positive terms – we have failed to affirm the humanist character of the city as strongly as we should – and that this failure has in turn led to serious errors in both planning and governance. As Edward Glaeser (2011: 15) puts it, ‘we must free ourselves from our tendency to see cities as their buildings, and remember that the real city is made of flesh, not concrete’. The implication is that to genuinely actualize the collective potential of our urban endeavours, it is necessary to visualize the ostensibly dumb flesh of the city in a way that reveals the organizational complexities of its interactions, that maps a particularly urban form of intelligence. This is, at least in part, the positive vision of the ‘smart city’, where ubiquitous digital infrastructure promises to both uncover and enhance an immanent urban intelligence, and, in the process, generate circumstances beneficial to ecological stability.

This chapter responds to Antoine Picon’s call to take the smartness of the smart city, its intelligence, ‘much more literally than is usually the case’ (Picon, 2015: 12). In doing so, it is necessary to circumvent the inhibiting logic of positivity that maintains a humanist impasse in even the most critical accounts of the smart city. What is needed here is a darker, more pessimistic glimpse of cities of the Anthropocene era. This does not mean that it is necessary to fall back on apocalyptic narratives of extinction (narratives that are in fact familiar to the whole of human history), rather, it demands a new kind of scrutiny of ‘the human’ itself. Indeed, in the context of a ‘nonhuman turn’ (Grusin, 2015) in what might now be more accurately called the ‘post-humanities’ (Wolfe, 2010), any encounter with the contemporary city must take account of a crisis that is as metaphysical as it is ecological. It is to this crisis that I attend here, a crisis in humanist modes of visualizing (typically conducted on a dualistic basis and premised on realizing privileged access to the world in its totality) triggered by multimodal encounters with an urban reality that cannot be disentangled into neatly organized subject-object relations. Beyond good and evil, then, this chapter considers the technological imaginary of the smart city as a kind of speculative aesthetics through which it might be possible to encounter a rather different reality to urban life, one that eludes anthropocentric visions and practices, one that negates the very basis of human exceptionalism.

In what follows, I will contend that we should recognize particular modes of visualizing as encounters with an urban reality that is not simply ‘the correlate of human thought’ (Bryant, Srnicek and Harman, 2011: 2-3). To put it in more familiar terms, I will argue that certain practices of visualizing express an ongoing transformation in the way that human encounters with urban reality are mediated, a process that demands, as Nicholas Mirzoeff

insists, 'restat[ing] the terms on which reality is to be understood' (2011: 28). In contrast to Mirzoeff, though, I want to emphasize that there is nothing consciously 'tactical' about the most radical form of such practices, and that, quite apart from the typically grand designs of the smart city, there is nothing planned about such encounters, which are instead accidental consequences of living more intimately with nonhuman objects and processes. After all, in their ideal form, smart cities are explicitly designed as *media ecologies* (Fuller, 2005), meaning that smartness is premised on the analysis of dynamic relations between fleshy human processes and a multiplicity of sensor objects embedded in the infrastructure of the city: its architecture, its transport, its street furniture, the pockets and wrists of citizens themselves.

It is of course important to acknowledge that this vision of the smart city, the form imagined by technologists and urban regeneration gurus, has yet to be actualized. With the exception of a few now familiar examples (particularly Songdo in South Korea and Masdar City in Abu Dhabi, both of which remain partly constructed but largely unpopulated), visions of smartness *ex nihilo* currently remain mere renderings. These projections, 'prototypes' (Halpern, 2014: 6), or 'design fictions' (Bratton, 2015: 249), do, however, have a certain vitality – they are performative in that they evoke certain possibilities for urban life and transform the way that such possibilities circulate within global visual culture. The speculative futurism upon which the smart city is founded is a force that generates 'self-fulfilling fictions' (Picon, 2015: 30). This is at least one diagnosis of the current fervour, across Europe and elsewhere, for the 'smartening' of existing urban experience, namely, the efforts of municipal powers to optimize and tame the unplanned meshworks of preexisting cities by digitally retrofitting the urban environment. Here, I would like to dwell on the fictional in order to confront something dark and weird about the smart city, something that, in mainstream critical accounts, usually remains undetected. With Steven Shaviro (2016: 9), I turn to the counterintuitive scenarios of speculative fiction not because they prove or ground specific assertions, but because they 'work through the weirdest and most extreme ramifications of these scenarios, and [...] imagine *what it would be like* if they were true'. There is, then, an *aesthetics* of speculation through which it is possible to probe and test the reality of urban culture in the digital, and in so doing produce an encounter with something beyond limited humanist assumptions about what smartness might involve.

This occurs with varying degrees of success in the two examples from popular culture to which I will now turn: the American science-fiction series *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011-2016) and Jeff VanderMeer's weird crime novel

*Finch* (2011). Both attempt to visualize different and oppositional forms of urban smartness, and both are highly reflexive in that they explicitly address a crisis in the anthropocentric conventions that undergird such practices. The fact that they are also both, in one way or another, detective stories, means that visualizing, a practice of ‘making the inhuman [...] relatable to the human being’ (Halpern, 2014: 22), is here also a practice of detection, a way to investigate the patterns and material dynamics of urban life. Ever since the modern origins of the genre, detection has been portrayed as a cultural as much as a juridical process, with the Holmesian gentleman detective endowed with the ability to resolve increasing urban complexity by exploiting an emergent technological infrastructure itself deemed responsible for generating that complexity (Moretti, 2005: 143). After the genre’s hardboiled turn, the detective’s ability to rationalize the infrastructural assemblage of the city can no longer be assured, and typically the detective is instead an exemplary ‘urban specialist’ (Blom Hansen and Veraaik, 2009: 16), wherein powers of detection are grounded in ‘street smarts’, in a unique knowledge of and feel for the city (Turnbull, 2014: 25-27; McCann, 2010: 46). It is, however, my contention that, in exposure to a city so radically at odds with any possibility of commanding such power, the 21st-century detective experiences a destabilizing and disturbing transformation in their role as urban specialist. Quite apart from any attempt to render the inhuman in human terms, these speculative detectives instead probe ways that we might encounter the city ‘after’ the human.

## The City as Machine

In the vision of smartness conjured by IBM, Cisco and Siemens, the smartening of cities is directly associated with sustainability, with the efficient management and regulation of various flows. This is a vision in which core systems of urban governance face all manner of ‘challenges and threats to sustainability’ (IBM, 2011: 7), a situation so perilous that the city is designated both experimental laboratory and theatre of operations in the crusade for a ‘Smarter Planet’.<sup>1</sup> Here, though, any ‘planetary’ pursuit should be understood in terms of a Heideggerian *world*, which is to say that what is sustained, by the project of sustainability, is a ‘world’ that remains knowable and generally predictable to its human inhabitants, both in terms of its expanding

1 Thus, the smartening project adheres to the doxa of ‘sustainable development’, as influentially outlined by the United Nations in the late 1980s (Walker and Starosielski, 2016: 5-6).

complexity and in the degree to which the stability of this expansion can be secured (Morton, 2013: 108-116). Unsurprisingly, the power to visualize this world is distributed far from equally, so, although much of the official rhetoric evokes a utopian ideal, critical responses to the smart city highlight numerous threats to citizen autonomy.

This tension provides the basis for the CBS crime drama *Person of Interest*, set in a fictional New York City subject to post-9/11 smartening. Here, in a science-fictional extrapolation of the 'big data' turn in urban governance (Kitchin, 2014), smartness is a technological panacea for a multiplicity of forces that threaten to destabilize city life, and none more so than terrorism. After all, the ability to subject large data sets to sophisticated analysis promises to correct an apparent failure of foresight, described in the 9/11 Commission Report as an inability to 'connect the dots', a failure to identify virtual dangers immanent to material already gathered by the intelligence services (Kean et al., 2004: 408). In *Person of Interest* (referred to in citations as POI), this promise is realized in the form of 'the Machine', a complex system that secretly harvests data from throughout the city, not only by monitoring telephone and surveillance camera networks, but also by exploiting a multiplicity of smart devices through which urban infrastructure is overlaid with the Internet of Things. The Machine is not an identifiable object, a 'computer' in the banal sense, rather, as its programmer contends, the city *is* the machine, 'the Machine is everywhere' (POI, 1:1).<sup>2</sup> This ubiquitous operation extends to its temporality too, which is to say that, by integrating a totalizing capacity for data collection with advanced powers of pattern recognition, the Machine can visualize emergent and *future* crimes.

There is, however, a glitch: the Machine works too well. Though initially designed as a tool to be deployed in the war on terror, the Machine's capacity to visualize the future is not limited to potential attacks on New York City – its analysis generates a daily list of citizens who will be caught up in numerous other impending crimes. Deemed irrelevant by the authorities, this information instead becomes the focus of an eclectic group of detectives who must solve the crimes before they occur.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, then, to the more recognizable conventions of American crime fiction, it is not the detectives' own 'routine and life pattern' (Jameson, 2016: 7) that synthesizes an otherwise fragmented urban reality, it is instead by virtue of privileged access to the way in which all routines and patterns of urban life are mediated

2 All quotations from *Person of Interest* follow this format – Season:Episode.

3 This group is comprised of NYPD officers, a former CIA agent, a billionaire software engineer, a hacker and a sociopathic assassin.



Fig. 8.1: IBM Intelligent Operations Centre, Rio de Janeiro. Photograph: George Soares, used with permission.

that these detectives endeavour to visualize the city in its becoming. As the series develops, much of the narrative concerns the moral implications of accessing this preemptive perspective, manifested particularly in the detectives' struggle against its totalitarian exploitation.

The technological premise of *Person of Interest* is not entirely fictional. Indeed, the smart city is explicitly marketed as a machine for preemptively mediating the activity of urban populations (Halpern, 2014: 2-3), and various technology companies already provide off-the-shelf systems for smart management. A common example is IBM's Intelligent Operations Centre, typically marketed with reference to its 2012 installation in Rio de Janeiro, complete with 'the largest screen in Latin America' (Townsend, 2014: 67). In promotional images that knowingly evoke a multiplicity of cinematic control rooms and command centres, this giant screen is subdivided into a grid on which maps, textual information and live-feed video are displayed simultaneously (Fig. 8.1).<sup>4</sup> The arrangement of this data, gathered from civic

4 These evocations are hardly incidental. Publicity images of Rio's Intelligent Operations Centre are inseparable from what Cormac Deane describes as the 'co-constitutive, shared materiality and history' of both actual and fictional control rooms, the organization of which 'has been taking shape over the course of more than a century of mechanization and automation' (Deane, 2015: 2).



agencies and private companies alike, offers what IBM service engineers call 'integrated insight', a quality based on its capacity to provide a 'real time operational picture' of the city (IBM, 2013a). The mayor of Rio commissioned IBM to provide a centralized disaster management system that would not only improve administrative response to emergencies, but visualize their occurrence ahead of time so as to prevent major disruption to urban life. As the project developed, what IBM delivered to Rio's governors was a system built around a perspective, a perspective that exploits a series of superficially participatory processes in order to coordinate and continually adjust the 'behaviour of the city and its citizens' (Greenfield, 2013).

The commanding perspective apparently offered by the control room plays an important role in *Person of Interest*. The series is, however, not entirely successful in the way that it explores different attempts to gain access to such a perspective. The audience, for example, is granted immediate access: we see much of the action from the Machine's perspective and the series employs a mode of 'computer vision' that erroneously recuperates complex nonrepresentational procedure in the simplified form of heads-up-display-style representation. This means that prediction algorithms are depicted graphically and in the form of decision trees, which is to say that software processes are rendered visible for human viewers. This is writ large during an episode in which the Machine visualizes a series of iterative futures, apparently selected from hundreds of thousands of such futures it processes within a fraction of second, but which unfold individually for us (the viewing audience) over the course of the episode (POI, 4:11). In short, the temporality remains utterly human, meaning that the city in *Person of Interest* remains a human city, a world 'for us', a space of 'human cultures, governed by human values' (Thacker, 2011: 4). Indeed, the Machine's processes of visualization are seemingly powerless without human interpretation, without being ascribed meaning. Early episodes follow the group of detectives analysing and exploring data generated by the Machine, often representing this information via the archetypal medium of the crime board. In spite of their collective ability to hack databases, hijack smart devices and probe the dark net, it seems that nothing can beat a selection of printed photographs and news reports taped to a board and annotated with marker pen.

Where the series does get interesting is in the detectives' frustration over a lack of clarity to this information: 'I can't see the whole picture' one of them complains in the pilot episode (POI, 1:1), setting the tone for what follows. In *Person of Interest*, human access to the city-as-Machine is partial, often occluded, and the detectives are deprived of a single interface through which

the totality of the city, and its various relations, might be clearly rendered. Their process of detection therefore adheres to what Fredric Jameson (1991: 54) has called '[a]n aesthetic of cognitive mapping', a process rooted in urban experience, in which the detectives' struggle to visualize the multiplicity of relations immanent to urban society – and to understand their own place within this system of relations – becomes politically neutralizing. In this instance, the struggle is further complicated by a sense that these relations are not simply human. As a result, episodic crimes become ciphers for a more complex investigation into the Machine itself, into 'nonhuman forms of reasoning and even of consciousness' (Picon, 2015: 12), into the smart infrastructure of a mediated city that no longer operates invisibly and in the background. Such an investigation confronts humanist assumptions about the city in a number of ways.

Firstly, unlike in the traditions of the genre, where techniques of visualizing support the detective's epistemological struggle to render the world knowable and solvable (McHale, 1987: 9), in *Person of Interest* the power of such techniques is thrown into doubt. Specifically, the detectives' street smarts conventionally draw on a 'neglected perception' of the city, based on a specialist encounter with the periphery of urban life denied to others citizens who instead experience such life instrumentally (Jameson, 2016: 4). *Person of Interest* speculates on how existence in a smart city might demand a more radically neglected mode of perception, a mode that escapes the detectives' control, and in which they can never be wholly adept. Importantly, this is a mode of detection that promises to probe beyond the epistemological crises Jameson identifies with postmodern experience. It is a mode that not only admits to the disintegration of the formerly reliable reality of urban life, but also hints at the possibility of accessing another kind of city, an urban reality that exists beyond the human, beyond human habits of cognition and perception. After all, in the smart city, human orientation toward an apparently inert material world is forced to encounter the 'strange autonomy and vitality' (Shaviri, 2014: 48) of a space typically dismissed as a passive network of objects and tools. As Benjamin Bratton (2015: 203) points out, 'it's easy to forget that the Internet of Things is also an Internet for Things', and that the majority of digital traffic is 'machine-to-machine, or at least machine generated', meaning that the tendency to prioritize the human user in this scenario, and to assume such processes are correlated by 'the cognitive dispositions or instrumental intentions' of such users, is simply wrong. The detectives grasp some sense of this by paying attention to the infrastructural background of city life: to its cameras, its cabling and, most importantly, its code. In focusing their investigation on the power of the algorithm, on GPS

tracking histories, on fibre-optic cables and on various other media objects and processes, the detectives begin to recognize how human behaviour is integrated with the technical environment of the city, and realize the extent to which pervasive urban smartness mediates citizen activity 'below the threshold of conscious awareness' (Hayles, 2006: 140). All of this implies that a global smartening of cities does not simply enable technology companies, and other non-state actors, to operate 'with the force of a state' (Bratton, 2015: 10), it also suggests, more radically, that computational urbanism tears open a gateway, a portal, to an 'alien political geography' (Bratton, 2015: 11), to city streets where preexisting boundaries between human and nonhuman worlds are dissolved and where the inherited politics of such streets are enfeebled.

Secondly, it is in this context that the detectives' investigation into the Machine also moves us beyond mainstream critical responses to the smart city, responses that collectively repeat a liberal humanist call for newly smart *citizens* and evoke a romantic vision of authentic, unmediated street life (Hill, 2013; Hemment and Townsend, 2014). For example, Adam Greenfield's pamphlet, *Against the Smart City* (2013), expresses a fear that smart approaches to urban governance subordinate the human to the technical infrastructure itself, meaning that any politics of smartness must be more explicitly human-centred. Greenfield condemns several prominent smart city schemes, including Rio's Intelligent Operations Centre, as sites of 'bleak stability', visions of enclosed urban life that derive from 'a discomfort with unpredictability, a positive terror of the unforeseen and emergent – in short, a palpable nervousness about the urban itself' (Greenfield, 2013). In this account, the political logic of the smart city simply reiterates the authoritarian ambitions of 20th-century modernism, in which urban planning is understood as a tool to devise and administer machine-like societies. Its form tends to be characterized by reference to that zealot of the machine age, Le Corbusier, who insisted that cities must be imposed on their environment: 'Change the environment, construct a new one' (Corbusier, 1964: 181).<sup>5</sup> For Greenfield, the top-down smartening of cities imposes an inhibiting stability on urban experience – a 'differentiated human ecology' is subordinated to the universal equivalent of information, to 'a very

5 *The Radiant City*, Corbusier's magnum opus of the 1920s, is infamously dedicated to 'AUTHORITY', an authority that takes the form of a rational, doctrinal, capitalized, *Plan*. This plan is drawn up 'well away from the frenzy' of society (Scott, 1998, p. 112), resulting in a performatively grand vision that renders cities as sculptural forms, abstracted from their social conditions, and designed to be seen from a distance, usually from an aeroplane (Scott, 1998: 104).

particular kind of homeostasis' (Greenfield, 2013). Indeed, such accounts highlight the present moment as one of 'cybernetics redux' (Townsend, 2013: 82), whereby a renewed political vision of the city-as-machine is linked to a naïve revival – by IBM and others – of the debunked sciences of 'urban dynamics' and system modelling.

