Between here and elsewhere: relating to place

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Writing this text I am located at the precise geographic co-ordinates of:

51° 30' 46" N x 0° 04' 15" W

Reading this text now you must be 'somewhere', be it in your office, home, train, bus, plane, tube. Whilst some texts, like tourist guide-books for instance, are written to be read when actively visiting specific places, their purpose being to inform, and guide us as we are visiting these places: the context and purpose of this particular text, it's physicality as an object, personal circumstances, and social protocol, delimit where it might be read. Whilst Joshua Meyrowitz (2004) writes that we are 'always in place…[with our bodies] dependent on the nature of the specific locality…[and] bound by the laws of space and time,' the abstract numerical co-ordinates of my physical geographic location available through global positioning devices, online street maps, and satellite navigation systems for example, do not relay to you anything about my immediate physical surroundings that might give you a sense of my 'place'. Location, as Tim Cresswell (2004) explains, is a site without meaning, however if I tell you that as I write this I am in a flat in Aldgate, east London, surrounded by such objects as a 1960s hoop game-board hanging on the wall, a rustic Portuguese vase, a black and white photograph of my father standing outside the shop, 'immediately many images come into our heads … as replacing a set of numbers with a name means that we begin to approach 'place'.' (Cresswell 2004: 2) With all that these culturally constructed signs imply, our imaginations begin to construct an image, a representation of absence to presence through which we begin to understand, for place, according to Cresswell, is a way of 'seeing, knowing and understanding the world.' (Cresswell 2004: 11)

Currently we live in an information age saturated by live images from around the globe broadcast 24/7. YouTube allows users to share video-clips, podcasting enables downloading broadcasts at a time and location of our choice, car satellite navigation systems help us travel via the shortest route, and personal GPS devices

let us know where we are in the world at any given time. It is argued that these electronic broadcast emissions have impacted on us by neutralising experience of our environment and causing social fragmentation. Constructed geographic space is being transformed, indeed dematerialised, with the markers of position and location disappearing and the notions of scale and physical dimension gradually losing their meaning - in the face of the infinite fragmentation of point of view. (Virilio 1995) Therefore if, at the turn of the 21st century, these electronic broadcast emissions are eradicating a sense of place, and the marks of location are disappearing with notions of physical dimension losing their meaning, what are the implications of this 'etherealisation' in geography? For if space is being annihilated or negated by time, and space, as Creswell (2004) explains, is that which has areas and volumes invested with human meaning and attachment - becomes a place, how then might we relate to place?

My current research, a site-specific video-podcasting project, with the working title of 'From 00° 00' 00" to 0101', examines the impact of new technologies' formulation and representation of a new global cultural space on our perceptive experience and how we relate to place, and asks the question: to what extent is this transforming national and personal identities?

The medium of video-podcasting for personal mobile media devices was conceived and is utilised as a means of convenient broadcasting. It is approached by broadcasting companies, for example, to widen its audience with downloadable catch-up television programmes, or mini-episodes to complement their already existing digital and terrestrial broadcasts; by educational establishments as an educational resource, and by the private sector as audio/visual versions of online blogs or as self marketing strategies.

Focusing on two distinct symbolic sites as geographic locations for the research, development and production of mobile site-specific video-podcasts: London as urban 'Heart of Empire' and 'Middle England' as rural Heart of England. This project however, proposes to invert the role of the user, from that of consumer, where physical locality is irrelevant to the video-podcast they are watching, to that of producer - imaginatively interacting through the video-podcast in new ways with a pre-determined environment. In this way the project will exploit the potential of the medium of video-podcasting for hand-held mobile site-specific broadcasts, as a means of re-engaging with the particularity of physical place, at a time when it

appears our perceptions of location, mobility, and identity are being destabilised through the proliferation of such technologies.

Contextualising the project

To situate my research project 'From 00° 00' 00" to 0101' this paper provides it's theoretical context.

Historically, all technologies have had an impact on how we relate to place, as Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) writes, they have 'affected the information that people bring to places and the information that people have in given places. But the relationship between place and social situation was still quite strong.' (1985: 115) He suggests however, that what is different about the recent electronic media is that they achieve a 'nearly total dissociation of physical place and social place … [where] we are physically no longer determines where and who we are socially.' (ibid) In this respect different places and different identities become irrelevant, and it is this, Meyrowitz suggests, that impacts on what he calls our 'sense of place.' Ultimately our sense of place is being altered as a consequence of there being no need, through electronic media, for physical presence as a prerequisite for first-hand experience. (ibid)

Marc Auge´ (1992) goes further and argues that a supermodern predicament of acceleration and overabundance of a world system of interdependences, technology, information and events, has left us with a need to give meaning to the world and the present. What he defines as 'supermodernity' is an era where there is no synthesis of old and new, of distinct individualities, perceived as equivalent and unconnected. As a consequence of supermodernity, he suggests that there needs to be a rethinking of the traditional notion of place as it is increasingly being replaced by 'non-places.' Non-places (also described as out-of-place), Auge´ says these are the 'real measure of our time,' (1992: 79) as they encompass all means of transport technologies (air, rail, motorway), the buildings related to travel (airport, stations), as well as leisure parks, hotel-chains, large retail outlets, and communication technology networks.

