Sound

‘How Many Movements?’
Mobile Telephones and Transformations in Urban Space [1]

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Mobile telephones create aural space that is both technological and imaginary. Caroline Basset explores the new spatial economy that is the result of the dynamics between physical and virtual space, between old and new space. Fragmentation and individualization are not her primary findings. Rather, according to Basset, the changing dialectics of presence / absence also generate new types of connectedness and continuity, of mobile subjectivity.

There are two texts which simply alternate: you might almost believe they had nothing in common, but they are in fact inextricably bound up with each other, as though neither could exist on its own … but … only in their fragile over-lapping.
—Georges Perec

1. Th ground wher u walk

I left my pictur on th ground wher u walk…
—A text message poem*, Guardian OnLine*, 7, 5 December 2002

In the city where I live advertising flyers are often taped to the ground. In rain-soaked England the images dissolve very quickly; but the taped outlines remain far longer. These empty squares produce ***ad hoc*** grids; hop-scotch pathways through the city. I often find myself falling into step with these grids when I use my mobile; not entirely absent-mindedly, but not entirely intentionally either. This is how I walk when I am talking into another space, when I am walking ***here*** but listening ***there***, receiving or sending text messages, making or taking calls.

This way of walking is like the pavement game children play, the game where stepping on the cracks between stones is prohibited because the ground is full of monsters only held at bay by this ritual. Children engaged in these games operate with extra care: every step matters. For me the inverse is true, I am operating in a distracted way: each step matters ***less***. This outside city space engages my vision, but I am not necessarily attending closely to what I see in this space, and I am certainly not seeking to control it. I am focussed on a second space, the auditory space opened up through the phone. It is there, into that space, that I direct my emotions and my intellectual attention – and it is into that space that I seek to be ***heard***.

The spatial economy of mobile tele phony is complex, engaging the dynamics not only of virtual space (the bubble into which we speak when we make a connection), but also of physical space as it comes to be penetrated by virtual space: whenever a mobile is used it connects not two spaces but four or more. This is one of the ways in which mobiles play a part in the production of contemporary space. They also play a part in the negotiation of

new forms of subjectivity. This negotiation is explored here. And I begin by looking at what has ended.

2. The 'Incarceration Vacation'

The more you see, the less you hold.. [this is] a dis-possession of the hand in favour of a greater trajectory for the eye.
—Michel de Certeau

You Extend From Who You Walk On.
—Gretschen Hofner

In the 1970s, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau contrasted the embedded perspective produced by walking in the city at ground level with the strategic viewpoint from on high, a view usually enabled by technology.[2] For De Certeau walking was a spatializing, *narrativizing* practice. Those who felt their way through the streets, tracing out their own trajectories, produced a second, ghostly mapping of the city; one that confounded the official city of the planners and architects – at least for a time.

Today I still walk in the city. But I am no longer a pedestrian in the old sense because I am no longer embedded in my immediate locality or environment, even when I walk rather than go by car. The penetration of the old spaces of the everyday by mobile phone users now largely goes unnoticed; routine and habituation mask what is an extra-ordinary shift. Today the city streets are full of virtual doorways, opening into other places. Countless ways through, ways out, and ways in to the city space are constructed and de-constructed by a myriad of mobile phone owners, who transform as they use. This change in space means that today I can walk here in the streets and simultaneously connect with other people in far away spaces. I find new perspectives, and not only because I can be *reached* on my mobile phone but also because I can use it to *reach out*. (The difference between the mobile phone and the Walkman inheres in this distinction; the mobile, unlike the Walkman, offers the possibility of remote intervention). My perspective has shifted, indeed I have more than one perspective available to me. It is clear that the (negative) place accorded to information technology in De Certeau's consideration of the dialectics of power, control and freedom is challenged by the case of the mobile.[3]

From walking to riding: elsewhere in the *Practice of Everyday Life* De Certeau explores a train journey as an 'incarceration vacation', a space in which passengers submit to the discipline of the rails but where they paradoxically find some freedom from other responsibilities. In this space they are *made* unaccountable. This is an unexpected freedom, and even for De Certeau the expanded if prosthetic expansion of perspective it offers the incarcerated traveller is alluring. The train becomes the grounds from which vision extends: the grounds we walk on.

The mobile phone changes this dynamic. For the mobile phone user, travel no longer presumes a broken connection. There is no dislocation between the world of the train and the world beyond: not even the temporary dislocation the journey used to produce. Each world is shot through with the other. De Certeau called the train a mobile symbol.[4] Today, mobile phones are at once a new symbol of a particular kind of contemporary freedom to move and act in multiple spaces, and a symbol of 'always on' accountability / surveillance. This new symbol challenges the priority the visual is accorded in De Certeau's economy of spatial power and demands that the connections he sees between the strategic and the scopic are re-thought. These days mobile-equipped travellers operate in that speed-blurred band that used to demarcate the division between landscape beyond the rails and the fast-moving space of the train. Or rather, there is no longer a boundary, but only an *interface*. You are advised to 'take your world with you' when you go because this is the end of the incarceration vacation: with its unexpected freedom and its constraint. The question is, what comes next?