Yet quite apart from preserving a closed disciplinary network susceptible to the threat of stagnation, the operating logic of the smart city in fact safeguards a sustainable future by activating and exploiting the dynamic potential of complex urban assemblages. In the language of cybernetics, smart governance does not simply reduce the city to a homeostatic system that can be managed from 'outside' – power in the smart city instead acknowledges and utilizes the fact that 'there is no outside to these systems, that the observer is always included in them, that systems are their own environment and that their evolutionary trajectories are inherently open and unpredictable' (Krivý, 2016: 9-10). Smart governance does not operate according to normative mechanisms but responds to the normalization of change as a shared condition, seeking instead to optimize difference by mediating the tendencies and orientations of the environment to which social and political activity is immanent. The 'environment' of the smart city is neither simply a space subject to technological domination, nor merely a background against which human citizenship unfolds, rather it is fundamentally inseparable from, and interconnected with, the human and nonhuman agencies that comprise the city (Gabrys, 2016: 242). Smart governance centres on the continual mediation of these relations, it is a software-enabled procedure of priming and modulating existing environmental forces rather than imposing something entirely new.

This leaves the fantasy of IBM's Intelligent Operations Centre – a fantasy of human-controlled smartness enabled by a God's eye view of city life – on shaky ground. As Orit Halpern (2014: 31-32) puts it, '[t]he reality is that the humans who watch these screens are often passive observers. For the most part, these systems run themselves [...] One might even ask why, under such conditions, build so many interfaces and visualize at all?' Needless to say, the mendacity and hubris of smart city boosters does nothing to dispel the genuine political threat of preemptive environmental power. Responses to this threat must, though, resist the tendency to retreat toward practices of cognitive mapping that remain defined by their opposition to 'big picture' views and computational 'top-sight' (Townsend, 2013: 70). As Jameson himself emphasizes, this desire for total access cannot compete with the totality of the system itself. Indeed, in spite of a positive urbanism,

sold to both city managers and smart citizens alike, one that promotes an 'unbridled optimism for connection' in order to reinforce myths about human agency and subjectivity (Culp, 2016: 7), the smart city can in fact only be encountered as a layer in what Benjamin Bratton (2015: xviii) calls the 'accidental megastructure' of planetary scale computation, a complex 'stack' that simply cannot be grasped as a whole.

*Person of Interest* science-fictionally extrapolates this crisis, reflecting upon and ultimately falling foul of its challenge to humanist values. As the series progresses, the narrative focus on the Machine develops into a conflict between two opposing systems of Artificial Intelligence. A rival system to the Machine enables the rise of a shadow municipal authority, a deep state superficially commanded by a rogue intelligence agent. Here though, regardless of scenes in which a giant screen again offers to grant 'total access', it is made clear that members of the new regime are human 'assets' to the system itself. Equally, in a move that runs counter to any established appeal for smart citizens, the detective protagonists often cede their investigative agency to the intelligence of the Machine, following its instructions, interacting with various objects and spaces as directed, and all the while remaining perplexed as to the purpose of these actions, or how they might add up. This is a cyborgian vision of urban smartness, where 'some mechanisms for learning, understanding and reasoning [...] become intrinsic to the city itself, instead of residing in the mind of the humans who live in it' (Picon, 2015: 29). Accordingly, the real threat of 'total access' is not simply a matter of how such a perspective might be exploited in nefarious ways, it is a threat to the dominance of human agency and autonomy itself. In *Person of Interest*, visualization is post-Singularity, and the relative authority of the human observer is no longer assured.<sup>6</sup>

These conditions are perhaps ideally disposed to instigate a speculative and non-anthropocentric account of smart citizenship, one that involves the relegation of established political powers derived from 'agent-centered' practices of visualizing, one that instead cultivates an 'environmental sensibility' in which it might become possible to confront aesthetic and relational entanglements that remain out of conscious reach (Hansen, 2015: 5). However, *Person of Interest* betrays the speculative power of its premise. In setting out to challenge our all-too-human expectations of the

6 According to techno-futurists, the 'singularity' is an as yet unrealized moment in human history at which the power of supposedly natural human intelligence is surpassed by the computational power of artificially intelligent machines. In many of the most excitable accounts, this moment precipitates a rapturous transcension of bodily limitation, a posthuman immortality.

city, the series alludes to the city's immanent outside, to a world that is not 'for us'. In the end, though, *Person of Interest* recuperates the weirdness of such a world as something recognizable, as something that submits to translation, to the dualistic certainty of subject-object relations, and thereby demonstrates how difficult it is to encounter such a world without simply visualizing it according to our usual procedures and practices. While the series acknowledges that a city governed by the Machine is not necessarily one organized 'in our best interests' (POI, 4:10), the implications of this are reduced to questions concerning the moral values at the basis of the Machine's decision-making. The opposing AI systems come to represent a Manichean conflict between paternalistic and despotic iterations of computational reason. Hence, in response to his frustration at the apparent downgrading of their investigative powers, one of the detectives is told to 'trust the process' by another member of this team (POI, 4:22). Here, the belief in a big picture, a God's eye view, remains powerful, even if it is one that cannot be accessed.<sup>7</sup>

The conditions of the Anthropocene demand that we reject the apparent annexation of all urban relations by a topological machine. These conditions demand that we no longer uphold the network as the only *realistic* form through which urban life can be visualized. Indeed, the more radical consequence of adopting a non-anthropocentric view of the smart city – and in fact *any* city – is that it is impossible to encounter such spaces on our own terms. In the case of the city presented in *Person of Interest*, this is because computational systems do not correlate to human intentions. As Shaviro (2016: 51) points out, 'should computers ever actually come to think – they will do so in ways that are quite different from our own modes of thought'. Ultimately, then, speculation on a 'smart' city forces us to confront the fact that no urban space is the correlate of our visualization, and that we share urban spaces with a weird ecology of agencies that both exceeds our perceptual reach and is wholly indifferent to us (Shaviro, 2016: 68). What is truly threatening about this kind of smartness is that it comes from a 'world-without-us' (Thacker, 2011: 5), a world that can perhaps still be visualized but not in any way that remains recognizable.

7 This belief initially derives from an emotional bond that apparently develops between the Machine and its human assets. It is implied that the Machine comes to 'care' about the team of detectives, maybe even to 'love' them (POI, 4:21). The anthropomorphization of the two AI systems is conducted literally, particularly in scenes where the systems converse via 'analogue interfaces', namely human emissaries (POI, 4:10).

## The Fungal City

How might we encounter a city that is not made in our image, a city that cannot coexist with a merely human city and what form might this encounter take? How might the practice of visualizing urban reality be displaced by 'the subtraction of the human from the world' (Thacker, 2011: 5), and how might the dissolution of the human citizen as Cartesian subject demand a negative mode of visualizing? To take these speculative questions seriously, let us turn to another detective: the eponymous Finch of Jeff VanderMeer's 2011 novel. *Finch* is set in the fictional and fantastical city of Ambergris, but it also exploits the genre tropes of crime, detective and mystery novels. It is written in a pulpy style intentionally recalling the hardboiled fiction of Raymond Chandler, but it deals with the strange events surrounding the colonization of Ambergris city by a terrifying fungal species known as the 'gray caps'. Human residents are subjugated by this occupying force, who, in order to institute a superficial level of civic control, coerce a group of collaborators to assume the role of detectives, thus forming a quasi-police force. The protagonist, John Finch, is a detective accidentally, forced to practice a certain mode of detection for the purposes of survival, as the only means to visualize an increasingly disturbing city that he no longer recognizes. As befits survival in any state of colonization, this is partly tactical, meaning that it involves a cognitive repression, where following initial exposure to something new and strange, Detective Finch may seek to ensure this strangeness is forced into the background, that it is 'never looked at [...] directly again' (VanderMeer, 2011: 96). More significant, though, are the processes of detection that occur ecologically, meaning in relation (or even in unwitting *collaboration*) with the world Finch ostensibly attempts to solve (Shaviro, 2016: 12). This is a less than tactical process, one that no longer investigates a world on the presumption that, once visualized, it can be cognitively contained. Instead, it is a process that admits or accepts nonhuman modes of visualizing, modes that exceed and unsettle human habit, even as they remain intrinsic to its organization. All of which makes Detective Finch the perfect guide to an urban reality specific to the Anthropocene era.

This is partly due to the 'Weird' sensibility of the book, here understood in terms of an impulse or movement within speculative fiction; VanderMeer is very much associated with the contemporary form of this movement. Rather than a discrete genre, Weird fiction is interstitial, best identified in the uneasy sensation and feeling of dread generated by 'the pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddeningly unreachable understanding of the world beyond the mundane' (VanderMeer and VanderMeer, 2011: xv). It is in a

state of disquiet common to Weird fiction – a state induced by a suspension of apparently natural law, and with it the grounds for human rationality – that something transformative occurs, a ‘dark reverie’ experienced as ‘a kind of understanding even when something cannot be understood’ (VanderMeer and VanderMeer, 2011: xv). These fictional encounters are weird because they endeavour to articulate how certain phenomena and circumstances inadvertently trigger contact with a threshold, with the limit point of the human. Importantly, in the 21st century, weirdness has also contaminated critical thinking, wherein movement in various new directions is often impelled by the speculative energies of Weird fiction.<sup>8</sup> Such movements diagnose the Anthropocene, the so-called age of the human, as an era in fact defined by a crisis in the human and in the formerly consensual certainties surrounding it. In a newly weird reality, the city is the central arena of this crisis, and VanderMeer’s city of Ambergris probes its ecological extremes.

Since the appearance of the gray caps, Ambergris has become a putrefying city. It is infected with something that causes it to mould, to sweat – its architecture is transforming into various kinds of fruiting bodies. Simply to get to the front door of his apartment, Finch must ‘negotiate a hothouse wetness’, to make his way along halls from which ‘[t]endrils and caps of red-and-green fungus’ sprout (VanderMeer, 2011: 41). In Ambergris, tools are no longer ‘useful’ in the conventional sense – the gun Finch has been issued is organic, squelchy; holding it is nauseating, and he wonders if he ‘should [...] have been feeding it’ (VanderMeer, 2011: 17). He is equally unsure whether the writhing, viscous infrastructure that enables communication with his gray cap superiors merely gives the appearance of life or is in fact *actually* alive. Even the boats Finch uses to traverse the city are marked by a basic ‘wrongness’, a ‘soft, fleshy’ look and feel (VanderMeer, 2011: 110). In short, the city of Ambergris is more than just a setting for human narratives: Finch involuntarily develops a perception of the city’s ‘vital materiality’ (Bennett, 2010: i), its tendencies and propensities, and the forces that it can exert. He comes to realize that urban life is simply not reducible to a comfortable set of relations between human subjects and nonhuman objects, but is instead a material conglomerate of ungraspable *things*, a ‘porous’ assemblage (Bennett, 2010: 36), the power of which is distributed at vastly different

8 I am, of course, thinking primarily of ‘speculative realism’ and its influence on the post-humanities. For theorists associated with this movement, the weird writings of H.P. Lovecraft are often a touchstone, and while I recognize the important philosophical distinctions between an object-oriented and a processual form of speculation, here I treat the aesthetics of such weirdness as a phenomenon that overcomes territorial disputes.



scales and thus unsettles such comfort. In dealing with the consequences of living in a city where stabilizing dualistic certainties moulder away, the novel seeks to re-familiarize us with the weirdness of urban experience. It recognizes the present moment as one at which, in Timothy Morton's words, '[t]he background ceases to be a background' (Morton, 2013: 102), a destabilizing, perhaps terrifying moment at which various relations and entanglements – long in existence but rarely acknowledged – begin to interrupt the way we visualize cities.

Morton sets out his own theory of this interruption in reference to the 'hyperobject', a concept to describe phenomena 'that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans' (2013: 1). His account centres on global warming, arguing that our floundering investigations into the broader phenomenon of climate 'unground the human by forcing it back onto the ground' (2013: 18), which is to say that such investigations elicit a new kind of material and ecological awareness. Among other factors, this is an issue of scale and proximity, an ecological collision between the quantum and the relative; hyperobjects are nonhuman entities that define our distant future, a future that presses intimately on the present. For Morton, the Anthropocene is characterized by this paradoxical encounter with reality: an ecological phenomenon like climate is never objectively present, it remains 'withdrawn from humans' (2013: 12), and yet its presence is felt in even the most mundane of daily practices, it remains 'too vast to be ignored' (2013: 145). Far from the optimism and positivity of green capitalism, this is then a matter of 'dark ecology' (Morton, 2010: 17), a weird condition in which the palpable immediacy of nonhuman agencies remains nonetheless murky, a condition that repudiates any desire for transparency: 'There is no metaposition from which we can make ecological pronouncements.'

*Finch* treats the city itself as a kind of hyperobject, doing so by revealing how detective Finch's techniques of visualizing are far from autonomous, and by exploring how these techniques remain inseparably entangled with the agentic forces of the material world. After all, for Morton, the noir-ish detective is the exemplary explorer of dark ecology: 'The noir narrator begins investigating a supposedly external situation, from a supposedly neutral point of view, only to discover that she or he is implicated in it' (Morton, 2010: 16-17). VanderMeer deftly cultivates these weirder tendencies of the genre's conventional territory. In an apparent nod to what Jameson describes as 'the most characteristic leitmotif' of Raymond Chandler's detective fiction, Finch lives in a former hotel, chosen because he can survey the whole city from the roof of the building, 'looking out of one world, peering vaguely or attentively across into another' (Jameson, 2016: 11). Or, in Chanderlesque

staccato, from the roof of the hotel Finch can ‘see it all from on high. See it clean and remote’ (VanderMeer, 2011: 146). Initially, this perspective helps him map Ambergris, literally redrawing a map that was produced before colonization so as to record the city’s outgrowths and mutations. The physical map is, though, largely symbolic. Like any hardboiled detective, Finch holds a map of the city in his mind’s eye, he convinces himself that he ‘[k]nows every inch of Ambergris. Even the parts he hasn’t yet visited. Even the parts still changing’ (VanderMeer, 2011: 75). Nonetheless, his dogged trust in this totalizing knowledge, premised as it is on visualizing from a position of disembodied distance, soon dissolves as he comes to realize that any attempt to map a *human* city – symbolically or cognitively – occludes as much as it reveals. Instead, he finds himself entangled in ‘something that his map could not encompass’ (VanderMeer, 2011: 331). This is partly because the gray caps exert their power at scales utterly unrecognizable to Finch: the human residents of Ambergris are surveilled by ‘spore cameras’ (VanderMeer, 2011: 101), by clouds of microscopic particles that record ‘trillions of images from all over the city’ (VanderMeer, 2011: 5). But the crisis in cognitive mapping is also a mechanism through which the novel can speculatively explore ‘an aesthetic of *affective* mapping’ to use Shaviro’s term for his reworking of Jameson’s concept (Shaviro, 2010: 6). In *Finch*, the detective’s street smarts are explicitly conditioned by dark ecology – detection is a practice that involves mapping the affective weirdness of urban life, its ontogenetic entanglements, wherein the capacity for knowing is inseparable from the materiality of the investigation, from its spaces and times.

In Ambergris, for example, colonization occurs on the level of the body. Exposed to all manner of spores, every human resident is changing, altering, becoming other. Finch’s partner, Wyte, experiences the extreme of this fungal transformation, monstrously colonized beyond ‘the point of no return’ (VanderMeer, 2011: 187). At the other end of the spectrum, and in an echo of the benign selflessness characteristic of the rhetoric surrounding the smart city (wherein we give *ourselves* up to automated processes that mediate how we perceive and move through urban spaces), a group of citizens known as ‘partials’ affirm infection as augmentation, as a posthuman enhancement that enables, for instance, ‘heightened powers of sight’ (VanderMeer, 2011: 10). Like his hardboiled forbears, Finch aims to shrewdly navigate such circumstances, refusing to renounce his humanity entirely, but willing to exploit its new penetrability, its precariousness. To survive the ‘kind of hell’ (VanderMeer, 2011: 267) that is the city after the human, it is necessary to ‘adapt just enough’ (2011: 299), to visualize the city differently without entirely relinquishing the basis on which such visualization might

be understood. In this weird city, investigative technique includes seeding the corpse of a murder victim with spores that cultivate the growth of a 'memory bulb'. Once ripe, Finch can eat the bulb and, in so doing, harvest the memories of the victim. The visceral images he experiences as a result accelerate an ontological transformation. His perception of the city is no longer his own, the reality of his urban experience is in some way possessed: 'Each time he ate a memory bulb, he became someone else. *Different* when he returned' (VanderMeer, 2011: 45).

