

## Introduction to NEW MEDIA + NEW SPACE

To my mind, this workshop is predicated on the ineluctably spatial aspect of media and information. Media and information are spatial not only because images may be images of space, or arranged in space, and certainly not because digital information constitutes virtual reality. There is nothing virtual about being yoked to your screen.

I am not sure that a workshop on urbanism has much use for the term virtual. The term virtual space is deeply conservative, because, by carving out a separate spatiality for the digital, it allows space - what we could provisionally call real space or material space - to remain untouched. And it is precisely the question of how the digital is changing our understanding of space, our use of it to create our public culture and public politics, that this workshop is concerned with. We should perhaps simply speak of urban environments, and recognise that they are heterogeneous, and that a number of factors including material space and digital information go into the making of them. In this regard, the architect Robert Venturi has played an important role, one that is not perhaps sufficiently acknowledged outside of architecture. In his book *Learning from Las Vegas* (early 1970's), he argued that urban space is organised by information, in the case of Las Vegas, almost exclusively; and other cities, to greater or lesser extent. Although, he was arguing against the kind of urbanism put forth in the book *Collage City* (also by architects), in which urban form is understood primarily as a composition of spatial figures or fragments thereof (hence collage), it is easy to see how his argument could be lifted out of this context and brought to bear on the question of media environments.

[If there is a virtual world, its is everywhere already around us, for its medium is language. Language is virtual for the signifier is always material, and the signified is always already elsewhere.]

Making the link between space and media, the spatiality of media, is essential to this workshop because without it, the topics of the other seminars, which look at globalisation, surveillance, the use of media to galvanise the body politic, and the like, are accidental and their study simply and entirely empirical. These are the focus of empirical studies, but the link between media and space is not entirely empirical - there is a sense in which it could not have been otherwise.

I would like to pursue the link between space and media - and thereby to introduce the theme of this seminar, new media + new space - by discussing the interlinked ideas of freedom, space, and identity. Our freedom from state control to publicly pursue our own politics and identity[, the function of public space, and

our ability to shape our identity]. These thoughts have been prodded by the government's intentions to introduce identity cards, which I consider to be the single most nauseating threat to freedom by a government with dreams of totalitarian grandeur; but these comments are not intended to be political, nor a rant against identity cards, and nor is it the agenda of this workshop. These comments are merely made more relevant by this government's initiative. The links between freedom, space, and identity goes something like this:

- Zeno and the Stoics argued a political philosophy of world citizenship as opposed to city-state citizenship. They argued it in the Agora because – as foreigners with no rights to Athenian property – the Stoa in the public market were the only places where they could be heard. Only much later did they gain rights to teach in the Academy which was private property.
- The 15<sup>th</sup> C French Huguenots escaped persecution by leaving France for England.
- The 17<sup>th</sup> C English Anabaptists escaped persecution by leaving England for America.
- In 19<sup>th</sup> century America, if you ran into legal, financial, or domestic difficulties in the east coast cities, it was possible to disappear from law, spouse, or creditors, and refashion your identity, in the western frontier. Even though this is no longer possible, the high suicide rate on the west coast confirms that the fantasy *go west young man...* to find fortune and redemption, still operates.
- In Joseph Conrad's novel, *The Secret Agent*, a conspiracy of anarchists attempt to ignite a bomb at Greenwich, and to thereby symbolically undermine the temporal order of the world. They conspire in a Soho tobacconist's, a place of high anxiety because it is lit and public, and then slip back into the inky blackness of lampless Wardour street. They quite literally disappear beneath the murky surface of London. 19<sup>th</sup> century London functions the way the film noir city always functions. It is never a space of visibility where all things are seen, where there is clarity, but a space for hiding, a space where nothing is as it seems because everything is hidden and identities always shift.
- One of the places it still seems possible to escape state scrutiny is the Afghan highlands on the border with Pakistan. Bush said that there is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. There was nowhere that American surveillance could not reach, and for a short while I laboured under the claustrophobic thought that the world had finally become a closed shop. There was, finally, nowhere left to go. Although I disagree with his

*modus operandi*, I am relieved that Bin Laden has been successful in using the media to control his appearance and disappearance from state scrutiny. He has demonstrated several times now that he can switch the hegemonic gaze of state power on and off at will. Despite the extension of American ears and eyes by modern intelligence systems (military satellites, drones, spy planes, global positioning and tracking systems, mobile phone tracking) there are still places where transparency and instantaneity have not penetrated.