3. 'How Many Movements?'

Two perspectives on this question are offered here. First, drawing on Jonathan Crary's account of the suspension of perception in modern culture, mobile telephony is explored in relation to questions of attention. Using this concept as guideline, the dialectic of presence / absence that lies at the heart of the spatial economy enabled by the mobile phone is operationalized.

A second perspective is founded on the concept of the inventory developed by Georges Perec, another French theorist of the everyday. Perec stressed the importance of jumbled, half-forgotten, objects and processes in the production of everyday life, claiming that this *infra-ordinary* form of life might be investigated through experiments with numerological systems. The mode of inventory is one of these experiments, offering a means by which to codify experience and thereby to recall and record various aspects of everyday life. In Perec's hands however, the inventory is not a reductive codification but an expansive *narrative* process, reaching beyond the pure realm of the logic of the database. Here experience is not reduced to a bullet point, life to a code, and nor is organic space reduced to a technical diagram. Instead, Perec unfolds worlds from their barest essentials so that the inventory functions as a catalyst for a particular kind of distension or decompression, for a *return* to an experience in all its complexity. This return also involves a break since 'space as inventory' is also 'space as invention'. [5] In other words, Perec's numerological system, a form of artificial memory, is also a poetics: a way of re-making space that involves technical production and imagination. This is why the concept of the inventory lets us consider ways in which technologies like mobiles operate as *more* than technical processes (although they are also always technical processes). Complex spaces can be produced from the thinnest of possible cues, from simple lists, single items, bare technical descriptions of a process, or perhaps *from the single act of calling up a number*.

4. Attention and Imagination

Tracing connections between attention and perception, Jonathan Crary argues that in contemporary life 'individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for "paying attention", that is, for a *disengagement* with the broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focussing on a reduced number of stimuli'. [6] The capacity to switch attention from one space to another is very evident in mobile phone use, which hones our ability to rapidly engage / disengage from particular stimuli or from particular spaces, and expands the times and places where / when these switches might be made.

I return here momentarily to my own distracted walking in the city and to the children's pavement games it echoes. In both cases paying attention (or failing to pay attention) is not only about looking, nor is it about where precisely the gaze is directed (about the angle of the gaze). That is, attention is not purely a matter of geometry. Rather, attention is *invested* and is 'continuous with states of distraction, reverie, dissociation, and trance'. [7] Since it involves investment, attention also involves selection. This isn't to say that selection is necessarily a free act on the part of the individual (sometimes I am selected, my attention is 'caught' by a particular event). Free or not, since an individual's capacity to pay attention is limited, any selection is made at the expense of other objects / spaces so that to pay attention is to prioritize: to invest and to disinvest. One reason that I follow the taped grids, empty of content, when I walk in these streets using my phone is that they echo my own state. In my absent-minded meandering I too am often there, but there 'in outline only'.

5. Modes of Perception?

When you're expatriated, you're a little deaf, you can hear things but you can't get the full experience.
—Radio 4, found voice

There exists a gulf between the world according to sound and the world according to sight.
—Michael Bull

Mobile space tends to be prioritized over physical space, in the sense that it tends to be given more immediate attention. This might be explored in relation to modes of perception, and in relation to sensation and affect. How far does the mode of perception within which the mobile operates relate to the way we prioritize mobile space over physical space? In the case of the mobile use involves prioritizing one ***mode*** of perception at the expense of another. To turn attention away from the sensory rich environment of the streets and towards the thin thread of talk is to prioritize the auditory at the expense of the embodied and visual world. ***Pace*** De Certeau, this is a dis-possession of the hand in favour of a greater trajectory for the heard.

There are parallels with other technologies here. Investigating Walkmans, Michael Bull explores how sense perception is engaged in relation to the aural. He argues that personal stereo re-organizes urban space, overlaying it with a new and overwhelming aesthetic: Sound 'engulfs the spatial'. The prioritization of the auditory space achieved through the Walkman allows users to re-aestheticize their everyday experience of urban space as a whole. This is often achieved through negation; the present is consumed by the far away.[8] Bull's account speaks to other forms of mobile media, but other dynamics also operate here – most mobile phone interactions do not pack a powerful aesthetic punch either visually or aurally. The satisfactions they offer are located elsewhere.

6. Connective Force

We're forever meeting people who have watches, very seldom people who have compasses.
—Georges Perec

Many mobile interactions are humdrum, banal, and often apparently unnecessary, certainly they operate at the level of the phatic or gestural. Clearly however, they are ***compelling,*** since phone space is often prioritized over local space, and virtual interactions over physical ones. Anybody who has watched other people using phones, who has considered their own use, or who has witnessed the irritation phones cause in certain public spaces, will be aware of this conundrum. It might be addressed through consideration of the affective priority one kind of space claims over another (that is without specific reference to the question of the aesthetic qualities of that space), particularly if these claims are based not on what the space contains but on the communicational experience offered; on the ***processes*** the mobile enables, the forms of connection it opens up.