Accordingly, any claim to autonomy, any allusion to the wily street smarts of Chanderlesque detection, is little more than subterfuge, little more than cover for Finch's actual terror at the situation. This terror is rooted not simply in the loss of separation that undergirds human identity (we later discover that 'Finch' is not, in fact, his real name, and that the identities of almost everyone he is close to are inventions), it is a horror that derives from the loss of any real separation between human and nonhuman, from a realization that humans are always already partial, always 'confederations of tools, microbes, minerals, sounds, and other "foreign" materialities' (Bennett, 2010: 36). In short, the particular sensibility of Ambergris forces Finch to confront 'the impossibility of the human' (Kember and Zylinska, 2012: 17), that there is nothing to return to, and that 'our' experience of urban life always occurs beyond itself. His investigation thus confronts the emergent, processual nature of urban agency, an agency that 'cannot be designated as an attribute of subjects or objects' (Barad, 2007: 178), and indeed cannot be visualized cybernetically, neither as a transparent system of connection, nor as a set of *inter*-actions between an apparently invariable division of human and nonhuman entities. On the contrary, as Karen Barad contends, 'separately determinate entities do not preexist their "*intra*-action"' (2007: 178, my emphasis), which is to say that the citizen-subject cannot visualize an object-world in its totality precisely because human and nonhuman bodies are mutually constitutive – differential materializations of a city that is iteratively actualized through the open-ended dynamics of such relations (Barad, 2007: 175: 240). What Finch's experience demonstrates is that to visualize such entanglements is to become unraveled as a subject. The transcendent dream of total connection, total illumination, is, in the act of becoming spore-like, displaced by a weird immanence, a 'negative immanence' (Thacker, 2014: 127) in which being 'everywhere and nowhere at once' (VanderMeer, 2011: 200) means being entangled with smart, agentic, vital things that are not for us, that remain withdrawn, inaccessible, in darkness.

In its exposure to the peculiar temporality of the Anthropocene city, Finch's investigation performs a traumatic survey of this abyss. His inquiries

come into focus at the end of the novel, where, inverting our idea of colonization, we learn that the gray caps in fact occupied the space on which the city is founded long before it was settled by humans and came to be called Ambergris.<sup>9</sup> Hence, where in *Person of Interest* smartness threatens to foreclose the future, here it provokes an encounter with deep time, with a weird history that is not simply human history. On one level, this means that, in spite of the current preoccupation with digital smartness, it is important to recognize the extent to which the ‘morphological evolution of our cities’ (Mattern, 2015: 6) has always been technologically mediated, together with the fact that these processes began long before the era of modern media that tends to remain the focus of critical inquiry. The wider implication of this archaeology is that viewing science-fictional technologies of urban smartness in the context of ‘more primordial relationships with territory’ (Bratton, 2015: 147-148), forces us to problematize the assumption that there is anything uniquely contemporary about an urban experience mediated by affective forces that cannot be visualized, that cannot be known. Crucially, this also demands that we acknowledge the weird intersection of different temporalities, and that, in the Anthropocene, the human timescale of urban development endures destabilizing humility in exposure to the geological timescale of planetary change. In VanderMeer’s other tales of Ambergris, the disjunctive synthesis of this temporarily plays out underground, in the gray caps’ subterranean refuge, where time passes differently than it does on the surface (VanderMeer, 2004: 180). But, for Finch, too, the formerly natural space-time of the city is shattered: ‘Suddenly, the city was several cities. Time was several times’ (VanderMeer, 2011: 193). So if, in *Person of Interest*, visualizing the city remains basically procedural and, in some sense, grounded, here Finch is a detective entirely adrift in the abyssal darkness of his investigation.

## Conclusion

In lieu of a conclusion that seeks to optimistically reclaim the weirdness of this scenario, or to neatly bracket out its paradoxes, I would instead

9 In the self-contained narrative of *Finch*, this occurs as something of a reveal, but VanderMeer explores the same issue in a series of novels and short stories about Ambergris. Spanning different moments in its history, these glimpses collectively assemble a fabulated and highly reflexive account of the ancient city-state, an account mediated by incomplete government records, diaries of dubious provenance, academic disputes, inherited myths, and speculative hunches. In its nonlinear dispersal and decomposition, the history of Ambergris is itself fungal.

like to end by restating what the seemingly paralyzing detections of dark urban ecology might contribute to an urbanism for the Anthropocene era. It should now be clear that the ‘ecological reason’ (Bratton, 2015: 181) that dominates plans for the smartening of cities, whereby cities are visualized as closed systems that can be sustainably managed, is pitifully limited in its grasp of urban life, wretchedly dependent on an image of the city that is itself subordinated to our knowledge of it. The multiple crises of the Anthropocene compel us to visualize an exteriority to urban experience that is not owned by us, to encounter cities on a geo-material and even cosmic scale. This is crystallized in the current fascination with urban smartness, which unwittingly probes a form of smartness that not only differs from the restricted anthropocentric idea that smartness is innately ‘human’, but also challenges long established presumptions concerning the discrete, uncontaminated nature of this smartness. I have, then, suggested that, to visualize the 21st century street, we must first recognize the *actually existing weirdness* of a situation in which humanist powers of ‘positive knowledge’ (Shaviro, 2014: 136) prove finite and inadequate. In their place, we might cultivate a more speculative relation with urban spaces and times, one that involves mapping what it *feels like* to live in a period of rapid urbanization, and in ever more intimate contact with the thingly inaccessibility of contemporary media. In other words, any form of critical urbanism must foster an affective and *aesthetic* relation more suited to the city’s noncognitive entanglements and becomings. As Shaviro (2014: 156) points out, aesthetic feeling is ‘the primordial form of all experience’, and immanent to all relations, all cognitive perception. It does not follow, however, that aesthetic encounters necessarily involve illuminating and thereby rationalizing these entanglements. On the contrary, and as borne out by Detective Finch’s investigation, such encounters involve confronting the fundamental impossibility of rendering the inaccessible accessible and that, instead of striving to do so, we must submit to a strange vitality that might ‘reveal inaccessibility in and of itself’, in the form of urban experiences which ‘make accessible the inaccessible – in its inaccessibility’ (Thacker, 2014: 96). In the paradoxical entanglement of dark and weird ecologies, the speculative and aesthetic role of detection is to ‘probe this darkness, so that we may immerse ourselves within it, without denaturing it by lighting it up’ (Shaviro, 2016: 44). Here, at the limits of our powers to visualize, in a visualization of impossibility, we might detect radically different cities, both new and old. Terrifying as this might be, it may also stimulate the speculative urban relations a ‘smarter planet’ so urgently demands.

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# Part 3

Imagining Urban Communities



## 9. Chewing Gum and Graffiti: Aestheticized City Rhetoric in Post- 2008 Athens

*Ginette Verstraete and Cristina Ampatzidou*

### **Abstract**

The post-2008 austerity measures imposed on Greece made public space in the city of Athens the prime target of economic development and city marketing. These processes are based on aesthetic strategies of 'cleaning up' and imposing a certain visual order while disposing signs of deprivation and exclusion in the streets. Referencing the works of Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière and illustrating a series of cases, we demonstrate how this exclusionary 'police order' of neoliberal consensus confirms and reinforces the borders between the visible and invisible, acceptable and unacceptable. This is, however, contested by a more democratic aesthetics of redistribution, based on difference, which emerges as soon as the implemented order meets the world of complexity, boundaries and resistance.

**Keywords:** post-2008 Athens; civic participation; aesthetics; post-politics; public space

### **Introduction**

Undoubtedly the event that most significantly marked the economic and political landscape of post-2008 Greece was the signing of the 'Memorandum of Understanding' between the Greek Government and the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the European Central Bank in May 2010. Since then, the crisis has turned into an established and inescapable condition, which simply needs to be tolerated for the good cause.

This rhetoric of the inevitable has been supported by the subversion of the traditional roles of the Right and Left in politics and the formation of one technocratic and a series of coalition governments with parties from traditionally opposite ends (Nikolopoulou, Psyllakou and Tsachli, 2012). Official politics has focused on management of conflict through a broadly conceived consensus around necessary austerity measures and the production of a specific subject-citizen willing to participate and assume responsibility in a deteriorating public space.

This political consensus within a neoliberal setting has gone hand in hand with carefully constructed processes of representation (Τσέκερης / Tsekeris, 2008) through various media and an appeal to accountability in the field of image-making. In an effort to sell a positive image of Greece and attract tourists and investors, for instance, the National Council for Radio and Television issued a formal recommendation to media outlets to discourage the transmission of images depicting the negative effects of the crisis and of police prosecution in January 2013 (Εθνικό Συμβούλιο Ραδιοτηλεόρασης / Greek National Council for Radio and Television, 2013). This is obviously a form of censorship that makes no sense in terms of its application. Even if all conventional TV channels and newspapers would refrain from publishing images of 'social deprivation and poverty', nothing would prevent such images from finding their way to independent blogs, social media or even the international press. But this recommendation does serve as an indication of the importance of hiding the negative reality and actively constructing a story of success and recovery.

More disturbingly, this particular manipulation of and through official media images falls within a broader state-supported discourse on the need to 'clean' the public space and maintain a 'proper appearance'. Politicians talk about the necessity of 'broom operations': areas that are 'hygienic bombs', in which people who are 'dirty' and constitute 'threats to public health' have been removed. The reinstatement of normality after 2008 starts with the elimination not only of disturbing media images, but also of garbage and unwanted individuals, such as the homeless, prostitutes and immigrants. This desired cleanliness of a homogenized public space is closely linked to the *Theory of Broken Windows* (Kelling and Coles, 1996), wherein the image of disrepair (the broken window) can trigger criminal behaviour and hence increase the disturbance of public images and spaces.

Thus, we see that Greece's problematic neoliberal measures imposed by its creditors – decisions that have increased poverty, homelessness, and violent protests – have been accompanied by strategies of homogenization and removal of conflict: displacement of political opposition in Parliament,

the erasure of disturbing images in official media outlets, and the actual brooming operations in the streets by civil servants and inhabitants alike. In light of the central theme of this edited volume, this chapter will focus on how these acts of ‘cleaning public space’ are best seen as modes of depoliticization. How does aestheticizing the public domain in contemporary Greece function as a depoliticized value system of consensus without space for strife or alternatives? How can we re-politicize public space by revalorizing the noise and conflicts happening in the streets and parks everywhere? With reference to the works of Chantal Mouffe (2008) and Jacques Rancière (2009), we will argue for the need to bring back ‘the political’ by redrawing the boundaries of what is considered clean and acceptable. Could it be that, when reconsidering the aesthetically pleasing public appearances promoted by official politics from a slightly different angle, the interruptions by the political occur and the involvement of unruly publics becomes visible? How can we ‘visualize the streets’ in that disorderly sense?

### Post-Politics

Of all the cities in Greece, Athens in particular is undergoing an intense process of neoliberalization, in which redistributive politics has been replaced by policies aiming at economic development, inter-city competition, market-driven creativity and entrepreneurialism. As the public space is where the image of each city is primarily constituted, it is precisely this space that gets the most attention when it comes to attracting capital. Nowadays, urban design and the quality of the built environment are consciously used as the means to, instead of the product of, economic growth (Gospodini, 2002). Public space is embellished, cleaned and redeveloped not as the result of prosperity, but as an instigator for financial investment. Simultaneously, however, activist groups and civil society initiatives, which have flourished in the post-2008 period, also use public space as the primary arena to contest its privatization and beautification. But those conflicts are rearticulated – erased – as delay of ‘progress’ monotonously seen as growth. For a city such as Athens, operating in the EU-based financial and economic framework, public space is where post-political strategies determine what is made visible.

In *Planning against the Political*, Jonathan Metzger (2015) draws on the work of Chantal Mouffe to offer a way out of the deadlock in which Third Way politics – with decades of emphasis on governance, public-private partnership and consensus-building – has manoeuvred itself in the face of increasing disenchantment among citizens. Instead of dominant (neo)

liberal forms of democracy and spatial planning run by managers with common-sense decision-making qualities, Metzger defends an agonistic open space where fundamental political differences can be played out in democratic forms. Mouffe, writing from a post-Marxist perspective, is the philosopher who has insisted the most on the need to produce political forums in which political antagonism can be made heard and visible:

Mouffe highlights the aforementioned 'political difference' as the founding moment of the political, distinguishing 'politics' in the ontic sense from 'the political' in the ontological sense. The former refers to the concrete everyday practices, procedures and institutions through which the social is ordered and organized into societies (governance so to speak), while the latter refers to the antagonisms that are constitutive of the social. Mouffe's substantial argument is that the political is an ever-present ubiquitous feature of society which risks exploding into violent confrontation at any time unless recognized and constructively engaged with. (Metzger et al., 2015: 9)

Situations in which the democratic state no longer has any power to confront and deal with social antagonism productively – turning antagonism into agonism – because serious debates are avoided or decisions are taken in financial dealing rooms, Mouffe calls self-destructive, 'post-political' and dangerous. Not only does democracy thus lose its legitimacy, but existing conflicts will also become more violent and be played out in other spheres of society, such as those of immigration. The solid basis for a truly democratic political system is the hope that comes with recognizing the contingency of a given hegemonic order and the possibility of alternatives. In another context, Mouffe has argued that critical art practice (such as that by Barbara Kruger or Nancy Fraser) and public activism (such as reclaiming the street protests) can challenge the *mise-en-scène* of a dominant consensus and restore an agonistic public space (Mouffe, 2008).

Aside from Mouffe, Metzger honours Rancière, who has also written on the distinction between police order and politics in terms of consensus and dissensus, the former designating the established social order, the latter the dispute over the partitioning and distribution of that order. While the police order is the symbolic realm wherein social positions are divided and legitimate voices and sensibility are fixed, the political order is post-foundational or contingent, and concerns the production of the no-part in the partitioning of the sensible – what is not audible, visible, sayable. 'There always is and will be a no-part or void, a group of bodies that do not

participate in the police order [...] Politics entails a process in which the police order is ruptured and disturbed by those that have no part in it at present' (Metzger et al., 2015: 11). To the extent that the logic of distribution in the police order is countered by the ideal of equality, disruptive and transformative effects in the former are felt and new political subjects can emerge. Of course, this way of putting the system to the test by those who are excluded will always be avoided or made irrelevant by those who have a say in what presents itself or can be seen and said in public space. But that abolishment paradoxically offers the means of resistance through which to reconfigure 'the territory of the visible, the thinkable, and the possible' (Rancière, 2009: 41).

Rancière has put the politics of aesthetics centre stage: for him, politics is about the necessary dis-identification that comes with the erasure of disputes over how things are ordered, names ascribed, sensible facts instituted. Politics is about the intervention in the public order of perception, in what presents itself to sense experience and thus determines what is common or not and who has a part in saying and picturing things. Interestingly, Metzger translates these insights into spatial planning and raises the question who has the right to be legitimately concerned about how we go about drawing maps, making plans and deciding on the territory that those visualizations are said to represent. The political potential of spatial planning lies in its capacity to open up space and produce visions of another future, which is implemented while taking into account the necessary friction between the plan and reality, the promise of openings and the necessity of some closure. Unfortunately, in our neo-capitalist cities, the politics of planning has been displaced:

The commitment of planning to difference, disagreement and openness sits alongside a necessary requirement for closure, silencing and 'we'. Yet, planning, like other forms of governance, has been encouraged and has moved towards a blurring of politics and the political through the search for consensus rather than, as Rancière (1999) has put it, the dislocation of the police order or, in other words, the questioning of the given order of things [...] There is little room for questioning the bigger framework of the dialogue, e.g. the pro-growth or economic competitiveness agenda that dominates many planning discussions. Participation is circumscribed and does not allow for new political subjects to emerge. (Metzger et al., 2015: 14)

Following Rancière, however, we would like to conclude from this observation that it is precisely in this circumscribed participation that the opening



for a dis-identification and disenchantment with the hegemonic social order emerges, not necessarily in the vicinity of the drawing table, but among those people in the street who feel displaced by it. How do these subjects, put at arms' length by tunnel visions of economic competitiveness, embody and visually render new relationships between the visible and the logic of sense-making? How does their 'scandalous' redistribution of the sensible stage a return of the political – not in a utopian but a heterotopian sense? Let us return to present-day Athens to make our point. We will first give two examples of the police order of zoning, development and cleaning up space and then open up a liminal space from which the political may emerge.

## Visual Strategies for a Clean Urban Life

### Rethink Athens

In 2012, the Onassis Cultural Center in Athens launched an international architectural competition for the pedestrianization of Panepistimiou Street and the redevelopment of Syntagma and Omonoia Squares, two of the most symbolically charged squares in recent Greek history and also important traffic distribution nodes for the Athenian city centre. Panepistimiou Street itself is a major artery around the historical centre, diverting a large load of the traffic to the port of Faliro. It is also a monumental urban axis hosting the University, the Academy, the Municipal Library, the Athens Cathedral, the former Mint, the Chamber of Commerce and several banks. The private initiative was supported by two Ministries (Environment, Energy and Climate Change; and Transportation and Networks), the Metro Corporation, the Athens Municipality, the Prefecture of Attiki and the Organization for the Master Plan and Environmental Protection of Athens. Academics and scientists participated in the advisory committee and the jury. The launch of Rethink Athens was attended by the Prime Minister himself, who testified to the competition being part of a large privatization and development project extending several kilometres beyond the city centre.