- To jump to the other side of the surveillance fence for a moment... The Google Earth® project - which, from a subjective point of view, is essentially a project of personal empowerment through the deployment of the global gaze - will finally be complete when it is in real time. A domestic home for our military fantasies.

Freedom has always been linked with the ability to disappear from state scrutiny by leaving one place for another. Freedom has always been linked to space. We have to ask what happens to space when identity becomes a digital infrastructure, as it does when 49 items of information about every person is consolidated at a single point of access and implanted on a passkey to all social institutions and social and government services.

Freedom has always been linked to space, freedom has always been freedom to go elsewhere, to wander and to thereby disappear.

In these examples, people could escape state control and scrutiny, of one form or another, by leaving one place for another.

In these examples, we see different permutations of the relation between space, freedom to wander, the ability to disappear, and identity. For freedom from state scrutiny in order to take ideological positions that are at variance with the state.

This is not a rant against identity cards, or powerful data bases (if it is not government identity cards it is commercial databases like the one run by Tesco, reputedly the most extensive in the country with information on the health, finance, and consumer habits of its customers). My point is that we need to explore new forms of freedom because data collection and retrieval has taken this function away from space.

What happens to freedom when there is no longer anywhere to go to escape scrutiny, what happens to freedom when digital technology have made data bases so comprehensive and so centralised that it is no longer possible to slip beneath the surface. We do not lose our freedom, it just has to seek other forms, it has to shift to other modes. Space is no longer the locus for freedom.

The emergence of powerful data bases is changing our relationship to space. Freedom has always had a spatial form.

One of the essential functions of space is that it allows us to go from one place to another, in order to hide and to so exercise our freedom to escape from state control or to take political positions against the state, or to refashion our identities. This function of space no longer works in a world of powerful databases. This is not to say that we no longer have these abilities, but only that they have to shift out of the spatial mode. If up until a certain period, space gave us the mode and access to freedom, today it is increasingly only the fantasy of freedom. By fantasy of freedom, I mean not that in some sense space is a fantasy, but the freedom it offers is a fantasy. A good example of space functioning as the fantasy as opposed to the reality of freedom are the advertisements for 4WD cars, where the car is perched on a precipice.

We will no longer have freedom because we will no longer be able to disappear[, or at least disappear for any length of time. At every critical point where we need essential services, we are pulled back into the scrutiny system of the state. This used to be a fate reserved for special people like criminals.] And if we cannot disappear, one of the main functions of space - the function of space to allow us to wander, to escape scrutiny, to reshape our identities - will go with it. How does this change our relation to space. Think Big Brother, and its spatial implementation at Versailles.

Identity is increasingly becoming a digital infrastructure. It is becoming similar to other infrastructures like the highway, the gas pipeline or the water-main. The architect Will Alsop said on his TV tour of Britain, that even the countryside is plumbed in now. By that he meant that the line between countryside and urbanside has become almost completely erased in the new economy. [as a material fact and in terms of live/work lifestyles] There is almost nowhere in Britain that is not fully plumbed in with water, sewers, electrics and other services. The identity infrastructure is equally plumbed in. It is not just in cities. It is plumbed in at every cash mach, at every swipe card strip and pin point, at every university terminal. It will become more so, when the id card system becomes the mode of access for all modes of participation in the public sphere, whether it is the electoral system, the library system, the health system, the money system. Our identities will be fixed in the coordinates of a 49-dimensional identity space. It may be regulated, we may need to pay for it (the architect William Mitchell says 'metred'), we may need to take out insurance on it. And although it may seem today like the most frightening extension of the state power into big brother totalitarianism, it will eventually seem completely normal, because it is an

environment, and as McLuhan has said repeatedly, environments are largely invisible to their inhabitants.