Space and time, Manuel Castells (1996) observes, are the fundamental dimensions of human life, yet the conquest of space has been replaced by the advent of the immaterial transmission technologies of information and communication, which in turn, achieve the conquest of time. Paul Virilio argues that with space reduced to time, and distance transformed into speed, physical geographic expanse is being replaced

by temporal distance. This, he says negates space, replacing the ''space-time' of customary experience of places [and therefore a sense of place] with that of the non-place of the 'space-speed' of technology.' (Virilio 1990: 122) As a result of this new 'space-speed', where the dimensions of space become inseparable from their speed of transmission, everything arrives without any need to depart. Christine Boyer (1996) describes this effect as a reformulation of our 'perception of space and time, so that we experience a loss of spatial boundaries or distinctions, so that all spaces begin to look alike and implode into a continuum' (Boyer 1996: 19), resulting eventually in our inability to map our contemporary terrain, and to envision space and representational forms.

Through the effects of 'space-speed,' localities Manuel Castells' writes that people become:

> … disembodied from their cultural, historical, geographic meaning, and reintegrated into functional networks, or into image collages, inducing a space of flows that substitutes for the space of places. Time is erased in the new communication system when past, present and future can be programmed to interact with each other in the same message. The space of flows and timeless time are the material foundations of a new culture that transcends and includes the diversity of historically transmitted systems of representation: the culture of real virtuality where make-believe is belief in the making. (Castells 1996: 375)

Castells believes that all reality is virtual, as cultures and societies throughout history are made up of communication processes, which in turn are based on the production and consumption of signs. With no separation between ''reality' and symbolic representation,'(ibid: 372) all reality is virtually perceived. What is specific however, to our current system of communication technologies is the 'construction of a real virtuality … in which reality itself … [that is, people's material/symbolic existence]…is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience.'(ibid: 372-73) It is here that the medium merges together past, present, and future, where the image of something substitutes whatever it is meant to represent.

The spectacle of the live 'real-time' (of visual broadcast technology) 'impose the idea', according to Virilio, of 'presentation of a place', as opposed to representation 'of places'. This 'presence of tele-reality transforms the nature of both the object and the subject of traditional representation, so that pictures of places have now taken over from the 'picture houses' where performances used to occur.' (Virilio 1990: 3) He argues that in 'furnishing the image of a place, videography … [his term for video broadcast] … does not itself require any actual 'space' except for its supporting camera and monitor, and in turn the instantaneously transmitted image across distances becomes itself a new type of 'site'' that has nothing in common with the 'topographical space of geographical or even simple geometrical distance.' (ibid: 2)

The immediacy of the image therefore excludes 'unity of place' for the sole benefit of the 'unity of time', of a real time that affects the space of real things. In this scenario the image has priority over the 'thing' that is being presented, supremacy of 'real time' over 'real space.' The image is therefore 'invasive and ubiquitous … its role … is to be everywhere, to be reality…' (McCullough 2008) This results in the 'physical non-separability of outside and inside, near and distant.' (McCullough 1990: 6)

Malcolm McCullough claims however, that for the 'more mobile and networked of us, place has become less about our origins on some singular piece of soil, and more about forming connections with the many sites in our lives. Place becomes less an absolute location fraught with tribal bonds or nostalgia, and more a relative state of mind that one gets into by playing one's boundaries and networks. We belong to several places and communities, partially and by degree and in ways that are mediated. (McCullough 2006) His argument is further extended by the question he posed at his lecture titled 'Urban Inscriptions' delivered at 'The Mobile City Conference' in Rotterdam in 2008: 'Must media mean remoteness?' Whereas cyberspace has tended to imply a disembodied world experienced through a computer screen, he argues that the new paradigm of locative media can be used to bring things back to street level by inscribing in real space and thereby reintroducing the importance of physical space.

It would be a safe assumption to consider that we have reached a point of no return: that we have perhaps reached a stage where, as Virilio argues, the 'management of the surroundings in the real space of cities or countryside, will tomorrow play out solely in the organization of the control of the transmissibility of images and information in real time,' (1990: 122) where 'it will no longer be a matter of admiring

the countryside, but solely of scanning one's screens, one's dials, the directing of one's interactive trajectory, that is to say of a "distance" without distance, of an "interval" without interval.' (ibid)

Perhaps what we need to develop however, are, as Castells suggests, modes of perception that 'enable us to navigate between, to explore and question, the framework of pre-digested and pre-selected nodes of data that represent highly mediated forms of communication delivered over centerless, network-like electronic structures often called the space of flows.' (Castells in Boyer 1996: 8)

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