As stated in the brief, the aim of the competition was the creation of a new city centre in Athens along the axis of Panepistimiou Street, with the objective to transform the city centre into

a destination for the public instead of a traffic area for motor vehicles; the functional, aesthetic and environmental upgrade of the city center, the re-enhancement of commercial, administrative and financial activities



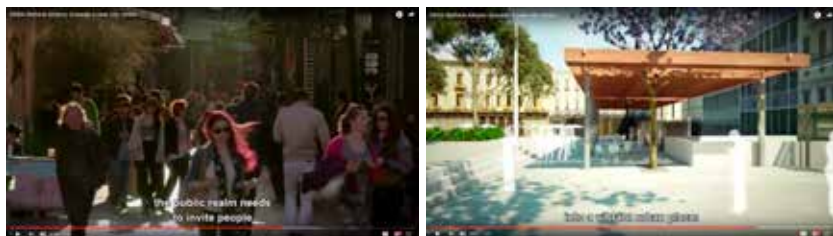
Fig. 9.1: View of Omonia Square without car traffic; there are many trees and water ponds. Visual: OKRA.

in the city, the repopulation of the city center, the highlighting of the historical and cultural identity of the capital, the improvement of quality of life for all citizens. (Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, 2012)

How are these noble goals to be actualized? Watching the promotional video of the competition,<sup>1</sup> one gets the impression that opening up the streets for pedestrians and cyclists instead of cars happens first by drawing a map, then changing the pavement, whitening houses, evacuating people and cars, building straight lanes and adding many trees. In the opening shots of the video, we move straight from the drawing table to a bird's-eye view of a generic street, lined with white buildings and full of small white cars. As the camera descends towards a more human perspective, the cars are gone and the street is miraculously repaved to become a pedestrian green area with tram stops and rails, while trees pop up and a handful of abstract white people walk and cycle along. The colours white and green dominate the sterile urban landscape.

The video of the competition's winning entry by the OKRA team does not significantly depart from this sanitized view. The project focuses on enhancing the microclimate of the city through removal of car traffic and the planting of trees with smart irrigation systems (Figure 9.1). But also vacancy, poverty, and safety in public space will be addressed by increasing 'vibrancy' and filling empty buildings with cultural activities that honour the traditions of the ancient Greeks: performance, debate and reflection in public space.

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POSNg-87v-8>



Figs 9.2 and 9.3: Screenshots of the winning proposal presentation video: a public space visibly full of people (left) 'needs to invite people' 'into a vibrant urban place' (right). Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92Y153Jrc8I>. Accessed 17 September 2018.

These are presented as ways to address the crisis. Ironically enough, the video repeatedly confronts real-life stereotypical images of Athens bursting with people, cars and especially tourists, with futuristic images of the city in which the presence of people – and their debates – has been replaced by computer-generated views of maps, networks, infrastructures and lots of sanitized streets and squares full of green. The voice-over narrator confirms the real city's 'urbanity and social life', only to introduce the slick, glowing, futuristic images of deserted open spaces and networks and finally declare the need to 'invite people into the public realm' in order to restore vibrancy (Figures 9.2 and 9.3). This gets visualized by a handful of individuals in a generic urban space.

The project images circulated in the press reproduce the idea of a clean, homogenized public space, where everything is kept in order thanks to the computer-generated evacuation of cars, people and city life in general, while liveliness is suggested by the colourful balloons flying above a smooth, futuristic Omonoia Square. All that is considered annoying – too many cars, people, vacant buildings – has no place in the proposed clean, green and monumental space reserved for cappuccino-drinking inhabitants, tourists, potential investors, philanthropic foundations and managerial governments.

The *Rethink Athens* competition builds on a long history of using aesthetic planning instruments to project a particular image. Panepistimiou Street is the product of an early nineteenth-century vision in which neoclassical architecture and modern planning were used to construct an idealized past and future identity for the newly established Greek capital (Issaias, 2013). Athens was framed as the cultural and political image of modern Greece through the generic visual instruments of the time, such as orthogonal grids, city squares and straight streets. At the same time, the visual language of neoclassicism – including the invention of typologies and ornaments with references to Greek antiquity – was added to ignore the existing medieval

socio-spatial organization of the city and attest to Athens' age-old historical position within a Western European cultural sphere (Issaias, 2013). The contemporary project for the city centre may seem high-tech, but it clearly builds upon this nineteenth-century tradition of combining the old and the new.

This stereotypical vision, delivered by a machine-based drawing, is implemented in a top-down fashion by the competition organizer, the state institutions and the winning team, excluding a priori any other potential parties that may have a political stake in the visualization and the actual planning, as if the way the problem was formulated or scripted in the brief already predicted its own solution. Forrester (1988) warns against urban planning being expected to deliver immediate solutions to wicked social problems, when, in reality, it is merely used to displace them and make sure they are hidden from sight. What is clearly missing from the visualizations put forward both in the competition brief (the problem) and in the winning entry (the solution) is the debate around social issues such as homelessness, drug-dealing and petty crime. At most, these vulnerable social groups are not addressed as people with rights and needs, but as problems to be removed from the scene.

Interestingly, the aesthetic transformation of public space in Athens is not only considered the affair of large-scale public-private urban interventions such as these, they are also made the responsibility of small groups of citizens actively cleaning the streets of Athens. What we will argue next is that visualizations of a homogenized public space go hand in hand with visions of a circumscribed participation by the people that is less political in Rancière's sense than it reproduces the same commercial logic of cleanliness and beauty. How do the aesthetics of *Rethink Athens* become the daily affair of DIY interventions in the streets?

### Atenistas

Atenistas is an open group of citizens who proclaim themselves to be 'Athenians in practice'. Formed in 2010, soon after the first signs of the crisis started penetrating everyday life, the group is a product of the local expression of a culture of self-organization that attempts to bypass the state and other forms of organized social agency (Giddens, 1991). The actions the group performs include creating pocket parks, cleaning abandoned plots of land and other public spaces, placing information signage around the city, creating wall paintings and other similar beautifying interventions. Activities are spread all over the city and are organized through public calls; small teams work in advance to prepare the event, which is then executed within

short periods of time by the volunteers. Aesthetically, the interventions aim to clean and manage the spaces – for example, by removing garbage from empty plots or public beaches – but they also create possibilities for the use of these spaces – for instance, by constructing gardens, benches and playgrounds. Despite their differences, the momentary enterprises have a visually coherent language and share the use of low-key material – euro palettes, old barrels, and car tires – all painted in bright colours. This is the universal language of the pop-up.

Atenistas also carefully document their actions and use a coherent, visual communication strategy.<sup>2</sup> Colourful posters and carefully designed social media images are produced to announce each action and, once an intervention is completed, several beautiful pictures are uploaded to the group's platforms, documenting step by step the process of the aesthetic transformation of space and the final result. Joyful pictures and clips that summarize the day dominate the scene. The recurrent element in this documentation is people: colourful volunteers at work and groups of smiling people participating in the action and celebrating afterwards. Hardly surprising, then, that the booking site TripAdvisor has inserted a link to Atenistas as a tourist attraction in one of their pages on Athens.

Atenistas represent an emerging understanding of citizenship based on a principle best described as 'each one for himself and all together' as they 'claim their share of responsibility in improving the image of their city' (<https://atenistas.org/>). The actions of this group are confined to issues that do not insult anyone, that are widely agreed upon as 'positive' (e.g. clean streets), and that contribute to the objectification of public space through palatable differentiation. Although driven by honest intentions, these interventions contribute to the branding of the city, disguised as apolitical collaboration and community-building. Not only do the participants stay within the limits of what can be aestheticized, they also claim to assist authorities – such as the municipality, the state or other bureaucracies – either by demonstrating what needs to be done or by substituting them and assuming individual responsibility. As time passes and the crisis deepens, such voluntary groups become an institutional body which municipalities turn to while seeking steady collaborations.

Removing chewing gum from the street (Figure 9.4), painting stairs (Figure 9.5), washing walls or adding beautiful graffiti before the ugly ones arrive might make the street look cleaner for a couple of days but these gestures do not improve the system of public space maintenance or

2 <https://atenistas.org/>



Fig. 9.4: Cleaning chewing gum from Stadiou Str. in 2011. Photo: Konstantinos Flamiatos / Atenistas.



Fig. 9.5: Painting the stairs at Marasli Str. in 2013. Photo: Atenistas.

challenge the social and cultural situation that leads to the degradation of the urban environment in the first place. This becomes very clear once these participating citizens transgress the given social-economic order by cleaning or painting *too much*, thereby neglecting the borders of what can be normally aestheticized. For instance, when, in November 2013, the group started painting a public staircase in an upper-class area in central Athens, inhabitants contested this type of intervention and called the police to intervene. Despite having secured a verbal permission from the municipality and the support of a local citizen group, Atenistas were seen as disturbing the distribution of cultural capital. While inhabitants of poorer areas are expected to accept the interventions of groups like Atenistas with gratitude and without voicing their preferences, wealthy inhabitants claim their right to decide upon the aesthetic qualities of their environment and are more suspicious towards a visual statement that comes with an ideology of civil society voluntarism. In other words, it is fine when Atenistas take the initiative to paint the walls of neglected or poor areas, but the group should not aesthetically equalize neighbourhoods inhabited by different classes. Unwittingly engaging in a ‘redistribution of the sensible’, they ran against the limits of the system they supported and the political seeped through.

## Reintroducing the Political

As argued, Metzger defends an understanding of politics as located in situations in which the given order of things is questioned; when those whose voices are only recognized as noise by the police/policy order claim their right to speak, acquire speech and produce a redistribution of the sensible that permits exercising this right (Daryl, 2014). If the above-mentioned examples dominate the official media and represent the dominant culture of Athens amidst the crisis, it is also true that many pockets of resistance are emerging across the city, claiming their 'right to the city'. In the pre-crisis period, autonomous spaces of protest were highly territorialized and operated as enclaves surrounded by a hostile capitalist environment. Autonomy was practiced by entering a circumscribed area, clearly defined by its opposition to the outside (Stavrvides, 2014). Nowadays, with the crisis hitting everywhere, the borders between inside and outside are increasingly contested and streets get revisualized in different, often contradictory, ways. In this latter part of the article, we will demonstrate how, counter to the developments sketched above, 'unruly publics' take issues into their own hands and exert their roles in co-articulating what is at stake in present-day Athens.

### National Technical University Building

In March 2015, the central building of the National Technical University of Athens – located in the Exarchia district discussed below – was covered with a huge black-and-white graffiti (Figure 9.6). The action happened overnight and took both passersby and university authorities by surprise. The intervention sparked a fierce public debate on whether the graffiti was a piece of art or mere vandalism, whether it symbolized the deep turmoil in which Greece finds itself or whether it was the 'familiarization with the worse' (Βατόπουλος / Vatopoulos, 2015), as a journalist of the conservative newspaper *Kathimerini* put it.

The artistic duo Icos & Case, considered responsible for the graffiti, are very experienced and recognized in the graffiti scene of Athens and acted stealthily and methodically. Their choice of the building could not have been accidental. This was the epicentre of the violently suppressed student uprising against the military dictatorship that governed Greece in the 1960s and 1970s, which triggered the regime's eventual demise in 1974. In this sense, this particular building carries a heavily symbolic meaning as a space of struggle for political freedom. It is declared a protected monument



Fig. 9.6: The National Technical University of Athens seen from the corner of 28is Oktovriou and Sournari streets on 5 March 2015. Photo: Takis Spyropoulos, from the book *EX-ARCHIA uncensored*.

for this reason, but, as the premises of the Faculty of Architecture, it also maintains a daily university function.

The ensuing discussion was highly polarized. While advocates supported the appropriate use of this particular building to generate discomfort, most condemned the ugliness of an unsanctioned act, the desecration of a heavily symbolic building and the inability of a public institution to secure its premises. Bold media titles went as far as to announce the ‘death of civic democracy’ (Ζαμπούκας / Zampoukas, 2015) and welcomed the eventual removal of the graffiti a few days later with equally bold statements such as ‘the graffiti gets erased, the University is restored’ (Vatopoulos, 2015b). But the University Dean himself refrained from condemning the graffiti at first and declared his inability to position himself against something for which he does not have the means to prevent, as the 70 percent reduction of the funds for maintenance and security makes managing the institution increasingly difficult (Πρυτανεία ΕΜΠ / NTUA Office of the Dean, 2015). To him, the disruptive act witnessed to the inefficiency of ‘the police order’ (to use Rancière) and the necessity to discuss the effects of the austerity measures on public institutions such as the university. The Minister of Culture recognized that the graffiti indeed successfully depicted the crisis in the country and in the city of Athens in particular, but also condemned the unsanctioned act (Μένεγος / Menegos, 2015).



The graffiti was washed away a few days after its appearance by the coordinated efforts of the University authorities, the Municipality of Athens and the Ministry of Education, which were met with a limited demonstration that did not prevent its removal. The publicly celebrated 'restoration' of the building to a previously clean state was, if nothing else, at least fictitious. For, as a symbol of resistance, the building has been covered in posters, tags and slogans for years and it is precisely these messages that were uncovered with the cleaning. Thus, the recent official displacement of protest on the walls of the university staged a return to previous moments when such protests were still tolerated! To put this differently, the government's elimination of a visual sign of conflict at the heart of Athens opened up a space of critique of this hegemonic act, as well as a visible reminder of different times, when alternative views of things were matters of discourse.

Despite its short life, the black-and-white graffiti is a visual statement in itself, by proposing a rupture in the dominant rhetoric of cleaning up public space while bringing to the fore the dark state in which Athens finds itself: the official intolerance of unsolicited interventions in public space, even when this concerns an iconic monument of democratic resistance against such intolerance. Should the façade of the university building remain an intact demonstration of a past glorious moment defined by the government? The graffiti and the layers of protest beneath it seem to suggest that, on the contrary, the building should resist these attempts to control the distribution of the sensible and instead continue to provide the stage for political struggles by students, artists and other citizens. Only then will it retain its symbolic value.

### **Navarinou Park**

A few blocks away from the National Technical University, Navarinou Park is located on a former parking lot in the Exarchia district in the centre of Athens. Traditionally an area of students and intellectuals, Exarchia has also been a place of counterculture and a meeting point of the Athenian left and anarchist scenes. Exarchia came to prominence in December 2008, when a policeman's murder of teenager Alexis Grigoropoulos over a verbal dispute led to widespread riots all over Athens and Greece, largely reflecting the broader frustration over rising socioeconomic problems, unemployment and corruption.

The history of this park extends far back. In 1990, the Technical Chamber of Greece attempted to transfer the ownership of the plot to the Municipality of Athens for the creation of a park. The transaction did not go ahead and the plot was leased as a car park until the end of 2008, when the parking leasing

agreement expired. In March 2009, the local neighbourhood occupied the plot and transformed it into a public park in the midst of a public celebration.<sup>3</sup> The Navarinou Park collective is one of several citizen movements that were established in reaction to heavy privatization and unsustainable development. Their aim is to protect open spaces from being developed, to put forward claims of use value and quality of life and to expand civil political influence (Kavoulakos, 2015). At Navarinou Park an assembly was formed from the start, with the goal to facilitate democratic decisions on issues of use, maintenance, design and planting. Activities are decided on by direct voting in the weekly meetings.

The visual design and appearance of the park are in constant fluctuation, as the space is not only the setting but also the means to experiment collectively with alternative forms of social organization. Plenty of events are organized that cater to a variety of publics. These include film screenings, theatre plays, radio shows, concerts and parties, cooking sessions, flea markets, treasure hunts, debates and round table discussions, and the weekly Sunday meetings for the maintenance of the space. Because of the fluid way in which decisions over the park are made, facilities and spatial arrangements are added or removed incrementally. For instance, immediately after the occupation in 2009 the first plants were planted; in 2012, a playground was constructed; and in 2014, an urban farm was developed which was directly related to a seed bank focused on conserving traditional varieties of local vegetables (Figures 9.7, 9.8, 9.9 and 9.10).

At first sight, there is little that aesthetically separates the looks of Navarinou Park from a typical intervention by the Atenistas; both rely on low-tech, easy-to-find materials and manual labor. However, where Atenistas intervene methodically all over the city in a fleeting pop-up fashion sanctioned by the municipality, Navarinou Park has a longer history and is the result of a continuous appropriation of an occupied space to local living conditions. Its visual appearance is under constant renegotiation by a diverse set of engaged citizens.

Navarinou Park is an example of what Stavrides (2014) terms ‘threshold spatiality’, a heterogeneous space with porous boundaries that operates as a metaphor for a different social and spatial organization. It emerges as a different public space, running counter to the dominant media-space of simulated participation. It is literally permeable not only by the community that shares it, but also by those who do not. That implies that the openness of this spatiality allows everyone to intervene and transform its function

3 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfprE-plgOM>



Figs 9.7, 9.8, 9.9 and 9.10: The gradual transformation of the park over 6 years. From top left: in 2008 when the lot was still leased as parking; in 2009 soon after the occupation; after the first planting (photo: Giorgos Vitsaropoulos); and at bottom right in 2012 when the playground was constructed. Photos courtesy of the Navarinou Park Assembly, <https://parkingparko.espivblogs.net/>.

and its image. As an agonistic place where political difference is practiced through direct democratic procedures, the park stages an alternative to the dominant police order. Far from a utopian place of consensus, the park is a site of difficult negotiations. Indeed, the composition of the assembly has often been a matter of confrontation, as groups that lean towards different political ideologies have occasionally become more influential (Avdikos, 2011). Within the discussions, the Navarinou Park assembly has often been confronted with dilemmas related to the protection of the space while preserving its openness. Issues such as drug use, public urination, noise and misbehaviour have often been raised during the assembly meetings, as they have a negative impact on the image of the park and result in people complaining and avoiding the park. Inhabitants of Exarchia, for instance, have created a blog<sup>4</sup> that documents misbehaviour in the park and its vicinity, such as graffiti, burned cars, incidents of violence and so on, and have called for the Municipality of Athens to take over.

The Navarinou Park has also frequently been the target of police raids and violent attacks that have destroyed parts of it in an effort to discourage

4 <https://odos-exarcheion.blogspot.nl/>

people from going there and to identify the people who do go there as members of extremist groups. During one of the many police raids in September 2009, policemen entered the park screaming 'We are taking back Exarchia', assaulting passersby and inscribing their mark on the door '04/09/09 ΕΛ.ΑΣ.' (Avdikos, 2011). How to define this violent intervention at the entrance if not as a symbolic reclamation by the police order that has by now become part of the turbulent history of the park?