When identity becomes digital infrastructure, space ceases to be the host for freedom, and becomes instead party to a fantasy of freedom. By fantasy, I mean not that space is a fantasy, but that the freedom it offers is chimeric. So long as you can disappear in the western frontier, in the Afghan highlands, even in a surrealist rêve in the Monmartre crowds, the freedom that space affords is not a fantasy. But as soon as space becomes transparent to the scrutiny of the state either through the mechanisms of surveillance or the storage and retrieval of data, space offers only the fantasy of freedom. A good example of space functioning as the fantasy as opposed to the reality of freedom are the advertisements for 4WD cars. The car is invariably perched on a precipice in the wet mountain wilderness of New Zealand (which is where pre-war Britain is now located). As if anything as dependent upon roads, fuel distribution, road tax, licensing, 3 year financing and warrantees, legal instruments like title and insurance certificate, all of it supported by a credit rating based on your mortgage (with council tax, house insurance, life assurance policy, finally job with pension add-ons), could ever be part of an escape.

I have looked at just one aspect of space, this aspect of identity and freedom from scrutiny. Urban space is losing its efficacy in this respect. [its potential for use] My point is about how the meaning and use of space, and hence our relation to it, is changing. [freedom is an irrepressible pressure] We are not loosing our freedom from state scrutiny, we will shift into other areas and other modes and other forms of congregation than spatial ones, for the expression of public politics, and the modulation of our identities.

When identity becomes a digital infrastructure, [our relation to] public space is changed. To appreciate how much this shift will change urban discourse, consider how this changes such cherished stock in trade figures of 20<sup>th</sup> century critical urban culture as the *flaneur*. The *flaneur* is the figure of public urban man. His home is the street, indeed he is only a *flaneur* on the street. [Imagine *flaneuring* around the sitting room.] He is apart from the crowd because he observes it, but invisible to the crowd because he flows with it. His wandersome movement is an indicator of an unconscious world of desire. [a spatialisation of a hidden world of unconscious desire.] The *flaneur* is always visible but always dropping out of sight, both to himself and to others. This is a world whose possibility depends upon a continual exchange between appearance/disappearance, an exchange not possible to sustain if we imagine that, as he wanders from Monmartre to Rive Gauche to Park Monceau, he is never out of sight of CCTV cameras. This would not be such a big deal, except that from this surrealist conceit, a whole series of ideas about

urban culture is predicated on it. What it means to be part of a crowd, the relation between individual identity and collective identity. Simmel to Sennet.

### **Id cards**

In addition to finger and iris prints, these items of information relate to birthday, sex, national insurance, health, tax, and driving status: they fix each person in the vast multidimensional matrix of social and other services, including the health system, the retirement system, the legal system, the education system, etc.

### **VLC and PG and Homer**

The study of very large conversations

The work of PG who is here today as one of the collaborators on laser\net.

How we translate the world into other forms

The shift from space based to digital art

Not a different form so much as a different location

It tells us new things about ourselves

Urban myth-making - maybe it no longer requires the city and its institutions (museums, monuments, Dundee city of Discovery) for its locus

How to work the megamachine, the digital megamachine

The communal myth-making that keeps societies together, that bundles us into groups, that keeps us alive

The chat room

The VLC

Later day Homer, gathering together strands of culture, bundling together strands of culture by gathering it and reiterating it, repeating it many times to different audiences in different locations, each time adjusting its content. This is what McLuhan addressed in *The Mechanical Bride*, only here he attributed it to advertising, as the primary form of visual and literate cultural production. Visible from everywhere, pervading into all cracks and avenues of our city and our consciousness. This myth-making shapes our taste and our politics. How do we make a platform for performance that will allow us to regain control of the media and that will allow us to become producers instead of consumers: active, joined up producers working on common mythmaking projects vs simply consumers isolated in our passivity.

The attempt to regulate content is an attempt to prevent the formation of a public consciousness through mythmaking as much as the banning of demonstrations in public urban space is an attempt to prevent the formation of public consciousness.

The attempt to regulate hardware and software is akin to planning regulations which do not determine what you build so much as determine the parameters within which what you build is permissible.