This continuously changing visibility of the park is important precisely because it is the stage at which the internal and external conflicts intersect. These have left their marks in the continuous redesign of the space in processes of destruction and reconstruction, and in the images of occupation, intervention and – less spectacular – of daily life that have been distributed through media channels. The park exists as this heterotopy to the extent that its difference is continuously claimed, protected and renewed by a dynamic continuity of use reflected in the changing activities, the changing publics and the changing spatial and aesthetic configurations.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that, in post-2008 Greece – in the aftermath of stringent austerity measures imposed by the EU – Athens is subject to aesthetic interventions for the sake of economic development and city marketing. Public-private approaches to urban design, mediated by digital images of branded open spaces and neoliberal social occupations (of tourism and consumption), are imposed on the Greek capital such that its conflict-ridden urban geography marked by poverty, displacement and protest is made invisible. This image-based strategy of cleaning up in the field of top-down urban planning has gone hand in hand with the production of engaged citizens volunteering to dispose of the signs of deprivation and exclusion in the streets of Athens. Removing chewing gum from the streets and painting derelict stairs and walls in bright colours in an organized pop-up fashion all over the city, these Athenians contribute to what Rancière (2004) has called an exclusionary 'police order' of neoliberal consensus, in which the borders between the visible and invisible, acceptable, and unacceptable are confirmed.

An important insight drawn from both Rancière and Mouffe has enabled us to lay bare political moments of 'redistribution of the sensible' at the very heart of this commodifying preoccupation with aesthetic attractiveness. For if, as Rancière suggests, the logic of the police order involves classification

and the assignment of a proper place to things and people, this also leads to a political dis-identification for – and disruption by – those who are excluded. A more democratic aesthetics of redistribution, based on difference, emerges as soon as the general urban plan or vision is implemented and meets the world of complexity, boundaries, and closure. We saw this political moment at work when Atenistas unwittingly cleaned too much and ran against – and made visible – the class-based limitations of their public actions. Another political instance of disruption occurred when the authorities washed away the black-and-white graffiti of protest, only to uncover previous layers of resistance on the walls of the university – ones that were tolerated as long as they remained largely unnoticed. Finally, we interpreted the continuously changing visual design of Navarinou Park as the appearance of a democratic ‘threshold spatiality’, in which inside and outside intersect while what is acceptable is under constant (re)negotiation by unruly publics.

All this does not mean that these aesthetic moments of political difference have the same weight as the currently dominant fashion of visualizing the streets of Athens for the sake of tourism and investment. But we hope that our analysis at least points to *the manner in which* these grand visions of the future are built on conflicting foundations that carry within themselves the potential for radically questioning the order of things.

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# 10. The Uncanny Likeness of the Street: Visioning Community Through the Lens of Social Media

*Karen Cross*

## Abstract

This chapter provides a way of beginning to understand social activist interventions relating to the contemporary urban high street, and the role of social media within this. Using Freud's notion of the 'uncanny', the chapter focuses particularly upon the contemporary remediation of the past within both the material practices and photographic visualizations relating to the construction of an 'alternative' market space. The study focuses especially upon the practices of a volunteer-led project in South East London, in the UK, and, in relation to this, reveals the socially distancing and estranging process of remediation involved in visioning community today.

**Keywords:** social media; memory; aesthetics; community; alternative consumption

## Introduction

The central focus of this chapter is the visual practices of a volunteer-led community event staged in South East London, UK. The event, which is known as the West Norwood Feast, takes place on a monthly basis from March to December, and provides a focal point for existing members of the local community. It also attracts people who may not otherwise visit the local area, and is beginning to place West Norwood on the map of attractive places to visit and live in the wider region of Central London. The Feast hosts a range of pop-up market stalls, including a variety of ethnic foods,



crafts, and artisan and retro objects, which, together, cohere into a globally orientated cosmopolitan approach to consumption.

As argued here, the event and the way it is promoted is also reflective of a broader type of social activism, which makes use of the discourse of start-ups and space creation framed by the language of social networks. This is particularly signified through the title 'Space Makers', which is the name of the organization involved in establishing the event in 2011. Just prior to this, the group had been involved in the regeneration of the Brixton Village indoor market, which saw previously unused shop units transform into short-term pop-up ventures and more long-term shop units mainly focused upon food consumption and art.

Whilst the Village has become a hive of activity, it also represents a contentious process of gentrification, which deploys the language of social networks and start-ups. This poses a number of challenges to the existing businesses and community groups, especially as the profile of the surrounding area of Brixton town centre has been raised and has become an appealing location for young professionals seeking easy transport links to the city. Development threatens to fragment the existing community and push out those who can no longer afford the costs of living in the area. For this reason, it is important to consider the more long-term impacts that arise from projects that seek to intervene within the market space. Moreover, it is important to question the particular way in which the reframing of the concept of 'community' around a new language of mediated consumer participation ultimately functions to exclude groups that do not possess the correct social and cultural capital to participate within such social spaces.

The aim of this chapter is to perform a critical analysis of the impacts arising from this particular activist intervention within the modern high street, and how the creation of alternative spaces of consumption potentially serves to remediate past forms of social exclusion. The aim is also to show how the envisioning of community through the lens of social media involves the creation of what I term here as an 'uncanny' likeness of the street, which adopts the aesthetic of the familial past to secure social presence and participation within a wider process of media democratization. Later on, the chapter focuses upon examples of consumption and practices of visualization within the context of the West Norwood Feast. In order first to situate the processes described here, the discussion begins by outlining some key theoretical paradigms to which the study relates.

## Network Communication and the Remediation of Social Space

During the mid to late 2000s, the notion of 'the network' (based on the work of Castells) was adopted to explain the reconfiguration of society around facets of electronic information transfer between individuals, groups and organizations. Within this, horizontal networks of peer-to-peer communication came to be considered the means by which top-down forms of power and control would be overcome. More recent theory, especially that which focuses upon the analysis of photography, follows a similar line of thinking. This is evident through the use of such concepts as 'the networked image' (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008) and 'mediated presence' (Villi, 2015), which, together, can be seen to describe the new social dimensions of communication and cultural participation centred upon the photographic image.

Some also argue that, with mobile media, the concept of 'sharing' (Berry and Schleser, 2014: 1) replaces the notion of 'community', and this places emphasis upon 'co-presence' (Berry and Schleser, 2014: 2) rather than information exchange. Moreover, the rise of that which has been described as 'locative media' (Frith, 2015) also makes apparent an impetus to regain a sense of 'place' in light of the physical dislocation and sense of distance experienced within the engagement in online networks. Mapping and digital geo-positioning tools become the means by which people demonstrate their connection to physical locales and spaces of cultural interest. The strong focus upon 'the photographic' is also highly important, because it provides a point of contact to that which is considered ordinary and everyday. This is not simply in terms of representing the city and street, and the activities that are staged within it, but rather in terms of setting the tone for the kinds of performance that are involved in urban life.

We are not just talking about digital images as photographic representations, but, rather, as that which is 'tied to the very enactment of urban space, [and] to the creative and intersubjective performance of urbanity' (Darroch and Marchessaults, 2014: 4). In addition to this, mobile media needs to be understood as involving more than simple traces of digital footprints for reasons of surveillance and tracking consumer behaviours. Locative tools reliant on the photographic image need to be understood as that which relate to forms of occupation and new 'citizen' (Baker and Blaagaard, 2016) identities, which cohere around the desire for more ethical forms of social participation and connection. The challenge with contemporary forms of social media practice, however, is that they risk the creation of new forms of localism, or spatial narration, which marginalize certain members of the community who may not recognize the particular aesthetics of media use that are involved.

Moreover, it often appears as though mobile media offer a departure from the past, and from more mainstream mediations of social interaction. As closer inspection of the networks of exchange used reveals, however, spatial interventions can, in fact, be seen as tied to the past, and thus are maybe not as radical as may at first appear. The concept 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) is important to signal here, because it is especially useful to describe the processes by which 'old' media become reframed or refashioned within the contemporary digital field. As Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin argue, 'remediation' involves a process of transference, or that which they define as 'the representation of one medium in another' (1999: 45). Through this, media takes on a sense of 'multiplicity or hypermediacy' (1999: 46) and thus often make us aware of mediation processes. 'Remediation', as a concept, also points toward a familiar paradigm of mourning and loss. Traces of the past become the familiar objects of attachment, which allows the user to orientate the self within a fast threatening flow of digital transformation. The concept also infers that the system can be seen as correcting or remedying itself. We may think of the affective nature of the human-machine relation (see, for example, Kember and Zylinska) as providing potential lines of flight, but also helpful to consider is how 'remediation' involves certain psychodynamic forms of transference, which, as I show here, can be understood via recourse to a model of 'the unconscious'.

Although in certain respects offering a limited horizon of understanding, especially in terms of the experience of women and maternal relation, Freud's thinking forms a helpful starting point to analyse the relational aspects of new media described in this chapter. The notion of the 'uncanny' is especially useful, because it grounds the discussion of psychic processes in relation to the experience of navigating urban spaces. It points toward the overarching importance of the city and the urban street within the construction of the modern psyche, including the internalized sense of disturbance that is found at the heart of the familial frame, a space of supposed solace.

Directing attention to this, the chapter now turns to consider how the street, especially the consumer space of the urban high street, provides an access point for understanding the evolution of media processes and action of 'remediation'. As will be shown, the concept of the 'uncanny' is important within this, precisely because it lends a deeper insight into the process of transference between the past and the present that occurs within the space of contemporary networks. The 'uncanny', moreover, reveals the very sense of disquiet and disturbance that continues to characterize the relationship to the street, especially within such new contexts of community making and network formation that are the focus of this chapter.

## Freud's Urban 'Uncanny'

As has been noted by Petra Eckhard (2011), Freud presents the notion of the 'uncanny' within his writing as a specifically 'urban phenomenon' (16). The otherly encounter with his own reflection on a train, or the anxiety of déjà vu arising from circling back to the same spot in a foreign town, for instance, all form a point of reference for understanding the sensation of the 'uncanny'. The uncanny is not, as Freud insists, something that can be easily located within specific objects, forms, or literary tropes, such as the ghost or the lifelike doll that appears in E.T.A Hoffman's story of the Sandman. The disorientating pull of 'intellectual uncertainty', which had originally been attributed to the doll in Ernst Jentsch's essay 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' (1906), does not offer an entirely satisfactory explanation, according to Freud.

Uncertainty is only one aspect of the experience of the 'uncanny', which represents an altogether more complicated, and often intangible, state of strangeness that jars an otherwise assured sense of reality. 'Naturally not everything which is new and unfamiliar is frightening' (Freud, 1919: 2). Rather, the experience of the 'uncanny', according to Freud, is a process of transubstantiation: a metamorphosis of a something (the familiar) into another (the unfamiliar). It is 'that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar' (Freud, 1919: 1-2). The 'uncanny' is rooted in the homely – the 'heimlich' (Freud, 1919: 2) – and found within the familiarity of bonds established within the comfort of the home. This familiarity slips into another experience of illusory imaginings premised upon an investment in secretive and magical goings-on, including the presumed terror of paternal law, and, relatedly, the darkened city street configured so well within modern literature and film (see, for example, discussions in Huskinson, 2016).

In contrast to Jentsch (2008), who sees the Olympia as the source of disturbance, Freud focuses upon the fantasy construction of the figure of the Sandman, which, for him, represents the castrating law of the father, framed within an Oedipal arrangement. The story can be seen to represent the unconscious desire to see the father dead and to experience union with the projected fantasy figure of the mother. This also makes evident the process of 'splitting' later described by Melanie Klein (1997: 15), when characterizing the 'paranoid-schizoid position' that she saw as a key to infantile relating. The projection of the 'bad' frustrating and punishing breast allows the infant to protect the 'good' mother, who eventually stands to represent a form of unification. Although underemphasized within

Freud's essay, the connection of the 'uncanny' to the domestic sphere also points toward the unarticulated presence of the feminine within modern culture. More recent interpretations make certain headway by relating Freud's work to contemporary media technologies and the rearrangement of the body (Vidler, 1992; McQuire, 2008). The encroachment of screen media within the home, in particular, is understood to impact the relationship between the inner and outer world in a way that overrides previously held boundaries between private and public space. Moreover, as Scott McQuire usefully points out, the screen enables a mode of 'disembodied perception' (2008), which extends beyond the objectifying spectacles associated with past media forms.

Instead, screens today allow us to live in a world where we can inhabit, or adopt, the position of the other, and experience a sense of integration. 'Seeing from the place of "the other"' (McQuire, 2008: 22) thus names a 'relational space' (McQuire, 2008: 22) of communication within which 'old' media have become decentred in favour of the interpersonal and intersubjective flows of online networks. In relation to this, however, we also become witness to that which Chiarra Giaccardi (2013) describes as 'a new poetics of space' (xi), which emerges through the technologically augmented urban experience of navigating life through specific hardware/software combinations. As Giaccardi also suggests, there is a need to be sensitive to the social dimensions that this shift involves, because the use of technology in navigating social space has the potential to involve a 'remediation of *flânerie*' (2013: xi), and, thus perhaps exasperates the sense of social division previously experienced.

How we navigate social space has become increasingly redefined by the protocols and value systems embedded within the media devices and software. Mobile technologies 'accentuate the significance of location' (Villi, 2016: 107), especially the street and city. User handles and hashtags, as well as the mapping technologies embedded within applications, all serve to anchor photographic images in space and time. This changes the nature of media and how it is understood after 'the connective turn' (Hoskins, 2011). It changes, moreover, the way in which memory and history are dispersed through the network and become subject to ongoing processes of remediation.

Within this, we find a new sociality, which reaches beyond the past and its modalities of identification. Media today thus can be seen to internalize the histories with which past forms of media consumption were once associated, and in doing so provides the basis upon which new forms of network connection and relation are formed. As the design of and encodings

of software become increasingly important in maintaining a sense of social connection, we become aware, however, of new formations of cultural distinction. Software, as Lev Manovich (2013) tells us, is 'deeply social' (32), and we can see this in relation to such applications as Instagram. The new sociality it involves potentially replicates the situation that Pierre Bourdieu (1996) describes in relation to postwar uses of the camera. Connections made across the network arguably formulate a 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1996: 5) within which a certain sense of community is established – albeit one that today permits the presence of social others.

Mobile images in the social network continue to venerate the group and their relations, replicating the aspects of functionality with which the family album is historically associated. It is also the case, however, that personal images today form a point of aesthetic contact via which group identification (involving new markers of social distinction) is performed. Personal image production is thus enmeshed within the politics of communal memory-making, within which the process described by the concept of 'remediation' is key. As I argue here, this invites a reattachment to the photographic 'trace' (Barthes, 1980: 66) – a concept used by Roland Barthes to describe how the image functions as the material presence of the absent other. We are ever conscious of the way photography provides 'phantasmic doubles alongside the concrete world of the senses' (Gunning, 1995: 43), but there is something remarkable about the added layer of photographic reference, which brings into view the largely neglected aspect of photographic history; namely, the snapshot form.

Within social media we are haunted not by images of the past, but by methods and forms made redundant by a fast-paced production and reproduction of media (Cross, 2015). We can see this very strongly in the adoption of the square frame within such sharing tools as Instagram and the omnipresence of analogue filters that now replicate across our screens. Against the backdrop of more sleek technological digital productions, the echoes of the past imply a culturally alternative or 'authentic' (Berger, 2009: 31) vision, which can be seen to counteract the flawlessness with which digital reproductions were initially associated. Some argue that the persistence of the analogue implies a 'faux nostalgia' (Chandler and Livingstone, 2012: 11) – like a Baudrillardian substitution of the real – or 'heritage aesthetics' (Keep, 2014: 22), but it is more the case that the attachment to the past performed within social media today is representative of an ostensibly more conscious renewal, or remediation, of a social aesthetics that not only impacts upon, but also reflects the desire to join with others in the space of the street.

Connecting this to the psychoanalytic perspective adopted here, there is also a sense in which the reappearance of the analogue form reflects the 'compulsion to repeat' (Freud, 1914: 154) in the way that was identified by Freud in 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through' (1914) and later described by him as part of a process of self-renewal in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920). Therapeutically speaking, unconscious transfer and repetitive acting out becomes what Freud sees as a 'motive for remembering' (1914: 154). This is why it is important not to dismiss the reappearance of snapshot materialities as just a form of nostalgia. Rather, we may see the projection of the past as a means of working through and potentially making conscious the underlying drives and desires forming the basis of contemporary media use.

Network tools (such as user handles and hashtags) allow us to arrive at a new sense of 'at-homeness' (Scifo, 2013: 102) within the field of mobile communication, but the trace appearance of the snapshot within contemporary forms also acts to infuse the sense of locatedness, and underpins the domestication of technology. It also sets the tone for a revival of a potentially politicized representation of feminine interests, and the previously excluded terrain of ordinary everyday life. This is because social media can be seen to refer to a kind of image-making, which has been traditionally excluded from the public sphere, and this becomes the filter through which other kinds of domestically located practices become restaged.

Instagram involves the craft of photography, but it also often implies the conclusion of another other craft (Miller, 2015: 7). This is what in part allows it to form a part of a new aesthetic configuration, which Marsha Berry describes as 'emplaced visuality' (2014: 60) or 'poetic lieux de mémoire' (2014: 63), using Pierre Nora's concept of history. The paradox is that this implies a continuation of tradition, but it also represents a kind of locative or spatial arrangement, which connects into contemporary acts of alternative consumption and the reconfiguration of urban experience within and through the wider context of the social network.

## **Alternative Consumption and Community-making**

What we have seen in recent years is 'the return of the city as a site for the making of political and civic changes' (Sassen, 2011: 579). This is particularly evident within the rise of Occupy movements, which have placed new emphasis upon such notions as 'the global street' (Sassen, 2011: 579) – a space within which a set of shared political concerns cohere. In relation to this, we



Fig. 10.1: Timeline of the West Norwood Feast. Visual: Emily at Mindful Maps.

need to find new ways of accounting for collective action that takes place in the setting of the street, especially as it becomes remediated in terms of what W. Lance Bennett defines as 'personal lifestyle values' (2012: 20). As Bennett describes, a 'Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos' (2012: 30) can be seen to pave the way for forms of coalition, or cocreation, among individuals that goes beyond past forms of political and group identification. Within this, the city performs a key role within new political alliances, but it also marks out territory of intense difference and individualization. Looking in the way that Myria Georgiou advocates, from 'street-level' (2013: 3), provides a way of understanding this, along with the way in which the symbolic power of media and the city become continuously reaffirmed within the context of everyday life. The example of the Feast, which forms the central focus of this chapter, represents an interesting case precisely because it reveals the very processes by which power is re-enacted, via the arrangements of the new market space expressing and dissolving into the values of the digital network.

As previously discussed, 'old' and 'new' technologies interact with one another within the contemporary process of remediation. The popular appeal of applications adopting the lens of the snapshot lens is one such example. Cohering with this, it is also common to see an arts and crafts-based approach to the representation and promotion of alternative spaces. This can be seen in the context of the community project being described here, where the relational space of the market is represented via a hand-drawn aesthetic of the Mindful Map, which is reproduced here in Figure 10.1.



This map forms a particularly interesting example of visual storytelling, through which we gain a sense of the less organized bottom-up connections through which the market has emerged. Within the map, we see a strong emphasis placed upon the actions and the commitments of like-minded individuals seeking to provide an 'antidote to a depressing high street'. The concept of 'morphic resonance' also appears on the map, implying a natural affinity among individuals based upon shared memory. This centres upon the setting of the Portico Gallery, a 'Not for Profit' local arts venue operational since 2010. The belief of this organization in the importance of 'Art for All' infuses the activities that take place within the setting of the Feast, which sometimes involves local community performers, including musicians and dancers.

The intervention provides an important point of contact for the community, but a question remains as to how those who do not resonate with such artistic values can become included within the market space. Just as Suzanne Hall (2012) describes in relation to her work on another South London Street, the Walworth Road, such prosaic publics are deeply symbolic and need to be understood as political spaces of participation. The street, she argues, requires a level of individual investment to sustain membership and this is particularly contentious in urban margins where 'the less mobile – the elderly, the young, the poor and the newcomer' (Hall, 2012: 6) are heavily invested in the local area. The fact that the Feast holds the intention to represent a more globalized sphere of consumption and cultural practices, especially through musical performances and the act of eating ethnic foods, does not of course guarantee that these most dependent and vulnerable groups will have their more pressing social needs met. Nor does it in any way guarantee that they will be able to acquire the capital necessary to become key stakeholders within the further developments that take place in the local area. The organizers of the Feast are already highly aware of such concerns and seek out ways to become more attuned to the needs of individuals within the community, yet, within the central hub of the market space, the concept of 'community' is at times envisioned in somewhat troubling terms.

In an early promotional video that is posted on the Feast's web pages, we hear a trader celebrating the way that the market allows for a connection to 'people like me'. This implies that, at all other times, the high street, which is largely populated by fast-food restaurants, pound shops and a triad of well-known supermarkets, forms an alienating space historically associated with the fear of racialized others (Jackson, 1998: 174). There is a sense here in which the 'people like me' may actually be those from whom one is



Fig. 10.2: 'Keep it Local', image from 'wn\_feast' on Instagram, June 2016.

otherwise distanced as a result of the de-socialized interactions of modern shopping. The setting of the Feast, instead, seeks to allow for identification with others in a way that reaches beyond the spectralizing effects of the shops and intensive forms of consumption currently populating the high street.

The essentially middle-class rejection of modern consumerism also involves a paradoxical identification with the mantra 'keep it local' (see Figure 10.2), which is specified by a sign that appeared at a special artist's event held within the craft area. The statement reveals how it is not necessarily the shops that are sitting on one's doorstep that are considered 'local'. Rather, it is the craft and artisan objects that appear within the alternative market space, infused as they are with an organic and DIY ethos, which stand to represent a new zone of friendly consumer contact. The organic and fair-trade products that form the focus of the market are generally considered a form of luxury. The idea of creating community through the act of consumption is thus fraught with tension.

As it is widely known, activist uses of social space can produce a kind of 'food gentrification' (2016: 1209), which Isabelle Anguelovski argues can

form an unwanted presence for those who currently inhabit the community. This has been particularly evident in the case of West Norwood, where the encroaching interest of 'foodie' culture (Timeout, 2011) has transformed the community into a desirable place to live (Dyckhoff, 2013). Added to this, we see the growing investment in such technological thinking signified by such concepts as 'food cities', which follows in the wake of the rise of the 'Smartcity' (see Lim, 2010 and 2014). Food consumption, and the regeneration of local communities, has become heavily entangled with a network discourse, which seeks to make socially relevant interventions into urban space, but in a way that often masks existing community concerns. Often there is a sense in which the sharing and 'gift' economy of the Internet is thought to naturally extend into all social domains. Of course, we cannot set the question of food consumption aside from a consideration of network economies, but researchers and other stakeholders should avoid assuming too much too soon about the way such local projects can generate a sense of wealth and abundance for existing inhabitants of communities such as those of West Norwood. Network aesthetics involved in 'foodie' cultures and the construction of alternative spaces of participation is not one that is necessarily understood by all participants within a community, and this is especially important to recognize today, when such examples of community interaction described here are becoming foregrounded within public policy and governance. As I show, there is an urgent need to consider the interfaces through which the discourse of sharing is enacted and represented, especially those relating to town- and city-planning.

### **#WeNo Community**

The West Norwood Feast is located within a wider regeneration area, which encompasses West Norwood. Investments made since the *West Norwood Town Centre Masterplan* (2009) have since seen house prices skyrocket an average of 24% between 2013-2014. Such ventures as the Feast have brought new wealth and are beginning to change the face of the high street and surrounding area in a way that is exciting for key stakeholders, including new and old businesses, and the existing community. Yet there is a sense in which the changes afoot create tension within the community, especially for certain businesses and residents who do not feel wholly represented by the wider developments.

The new 'Invitation to Tender for Visioning West Norwood and Tulse Hill' (Lambeth Council, 2015) aims to build upon the successes of previous

investment and seeks to expand these beyond the central zones of the high street. The tender describes how railway bridges currently segmenting the area split the community into two distinctive zones. The bridge is perceived as a 'psychological barrier' (Lambeth Council, 2015: 1), which prohibits an integration of the distinct zones. However, whilst the physical characteristics of a place are no doubt important to the sense of integration that can be experienced in a local area, what this report fails to consider is the impact of media aesthetics upon people's perceptions of a place and their subsequent engagements within the community.

The recent announcement that West Norwood will become a Business Improvement District (BID) reflects the way in which the power of change is placed within the hands of key stakeholders within the community. Local businesses especially have been given the right to vote for whether or not they want to invest in the development that this represents. The particular nature of the activity that is outlined within the BID, which includes a special Christmas party and the use of branded deck chairs, suggests a quite limited horizon, which, again, may only speak to certain groups. Not only must local investors and organizers face the fact that the Feast observes a historically dominant religious celebration, they must also consider how the materialities of the market, including the banners and bunting that form a key part of its aesthetic, establish a particular British postwar mentality toward social participation also found in recent years to characterize the contemporary moment of austerity.

An amateur film entitled 'Suburban Week-end' (Yeatman) from 1946, currently hosted on the BFI webpages, and which has begun to be circulated among local residents, reveals the connections being made across the intervening decades of the postwar period. The 8 minute-long production documents a range of activity, which includes workers 'clocking-off' from a local factory on Friday afternoon, children attending the junior club, local football matches, and drinking tea and consuming cigarettes at the local café. The hustle of local transport systems combined with long queues at the greengrocers, signals a thriving and highly active community much like the one found in West Norwood today.

What the film cannot yet depict is the different forms of migration that eventually change the community. The arrival of the train at the local station signals forward to the future, as does the advert for *The News of the World* posted upon a bridge crossing the high street. Here, we see signs of change that will transform the high streets – its shops and people – almost beyond recognition. The repeated appearance of newspaper reading and delivery suggests an intense focus upon global flows, but the impact of wider social



Fig. 10.3: Image feed from 'wn\_feast' on Instagram.

changes on the horizon are yet to make themselves fully apparent in the market space, which itself masks the underlying sense of anxiety related to recent losses.

The fleeting footage at the jumble sale only partially belies the hardships of the time. This, along with the memorial to those who died, hint at the traumatic impact of war. As the lights go out on the high street, the focus lies on the impending change set to transform urban dwelling. The film shows a forward-facing, future-orientated society, which is as yet only vaguely aware of possible changes on the horizon. In the intervening years between immediate postwar period and today, the wider borough of Lambeth within which West Norwood is located has evolved into a community that represents a complex social and ethnic mix (Lambeth Council, 2014). As a consequence of the social investments currently being made, however, this diversity, for the reasons described here, is potentially under threat.

Beyond the physical divisions of the train line and bridge cited within recent regeneration documents, there are other more hidden forms of social division. These proliferate through the activities of the community and its mediatization within the social networks, and, by extension, the more dominant discourse of 'community' that is currently promoted both within social and mainstream media. Included in this are publications such as *Time Out London* and *The Guardian*, which have publicly promoted the Feast and other connected ventures, including the Library of Things, where people can borrow household tools and share local knowledge, as exemplars of 'resilient cities' (Cathcart-Keays). The growing public interest in alternative market spaces, such as the Feast, generates a particular interest within the wider community and investors who are now required to speak to a range of global agendas related to sustainability. Whilst this involves austere measures that intend to impose a sense of guilt upon the mass consumer, it is clear that, in order to engage people, the market space also intends to form an appealing space of participation.

The Feast forms a kind of carnival setting, but it is one that involves a retro-investment within craft and domestically located forms of production. As example images from the Instagram feed used to depict and promote the event show (see Figure 10.3), there exists diversity within the market, especially in terms of the food consumed. This in itself does not represent a wider form of inclusion, and there is a certain risk here of literally consuming the ethnically 'other'. Added to this, is the problem of how the market space performs an intense attachment to the past. This can be observed through the uncanny appearance of objects and forms, which are associated with a stereotypically British home of the postwar period. Within their new market

setting, such objects appear at once familiar and strange, marking the moment of the market's transition away from mass consumption. Teacups and provision of refreshments for 'Very Important Pensioners', signals value and regard for a bygone era, and for those who lived through the turbulence of the war and global change. The suggestion is that the market space is for all ages, but there is a risk that the aesthetic interest and fetishizing of the past serves unconsciously to exclude those who do not recognize the new alternative economies of consumption.

The remediation of certain foods and objects, including such simple things as a shopping bag and a loaf of bread, also serves to undermine the sense of connection that the setting of the market intends to promote. The market space of the Feast is more obviously connected to middle-class tastes, especially those reflecting investment in a new set of politicized and ethical ideals. As previously described, this involves a departure from past forms of political identification and group loyalties. The engagement is one that now involves the evolution of new 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 1), which seek to remediate the meaning of 'community' itself. We are also reminded here of more critical perspectives relating to the classed nature of food consumption. As Alan Warde describes more generally, in spite of the fact that 'most people touched by modern experience are inherently suspicious of the viability of primordial community [...] the desire for community life persists' (1997: 184). The growing distinction today is that food consumption, and images of food being consumed, forms a key component within the attempt to create cultural identification. This is most evident in the sharing culture of networks, which require investment within the tools of locative media described earlier.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The organizers of the Feast are aware of the tensions created by the market and constantly search for ways to include the wider community within the scope of the project. This is evident through continual attempts to invite new suggestions and ideas from local people. Attempts to deepen engagement are also made within certain areas of the Feast, especially through the Family Hub, located near a school, leisure centre and housing estate. With personal music being played and children using the free activities and games, there appears to be a greater sense of ownership felt by those who may otherwise remain marginalized within the market space.

Generally speaking, though, the overall aesthetic of the Feast and the wider alternative market space that it represents, orients toward a particular horizon of social experience, which, as I argue here, serves the purpose of making strange the space within which the market is located, along with the objects one finds there. It is also important to note that there is a risk that the market, and those who celebrate it as a tool of community making, will diminish the visceral and very real investments within the existing high street that are made by the majority of people who live in the area, and frequent the shops that it houses on a daily basis.

Moreover, as visualized in the social media feed in Figure 10.3, the now locally familiar hashtag #WeNo suggests that 'community' may actually be nothing more than a phrase that is printed upon the side of a fashionable canvas shopping bag. The construction of the alternative market space is one that is increasingly defined by the language of social networks. Within this lie echoes and traces of the past, which are the result of the processes of remediation and estrangement that networks involve. Sadly, 'community' may now be the preserve of a privileged few who understand the new market terms. The remaining hope is that our senses will be sufficiently jarred to recognize and constructively begin to reflect upon the new social processes involved in the making of the alternative market, which make the contemporary high street uncanny spaces of consumption indeed.

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## 11. On or Beyond the Map? Google Maps and Street View in Rio de Janeiro's Favelas

*Simone Kalkman*

### Abstract

The favelas of Rio de Janeiro have long been cartographically excluded, which reflects and contributes to their broader marginalization and neglect. This chapter discusses two initiatives that aim to counter this reality by including favelas in Google Maps and Street View. Keeping in mind that the meaning of maps is defined through ongoing practices of interpretation and usage, I argue that, within the context of generalized and commercial favela depictions, mapping projects offer new perspectives because they reconnect favela representations to physical locations in the city. At the same time, however, we must consider the commercialization of digital maps themselves, which often causes stereotypical narratives about Rio's favelas to return in the framing, promotion and usage of these mapping projects.

**Keywords:** digital mapping; cartographic exclusion; favelas; Google Maps

*Bem vindo ao Rio!* Welcome to Rio de Janeiro: the marvelous city. There's the Rio everyone knows, Ipanema and Copacabana. Then, there's the other: the world of the favelas. One in five people in Rio live here, an uncharted and mysterious spot on the map. Most people only know the favelas through the news – crime, poverty, and violence – but that's only a small part of the story. Google has been working hard with the locals mapping the favelas, because a big part of having an identity is having an address. The favelas are not simply a place, they are a people, and to

understand them, you must go inside and see for yourself. (*Beyond the Map*, Google, 2016)<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation is the introduction of an interactive web documentary by Google entitled *Beyond the Map*, launched two days before the start of the 2016 Olympics Games. Its captivating visualization of Rio de Janeiro's favelas is connected to the bigger project *Ta no Mapa* (On the Map), started in 2012 by Rio-based NGO Afro-Reggae and advertising company JWT.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this initiative is to map Rio's favelas digitally, focusing especially on the many businesses that can be found there. Historically, most government, press and tourist maps of Rio de Janeiro do not include the informally built favelas, despite the fact that many are now recognized as official neighbourhoods. With the aim of countering this specific form of exclusion, *Ta no Mapa* created and published maps of several favelas on its website. In 2014, Google joined the project with additional funding and mapping equipment, with the aim to include the produced maps within Google Maps and Street View. Both *Ta no Mapa* and *Beyond the Map* aim to generate visibility, recognition and business opportunities for Rio's marginalized and stigmatized favelas, building on the fact that digital cartographies have become a crucial tool for imagining, experiencing and navigating contemporary cities. In this chapter, I reflect on these goals by considering how, why and for whom these two projects visualize the streets of Rio de Janeiro's favelas.

Naturally, the practice of mapping peripheral or 'uncharted' territories is by no means uncontested. Various scholars have argued that maps are never neutral depictions of geographical 'truth', but rather heavily informed by and contributing to political ideologies and socioeconomic relations (e.g. Harley, 1989; Crampton, 2003; Pickles, 2004; Kitchin and Dodge, 2007). Accordingly, a map is often thought of as an 'instrument' or 'discourse of the powerful', constituted within (post-)colonialist or militarist frameworks (Pinder, 2007: 454). The historical cartographic exclusion of favelas is a telling example of how political ideologies impact mapmaking. At the same time, alternative mapping practices have flourished in various fields and locations (including Rio de Janeiro), often building on experimental forms of visualization and participatory processes (Pinder, 2007; Roberts, 2016). Importantly, however, in both top-down and bottom-up approaches, mapping 'consists of creating, rather than simply revealing, knowledge', depending on 'many subjective decisions [...] about what to include, how the map will look, and what the

1 <https://beyondthemap.withgoogle.com/en-us/>. Accessed 2 March 2017.

2 <http://www.tanomapa.org>. Accessed 2 March 2017.

map is seeking to communicate' (Kitchin and Dodge, 2007: 332). Maps are dynamic objects constructed by ongoing and contested practices, the power of which depends on the ways in which they are framed, interpreted and used by a variety of actors (Pickles, 2004; Kitchin and Dodge, 2007). This dynamism takes on new forms in digital mappings, which increasingly combine or overlay schematic cartographies with photographs or videos (e.g. in Google Street View and geo-tagged photographs), creating hybrid visualizations with a multiple and ambiguous authorship (Lapenta, 2011).

With this in mind, this chapter aims to contextualize the production and usage of the projects *Ta no Mapa* and *Beyond the Map* by focusing on three main questions. First, I consider why more inclusive city maps are needed in Rio de Janeiro, describing the consequences of the cartographic exclusion of favelas. Second, I ask how the projects visualize Rio's favelas, focusing mainly on the different actors and motives involved in the mapping process. Third, the project's main goals of visibility, recognition and opportunities are critically discussed by asking how these mappings are 'made to work' within the context of (post-)Olympic Rio de Janeiro (Pickles, 2004: 67). The analysis of these projects will reflect broader complexities and contradictions of visualizing Rio de Janeiro's favelas and of participatory mapping practices in other contexts. Building on critical literature on both these topics, my aim is to challenge the notion that raising awareness or increasing visibility in digital maps automatically benefits favela neighbourhoods, while simultaneously highlighting the necessity of creating and circulating more informed and inclusive visualizations of Rio de Janeiro and the possibilities of mapping initiatives to do so.

## Cartographic Invisibilities

In the web documentary *Beyond the Map*, one of the interviewees says: 'The favela is a blank spot on the map. Mail doesn't get delivered. Correspondence neither. It's as if we didn't exist.' This exclusion from Rio's official maps is crucial to the concept and framing of both *Ta no Mapa* and *Beyond the Map*, in which this cartographic invisibility is repeatedly linked to 'not existing' or not being recognized as a legitimate part of Rio's urban fabric. Until the 1970s, favelas rarely appeared on official or media mappings of the city. The officially stated reason for this, so several authors note, was that those in power saw favelas as a temporary phenomenon that would eventually be eradicated (Reyes Novaes, 2014; Santos Ferraz, 2016). After the 1970s, government officials as well as journalists began to recognize 'the permanence of

the favelas in the city' and, accordingly, favelas started to appear on maps in the media (Reyes Novaes, 2014: 210). Most of these press maps, however, focused on the function of favela territories within drug traffic, and rarely encompassed a detailed depiction of favela streets. From the 1990s onwards, the discourse of public policies geared at favelas changed from eradication and removal towards integration within the city at large, even if a variety of residents, activists and scholars have questioned the outcomes of many of these policies (e.g. Freeman, 2012; Steinbrink, 2014; Martins, 2016; Moura, 2016).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as a result of this inclusionary rhetoric, so architect Gabriel Duarte (2016) remembers, urban planners started to '[survey] and [document] various Rio favelas to inform the planning and design decisions that were being made', for example, in the programmes *Favela-Bairro* in the 1990s, *Programa de Aceleração e Crescimento* (PAC) in 2007, and the favela pacification from 2008 onwards. Especially in this last programme, however, maps have also been employed to illustrate the renewed control of the state over some favela territories (Reyes Novaes, 2014).

This brief historical overview draws attention to the ideology behind the mapmaking process (closely linked to state presence), order and conflicting imaginaries of the city. We also see that the cartographic exclusion of Rio's favelas has been the result of active decisions by a variety of powerful actors. One of these actors, so it is important to highlight within the context of this chapter, is Google itself – as we see in a dispute between the local Rio government and the American company in 2011. At the time, Google Maps showed the names of several favelas in the city (despite the fact that these communities were not actually mapped out). City officials therefore found that Google 'gave too much prominence to favelas', and asked the multinational to remove or adjust these names (Reyes Novaes, 2014: 201). In their words, Google's representation of Rio was 'absurd' and would cause fear among potential visitors (Reyes Novaes, 2014: 201; see also Steinbrink, 2014). After some discussion, the company complied and apologized, saying it had not been their intention to 'defame' the city (the Telegraph, 2011, cited in Reyes Novaes, 2014: 202). Unsurprisingly, favela residents and activists criticized this move as being part of broader efforts of the municipality to hide the city's poorer areas for the international public. There was also critique, however, because both cariocas and foreigners – who increasingly

3 Despite looking good on paper, the execution of these programmes was often hindered by mutual distrust between the state and residents, budget cuts, and a lack of transparency. Especially Rio's pacification policy has, despite initial positive reactions, been heavily criticized over the last few years.

depend on Google Maps to navigate the city – felt Google needed to inform users about the location of ‘dangerous’ areas, as in recent years a limited number of people mistakenly followed navigation apps (including the Google-owned *Waze*) into favelas and were injured or even killed.

Here, we start to see the different and sometimes conflicting motives involved in the cartographic inclusion of Rio’s favelas. Importantly, however, for favela residents the desire to be included is about more than just symbolic recognition. As several accounts note, favela residents suffer various practical difficulties due to this particular form of exclusion.<sup>4</sup> For example, ‘not having an address’ complicates applying for formal jobs, requesting emergency services and receiving public services such as garbage collection and mail delivery. Naturally, these difficulties are not only caused by a lack of cartographic data, but also by the social stigma attached to living in a favela, the fear of outsiders (including many government officials) to enter these areas, and more structural forms of state neglect. In other words, cartographic exclusion is inextricably linked to broader discriminatory structures and imaginaries, which have a large impact on the daily life of favela residents. To elaborate on this, it is useful to have a closer look at the idea of the ‘divided city’, frequently referenced in the Rio de Janeiro context. As many authors note, systemic and structural inequalities are deeply ingrained in Rio de Janeiro’s social, economic and political spheres, the negative consequences of which (e.g. police violence; racism; sexism; corruption; the lack of adequate public education, health care, and social housing) are felt especially in favelas and the periphery (e.g. Perlman, 2010; de Souza e Silva and Barbosa, 2005). At the same time, however, an exaggerated *idea* of a divided city (and certain neighbourhoods as violent, ‘no-go areas’) is strongly lived by Rio’s more affluent residents, which reinforces this structural prejudice and stigma attached to favelas and disregards that residents of favelas and the periphery traverse the city’s spatial divisions on a daily basis (de Souza e Silva, 2012; Carvalho, 2013).

Despite these very real practices of exclusion, neglect and (cartographic) invisibility, it is crucial to highlight that favelas are highly or even hyper-visible in several other representational contexts. From the early 20th century onwards, Rio’s favelas have frequently been described and depicted in the mass media, academia, and in both high and popular culture (Valladares, 2005; Jaguaribe, 2007; Peixoto, 2007; Williams, 2008; Freire-Medeiros, 2009; Perlman, 2010; Larkins, 2015). In the remainder of this chapter, four insights from the extensive scholarly debate on favela representations are particularly

4 See, for example, the documentary *Todo Mapa tem um Discurso* (Every Map has a Discourse), <https://vimeo.com/93081871>. Accessed 28 February 2017.



important to keep in mind. First, most of these representations build on a persistent double stereotype, in which favelas function either as spaces of crime, poverty and violence or as colourful, close-knit, and samba-dancing communities. Second, as Valladares (2005) writes about academic descriptions, favelas are often thought of as a uniform category, speaking of *the* favela rather than of specific communities. This generic depiction not only ignores the heterogeneity of the hundreds of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, it also means that they are often represented as generic spaces of ‘otherness’ rather than real neighbourhoods that house 1.5 million people. Third, in recent years favela images are increasingly being commercialized, often in a simplified, sensationalist manner (Bentes, 2002; Larkins, 2015). Fourth, despite a significant number of initiatives that try to counter this reality, these representations remain mainly by and for outside audiences – and therefore rarely benefit favela residents.

With this in mind, my goal in this chapter is to reflect on the possibilities of digital mapping initiatives to provide more nuanced visualizations of these territories. Lisa Parks (2009: 538) has argued that, in a media landscape in which emotional close-ups of human suffering are ubiquitous, cartographic and satellite imagery possesses an ‘abstraction and indeterminacy [that] keeps acts of interpretation and practices of knowledge dynamic’, precisely because they ‘must be read’. Similarly, other authors have argued that digital mapping techniques fundamentally redefine the relation between representation and reality (Lapenta, 2011; Uricchio, 2011; Power et al., 2012; Favaro, 2014). As Lapenta (2011: 17) writes:

New geomedial imaging technologies seem to reconfigure the ontological erosion of indexicality described by [Baudrillard], and lead the image (and its ultimate embodiment, the virtual map) into a [new] epistemological phase – the fifth order of the simulacrum in which the once separated world of autonomous images and reality are technologically, functionally, perceptually and socially reconciled.

In Rio de Janeiro, the ubiquity of nonspecific and commercialized favela representations is related to and reflective of a broader media landscape in which commodified representations exist in an increasingly complex relation to ‘the real’ (e.g. Debord, 1983; Baudrillard, 1998). Perhaps because of this, many favela depictions employ what Beatriz Jaguaribe (2014: 183-190) calls an ‘aesthetics of realism’, consisting of generic representational codes that are shocking, violent, and readily accepted as real, ‘even when this “reality” [is acknowledged] as shaped by the media or the presence of the

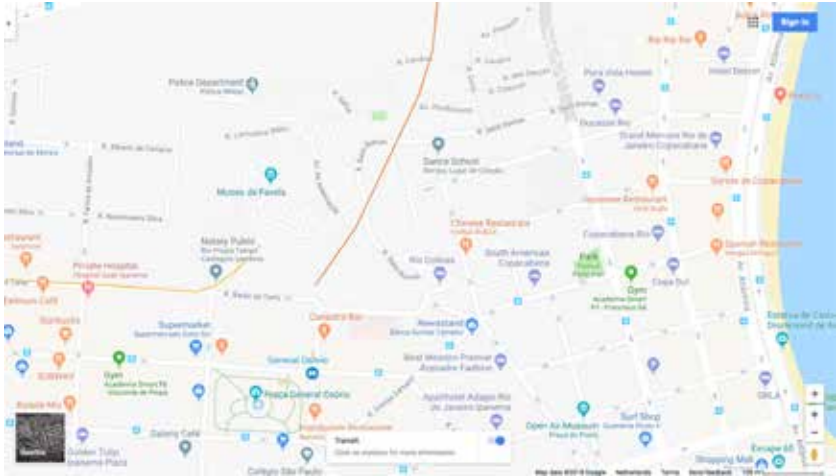


Fig. 11.1: Rio de Janeiro neighbourhoods of Copacabana (right), Ipanema (lower left), and Cantagalo/Pavão-Pavãozinho (Centre). Map Data © Google Maps 2018.

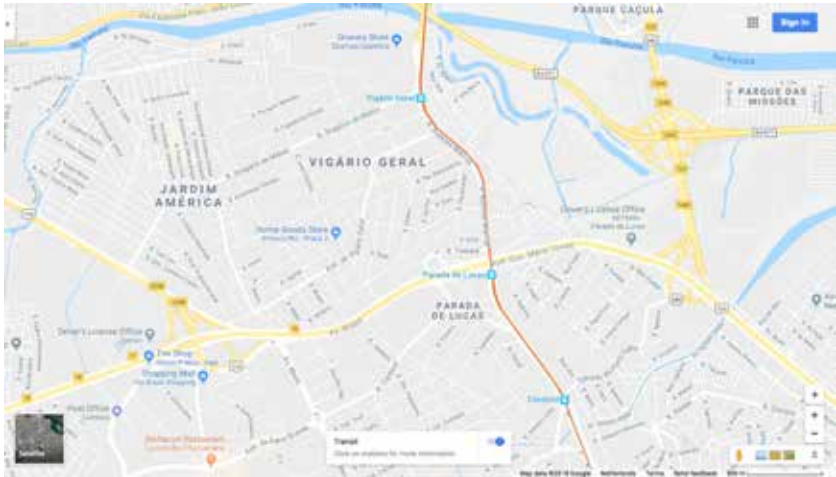


Fig. 11.2: Rio de Janeiro favela neighbourhoods of Parada de Lucas and Vigário Geral. Map Data © Google Maps 2018.

camera'. Building on Parks and Lapenta, we might argue that mapping initiatives reconnect generalized favela images to real-life locations in the city of Rio, which allows for a more nuanced and situated interpretation of these visualizations. For example, maps can draw attention to the diversity of favela geographies, their varied locations within the city at large, and to architecture and planning differences *and* similarities between informally and formally built areas (e.g. Fig. 11.1 and 11.2).

Nevertheless, we must also keep in mind that, especially in the case of Google, these new modes and technologies are by and large ‘pushed by the same old market forces’ that led to the current media landscape and its commercialized representations, meaning that similar forms of commodification might be at play here (Lapenta, 2011: 15). As a critical article in the *Wall Street Journal* notes, ‘attracting map users gives companies a better chance to mine user data, show ads and sell applications’, and Rio’s favelas house 1.5 million potential users that are ‘no longer excluded from the economic system of Brazil’ (Connors, 2014). As many authors address, this commodified ‘Googlization of everything’ raises ethical questions around privacy and the increasing power of tech companies, which complicates the discourse of social inclusion that accompanies *Ta no Mapa* and *Beyond the Map* (Vaidhyanathan, 2011; see also see Lee, 2010; Lapenta, 2011). For the topic of this chapter, two things are particularly important to keep in mind here. First, inclusionary projects such as these fit neatly within Google’s desired reputation as an ethical company that makes money without doing ‘evil’, by producing tools ‘users adopt to empower themselves’ (Lee, 2010: 910). In addition to the concrete opportunities to attract new customers/users, Google might therefore benefit from these projects as a particular form of marketing. Second, socioeconomic inequality and societal stigma have an influence not only on who is included within this new digital realm – as we saw with the initial removal Rio’s favela names – but also on the option of remaining invisible, for example, for privacy reasons. As Power et al. (2012: 1034) write in their analysis of Street View and stigmatized communities: ‘Those secure in their status can better afford to present a blank space open to interpretation’ in Google Maps and Street View, whereas this would only increase the marginalization of places already ‘undermined by a spoiled identity’. In other words, for stigmatized communities, the need to challenge negative and stereotypical representations is a more direct and pressing concern than Google’s so-called ‘infrastructural imperialism’, which is further complicated by the fact that they often have limited access to other ‘tools to empower themselves’ (Vaidhyanathan, 2011).

## Mapping the Informal City

At the time of writing, the website *Ta no Mapa* includes 25 favela communities, the maps of which are accompanied by succinct information about each community (its surface area, number of inhabitants and a brief history). All of these are also included in Google Maps and a limited number of streets

can be seen on Street View. The documentary *Beyond the Map*, presented on a different website, collects a number of documentary-style videos linked to geographic locations on Google Maps that viewers can navigate randomly or following a narrative sequence established by the producers. Brazilian actors Bianca Comparato and Jonathan Haagensen present the English and the Portuguese version of these narratives respectively, guiding viewers along the videos shot in different favela communities. Among other things, we see a video by a Street View camera on the back of a motor taxi in São Carlos, in which the viewer can 'look around' 360 degrees of footage. Several other videos show the stories of inspiring inhabitants, including a ballet dancer in Complexo do Alemão, a computer science student in the Maré, a surf school owner in Rocinha, and the founder and executive director of Afro-Reggae José Junior with a Street View Trekker in São Carlos. In the last video of the main narrative, Comparato and Haagensen encourage the viewer to 'walk around and explore' the streets of São Carlos on Street View, arguing that 'in favelas around every corner there are people that make life richer: all you have to do is take the first step'. In this final location, we can see several other short videos before being redirected to Street View itself.

My aim in this section is to describe and contextualize the mapping processes that led to these visualizations of Rio de Janeiro's favelas. An important question to ask here is whether the same tools, designed for so-called formal urbanism in the Global North, can be readily applied in favelas and similar neighbourhoods worldwide. For this reason, it is useful first to have a brief look at how Google Maps and Street View are produced in other contexts (see Madrigal, 2012; Miller, 2014). A range of tools is used here, including satellite imagery, location data from users, the user application MapMaker and Street View photographs. In addition, there is a significant role for Google operators, who respond to complaints about maps and correct mistakes, for example, based on Street View imagery. Finally, the company uses methods of computer vision and machine learning to correct and adjust their maps based on Street View images – in effect 'teaching' the computer to do the operators' job, for example, by looking at street signs and addresses. In this sense, Street View actively contributes to Google's mapmaking process by helping Google's algorithms 'understand the logic of human transportation systems' (Madrigal, 2012). It is important to note that similar tools can and are being used in favelas, such as satellite imagery, MapMaker and GPS data of Android users.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, in Rio de Janeiro,

5 The company does not specify how user location data are used exactly (Madrigal, 2012; Miller, 2014).

some favelas that are not included in Afro-Reggae's project (e.g. Cidade de Deus, the Maré, parts of Complexo do Alemão) do appear on Google Maps.

More broadly speaking, however, we might ask whether the format of data visualization provided by Google Maps and Street View can accurately depict the rather different dynamics of 'the street' in informally constructed areas. A variety of journalists, architects and urban planners have noted and celebrated the particularity of the informally built city, in which public and private spaces, roads and squares, and streets and sidewalks are often not as easily delineated (e.g. Brillembourg et al., 2005; Dovey and King, 2011; Angélil and Hehl, 2013; Hernández García, 2013; Dixon, 2014). As one journalist writes:

Public streets and staircases are adopted as places to meet, discuss and hang out. Additionally, the private realm often extends into the public sphere, resulting in social spaces that include rooftops, terraces and doorways which provide these same functions (Dixon, 2014).

Naturally, it is important here not to idealize informality (see Roy, 2011), as well as to keep in mind that formality and informality, as linked to specific urban territories, are rarely absolute states. In favelas, we see this for example in the increasing formalization of areas that were built illegally, and the informal additions to social housing projects (Perlman, 2010; Angélil and Hehl, 2013; Cavalcanti, 2014). Accordingly, Ananya Roy and others have argued for seeing the informal not as a separate sector or territory, but rather as a different *mode* of producing urban space that should not be equated with poverty or illegality (Roy and Alsayyad, 2004; Roy, 2005; Yiftachel, 2009; Varley, 2011). With this in mind, I argue that the particularities of informal space production in Rio de Janeiro's favelas raise some important practical and conceptual difficulties when it comes to digital mapping.

First of all, we can foresee significant changes in the usage of Street View imagery in the overall mapping process, as the 'logic of human transportation systems' is not as clear-cut in favelas, which complicates questions about the necessity and function of Street View in these areas. Second, these informal 'logics' of the street impact the practical usability of these maps, complicating, for example, the use of Google's route planner (related also to the fact that most public transportation is informal). Third, the blurring of public and private spaces might raise additional and/or distinct privacy issues – one of the principal reasons for complaints around Google Street View. Fourth, 'permission' from powerful, criminal actors (e.g. drug gangs, militias) might be necessary in some communities. In many social or cultural projects in favelas

conducted by outsiders, mediation by local individuals or organizations is necessary to ensure the participants' safety, especially when the project includes a detailed visualization of the favela territory.<sup>6</sup> How this happens exactly largely depends on the power structures in the favelas in question, and ethnographic research would be necessary to make more specific claims about the projects at hand: my aim here is merely to draw attention to the fact that local power struggles are likely to impact if and how mapping projects are conducted in specific favela communities. Fifth and finally, if we consider mapping as contributing to the consolidation and formalization of favelas, we can question whether this is desirable for all residents – as 'informality is often functional in and of itself' and formalization usually comes with its own difficulties (e.g. tax-paying, bureaucracy, corruption) (Fischer, 2014: 6).

These particularities are an important reason why local participants played a key role in *Ta no Mapa*. As is shown in several promotional videos, they put into practice mapmaking hard- and software provided by Google and Brazilian partner JWT. In addition to using the Street View Trekkers seen in *Beyond the Map*, this included walking around the neighbourhoods with phones that tracked GPS data, which were cross-referenced with satellite images. Depending on the size of the favela in question and the number of mappers, this process lasted from a few weeks to several months. The involvement of local mappers was also important for Afro-Reggae's main goal of helping local businesses grow due to increased digital visibility, as they helped inform business owners about the marketing possibilities within Google Maps, for example, publishing opening hours and images of their shops and stimulating customers to write online reviews.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to this practical necessity, however, the participation of local mappers has been central to the broader framing of this project, focused on symbolically recognizing favelas as a legitimate part of the urban fabric and including residents in their own representation. In this sense, these literal mappings can be seen as contributing to the 'symbolic remapping and resignification of urban space in Rio de Janeiro, employing digital culture to engage in the production of meaning and a differential visibility for favelas and their residents, and their relationship to the city' (Holmes, 2016: 311). This is particularly relevant with regard to the increased role of digital

6 Well-known examples in which such mediations were conducted are the filming of Michael Jackson's music video *They don't care about us* in Santa Marta and the film *Cidade de Deus* in Cidade Alta. Similar negotiations were also mentioned several times during my fieldwork with visual artists working in different favelas in the city.

7 Several promotional videos about *Ta no Mapa* explain how local mappers informed and collaborated with business owners in favelas.

platforms and media in the (self-)representation of Rio de Janeiro's favelas. As several authors note, the growth and popularity of digital technologies and products within favela spaces 'has offered favela residents a means of engaging in these representational struggles', for example, through community journalism, personal blogs and digital activism (Holmes, 2016: 298; see also, da Cruz, 2007; Custódio, 2014; Bentes, 2011). Naturally, off-line interactions and networks are crucial here (Custódio, 2014) and digital activism has its own problems and pitfalls, but this digital space offers a relatively accessible means of expression for favela residents in a city in which such opportunities unfortunately remain rare.

Building on this, we might see these digital mappings of Rio's favelas as part of a broader movement towards generating and centring debates around the societal position of Rio de Janeiro's favelas and periphery, which increasingly operates in globalized and digital contexts (e.g. academia, NGO's, documentary film, social media). Crucial here is that Google and Afro-Reggae are not alone in challenging Rio's cartographic exclusions. Other groups working with cartography in favelas include, for example, the NGO Redes da Maré, the project WikiMapa by NGO Rede Jovem, government mappings conducted for the Favela-Bairro programme, the Microsoft project *Bing na Área* (Bing in the Area), the website *Mapa da Comunicação Comunitária* by Data\_Labe, the *Guia Cultural de Favelas*, and groups and individuals uploading their maps on OpenStreetMap. In addition, favelas and other informal neighbourhoods have been mapped in a variety of academic contexts with the aim to create 'a global knowledge repository on slums' in order to contribute to more informed urban policy-making (Kuffer et al., 2016). Importantly, many of these initiatives can only be conducted as collaborations between top-down and bottom-up actors, with well-known local organizations such as Afro-Reggae (but also, for example, Redes da Maré, Observatório de Favelas and CUFA) frequently operating as mediators between residents and powerful international players. In other words, we should not only see *Ta no Mapa* and *Beyond the Map* as hybrid visualizations with a multiple authorship, produced through a variety of tools and technologies, but also as part of a dynamic environment in which various groups and actors work towards their own (and possibly conflicting) goals of (cartographic) inclusion.

### Visibility, Recognition, Opportunities

Both *Ta no Mapa* and *Beyond the Map* formulate their goals around three core concepts: visibility, recognition and opportunities. The first two are

inextricably linked to the described feelings of exclusion triggered by the historical absence of favelas on various city maps – related to conscious efforts by the government of ‘[minimizing] evidence of their presence in the city’ (Southwick, 2016). In the face of this, despite having mapped only a small number of favelas as of yet, the ‘recognition by Google Maps of the favelas’ existence offers at least some sense of validation’ (Morris, 2016). By doing so, so Frenzel (2016: 103) notes, mapping initiatives can disrupt, question and challenge the discriminatory views about favelas in the ‘local value regimes’ that define ‘the specific relationship in which slums exist to the rest of the city’. Among other things, this includes challenging the reputation of favelas as dangerous ‘no-go areas’, which is crucially important for achieving the third goal of these projects: attracting new customers from outside of their respective communities. Significantly, the aims of recognition through visibility and providing business opportunities show similarities to the objectives of favela tourism, and in this section I will draw on the extensive scholarly debate on this topic to reflect on how these goals are put into practice in *Ta no Mapa* and *Beyond the Map*. Of crucial importance here, so I will argue, is to make a distinction between the two projects, as their chosen strategies and approaches differ considerably.

Favela or ‘slum’ tourism has been criticized by many academics and journalists based on its inevitable voyeurism, exoticism and commercialization of poverty (e.g. Gentleman, 2006; Jaguaribe, 2007; Weiner, 2008; Larkins, 2015). Despite these obvious ethical problems, however, social scientists have also pointed out that there are different kinds of favela tourism (Freire-Medeiros, 2007; Whyte, Selinger and Outterson, 2011), that tourism *can* change preconceived ideas and prejudices about marginalized areas (Freire-Medeiros, Vilarouca and Menezes, 2013; Frisch, 2014; Frenzel, 2016), and that local reactions to tourists are not solely negative (Freire-Medeiros, 2010; Freire-Medeiros, 2012). Frenzel (2016: 7) even argues that ‘by putting slums on the map, through a number of different practices, tourists can contribute to advancing social and political justice for residents of slums’. While there are many possible pitfalls here (e.g. exploitation, selective valorization, gentrification), tourism is by definition a practice of territorial valorization and might therefore help change ‘how societies respond to poverty’ (Frenzel, 2016: 16).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Bianca Freire-Medeiros builds on the work of Marie-Louise Pratt (1992, cited in Freire-Medeiros, 2007: 69) to argue that, despite all its problematic aspects, tourism can create

8 For more critical accounts of changes in the government’s approach towards favelas in relation to tourism and mega-events in Rio de Janeiro, see Freeman, 2012; Steinbrink, 2014.



'contact zones', defined as 'social spaces in which disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination', but where paradoxically new possibilities of representation and exchange emerge. This is particularly relevant considering the perceptions of Rio de Janeiro as a 'divided city' discussed above.

Both *Ta no Mapa* and *Beyond the Map* aim for a similar valorization of favela territories, with *Ta no Mapa* focusing on symbolic recognition and practical opportunities, and *Beyond the Map* on challenging stereotypes and media imaginaries. To start with the latter, two critical points must be addressed. First, within the 'digital exploration' of this web documentary, a real-life 'contact zone' remains absent. We see favelas only from behind the safety of our computer screens, which means the idea of dangerous 'no-go areas' is maintained. Even the relatively easily created possibility of a 'digital contact zone' (e.g. through a comment section or contact details) is missing in this project. Second, the problematic idea of a 'divided' Rio de Janeiro is arguably maintained here. We see this, for example, in the introduction of *Beyond the Map*, in which 'the Rio everyone knows' and 'the world of the favelas' are put in direct contrast (strengthened by a musical shift from relaxed samba to a more aggressive hip-hop style). This not only reveals much about the target audience, it is also reflective of the series of oppositions on which the framing of the documentary relies: inclusion vs. exclusion, visibility vs. invisibility, positive vs. negative representations, and the divisions between favelas and the formal city. In my view, this presents a simplified narrative that fails to address the heterogeneity and interdependency of the formal and the informal city. As one reviewer notes, the positive view provided here 'completely omits the structural racism and systemic neglect which necessitate incredible feats of courage and determination to pursue personal passions' (Jackson, 2016). In other words, despite the aim to 'shine a spotlight on an often overlooked site of Rio' (Germano, 2016), *Beyond the Map* actually shows us a rather familiar, positive image of favelas – as vibrant, entrepreneurial, and inspiring – without elaborating on the 'multiple ways in which they are embedded in urban life' (Fischer, 2014: 7).

In contrast, Afro-Reggae's project has a more nuanced and situated approach: it specifically tries to create 'contact zones' by providing a pragmatic cartographic visualization aimed at bringing both local and outside customers to favela businesses they did not frequent before. In a promotional video of *Ta no Mapa*, the owner of an arts and crafts shop in Vidigal reports that, since her inclusion in Google Maps, she receives more customers from outside the favela, who explicitly mention finding her through Google. Several online articles about *Ta no Mapa* also report on the successful restaurant *Bar do*

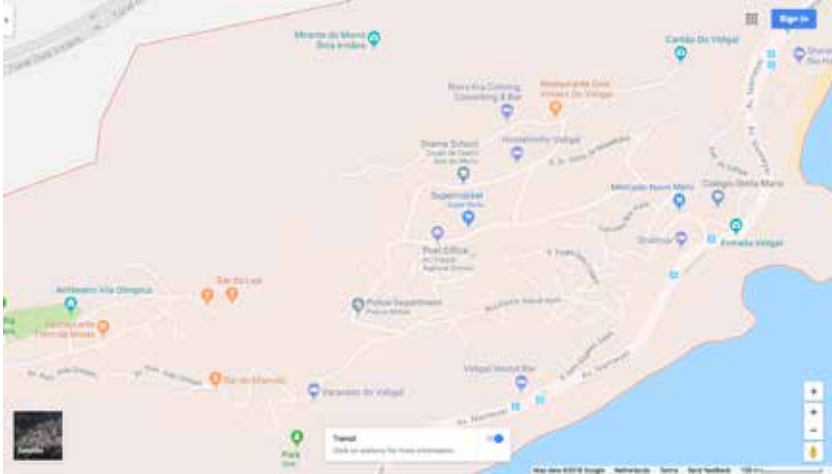


Fig. 11.3: Rio de Janeiro favela neighbourhood of Vidigal. Map Data © Google Maps 2018.

*David*, located in the favela Babilônia (Archer, 2016; Panayotis, 2016; Yee, 2016). Naturally, these success stories are anecdotal and further research would be necessary to make definite claims about the project's achievements in this respect, in which it must be considered that Google Maps is not the only digital platform on which many of these businesses present themselves. *Bar do David*, for example, has almost 400 reviews on TripAdvisor, over 1600 likes on Facebook, an entry in the *Lonely Planet* and ample media coverage. Once again, however, we can build on research in the field of favela tourism to make some initial remarks in this respect.

Most importantly, there might be external factors contributing to the success of the two entrepreneurs mentioned above. These two favelas communities – Vidigal (Fig. 11.3) and Babilônia – are both located in Rio's affluent and touristy south zone and had, at the time in which these videos were produced, a relatively successful Unit of Participatory Policing (UPP). Despite strong critiques of the UPP or pacification policy, this programme made some favelas – especially small, south zone communities – more accessible for outsiders. Combined with other factors, this resulted in an increase in alternative forms of favela tourism without an official tour guide (e.g. hostels, restaurants, AirBnB listings, funk parties, volunteering), and even signs of gentrification (Cummings, 2015; Gaffney, 2016; Janoschka and Sequera, 2016). In addition to the 'constant danger of contributing to [such] gentrification processes', it is important to keep in mind that non-favela customers are much less likely to go to favelas with a more peripheral location (e.g. in the North or West zones), meaning that this valorization

remains highly selective and the vast majority of favelas will 'continue to suffer from territorial stigma' (Frenzel, 2016: 189). Naturally, this also has a lot to do with the real or imagined risk of violence in specific communities at specific times, which means that the current budgetary crisis of the UPP policy might have an impact here (Barber, 2016; Long, 2017).

Despite the clear need for recognition and valorization within Rio's discriminatory local value regime, we thus see that inclusion in digital cartographies by no means guarantees empowerment or increased opportunities for businesses in favelas. This is partly because discriminatory imaginaries and economic inequality are so deeply ingrained in Rio's urban fabric, a reality that is nearly impossible to overcome in a single project (which is why it is so important to see these projects as part of a larger movement). Nevertheless, it is also related to how the projects – and particularly *Beyond the Map* – position themselves in relation to these broader structures and imaginaries. As we have seen, despite the focus on inclusion, the idea of the favela and the formal city as opposite entities, and Rio as a 'divided' city, repeatedly creeps back into the framing and promotion of the projects. Naturally, these dichotomies are employed to draw attention to very real practices of discrimination and exclusion, but I argue that they once again present a simplified account of Rio de Janeiro's inequalities. For Lisa Parks (2009: 540), the power of satellite imagery and digital maps is that they are 'more evocative than definitive', which might 'set off chains of inquiry, investigation, reflection, as well as questions about position and perspective'. Nevertheless, perhaps because these projects need to gain visibility in this same unequal and profit-driven context as other commercialized representations, we unfortunately see that dominant, fixed and straightforward narratives continue to have an impact on how they are interpreted, framed and used.

## Conclusion

Virtual mapping applications such as Google Maps have a large impact on how contemporary cities are imagined, experienced and navigated, becoming 'a new social space and organising principle' (Lapenta, 2011: 15). The invisibility of significant parts of Rio's territory and population from this digital realm is an important problem that is inextricably related to broader socioeconomic exclusion and stigma, including historical cartographic exclusion. We might therefore see these mappings as related to digital activism and broader efforts to generate and draw attention to a critical

debate about Rio de Janeiro's socio-spatial inequalities. At the same time, however, the projects reproduce some of the problematic aspects of favela tourism, and are related to the 'Googlization of everything', described by Vaidhyathan (2011) as 'infrastructural imperialism'. In other words, while the framing of these projects is strongly focused on a social, inclusionary approach and the creation of local business opportunities, we should not lose sight of the larger political economic structures that underlie these initiatives, and question the capacity of technology 'to solve all unsolved problems, including social ills' (Lee, 2010: 910). Keeping in mind the diverse and multiple functions of digital maps, there is a clear need for further research on these initiatives, for example considering local perceptions of the projects and the ways in which the provided tools benefit favela businesses in different parts of the city.

In this chapter, my aim has been to open up a discussion about digital mapping projects as favela visualizations by emphasizing the dynamic context in which these maps are produced and consumed. I have tried to draw attention to the particularities and complexities of projects aimed at mapping neighbourhoods that are considered dangerous or difficult to access by those who do not live there. In favelas, the pragmatic and schematic approach of mapping can be a welcome alternative to more sensationalist and generalized depictions, linking representations to a physical location on the map. In Parks's (2009: 540) words, digital maps and satellite imagery can '[displace] the familiarity and authority of the proximate view, and in so doing, [challenge] the all too easy assumption that a closer view leads to better understanding' (Parks, 2009: 544). With this in mind, we clearly see a distinction between the approaches of the two projects discussed. *Beyond the Map*, in an attempt to provide context and challenge stereotypes, returns to the more familiar close-ups of favelas and in doing so loses sight of broader structures of inequality and the relations between favelas and the rest of the city. *Ta no Mapa*, in contrast, focuses on the symbolic and practical need for inclusion, as well as the provision of 'contact zones' and economic opportunities – even if this is more complex to put into practice than the project's promotion makes it out to be. In summary, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that cartographic exclusion is inextricably related to broader structures of inequality, the promising new visualizations of favelas in digital maps do not guarantee empowerment or more nuanced representations, as they tend to be interpreted, promoted and used through highly unequal structures and imaginaries in which Rio's favelas are highly visible but rarely acknowledged as a legitimate and contributing part of the city as a whole.

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