Crary suggests that 'attention increases the force of certain sensations while it weakens others', [9] and I think that there are ways in which particular elements of phone use might be felt more intensely than others; even becoming excessive, breaking out into spaces beyond the phone. If mobile spaces compel attention it may be because they produce an accelerated, intensified sense of freedom of movement and of speed-up, a sense that might spill over from the phone space into other spheres of life. Connecting to a mobile space is often experienced as going 'live', allowing movements at (communicational) speeds that neither walking, riding or even flying can accommodate, even though they have come to seem natural. The users of these spaces are highly mobilized subjects, people able to keep up with contemporary life. Perhaps this explains why I pay more attention to the live transactions mediated through my mobile than to the 'live' live events

of the street.

7. The Selfish Phone

If you don't have a mobile, people don't care about you.
—Sussex University student

Finally, the mobile commands attention by *offering* a form of attention. Within the newly-created and individualized bubble of the call or the return call, the phone user is always needed and wanted: flattered by attention on the one hand, able to control the demand for a response on the other. There is a form of compensation going on here. If the space of the city is often indifferent and I am anonymous and lost in the crowd, on my phone, in my own space, I matter. The significance I am accorded may well compensate for any limitations in bandwidth, any constraints on the range, scope and scale of the space within which I matter. Here is another way in which virtual and physical spaces are inter-dependent: attention on one stems from neglect *in* (as well as *to*) another space, and relates to it. What is fetishized here (rather than aestheticized) is a form of life operating at a particular speed and intensity, but what is also offered is control. Mobiles give their users an enhanced and risk free sense of 'being live / being alive', even though (because) this 'liveness' is maintained in an artificially controlled bubble. A form of narcissism is integral to the dynamics of mobile phone use (and this is something that doesn't operate in the same way in relation to the personal stereo although it does pertain to some kinds of web-based interaction).

8. The Collective Imaginary

The spaces into which we shift our attention (and those from which we shift our attention) by way of mobiles are not purely technological spaces. To some extent they are imagined. This simple proposition is important. It means that the city streets and the auditory spaces within which we connect are technically achieved spaces, *and as a part of this*, spaces of the collective and individual imaginary. It means that these spaces are, in their technical iterations *and* in their imaginary formations, *and* in their political economy, connected social productions. This is not to say that they are not 'real'. Indeed, these connected productions (among others) help *comprise* everyday life. Henri Lefebvre understood everyday life itself in spatial terms, partly as that which is projected into space, and partly as that which takes place *as space.* [10] To understand that everyday life is space, and that this space is partly produced through a collective imagination, is not to deny the force of technological change or innovation, or the extra-ordinary shifts that the mobile has produced. On the contrary it is to seek to account for the force of that transformation in all its specificity.

9. Reconciling Oneself

As we increasingly switch our attention from one place to another, each time at the expense of the last (perhaps because we increasingly seek the sensation of connection over any sustained engagement with the discrete content it affords), our lives become fragmented. To an extent we become a 'patchwork of dis-connected states'. [11] On the other hand, since attention never presumes absolute presence it cannot presume absolute disconnection. When I switch my attention into my phone, I leave some part of myself behind and as a consequence I have some part of myself to return to: to reconcile with. Perhaps indeed, I need to think harder not only about *what* and *who* I am *between* and *across* these states, *between* and *across* these spaces, but also about how I operate to make these moves in the first place. Here Perec and his concept of inventory come into play.

10. Space as Inventory, Self as Experience

Space as inventory, space as invention.
—Georges Perec

As a cultural form, database represents the world as a list of items and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world.
—Lev Manovich

Lev Manovich has exposed the tension between narrative and database, arguing that a database logic has overwhelmed narrative to become a dominant cultural form. The database represents the world as an un-ordered list of items, while narrative produces trajectories of what seemed un-ordered. [12] Seen this way narrative becomes a subset of what is done with a database, with the latter as the central, defining logic of a computerized society. However the concept of the inventory, and in particular the function of the inventory as a mnemonic, can be used to challenge the claim that the logic of the database is always dominant.

11. Mnemonic Operators

In *Species of Spaces,* his examination of spatial practices and narrative identity, Perec attributes extreme importance to the everyday. He argues that to recall the trivial, insignificant, ordinary details of a life through the process of drawing up an inventory of that life is to open up the space of that life; to recall what is important about it. Our hoard of detritus is (also) our life's treasure because it is imperative to our identity over time, the key to who we are. The inventory is the hook that retrieves these treasures, functioning as a mnemonic operator, an example of the art of memory, or *artificial* memory. [13] The process of inventory turns Perec's past life into a memory palace, which is, in the manner of the oldest such palaces, both a system, and the memory of a system: both the means to remember a life and a life story. (In a sense remembered objects narrate Perec's life story back to him.) Like all forms of artificial memory, the mode of inventory is a mode of encoding and decoding, a mode of compression and decompression.

Today, the mobile phone functions as a mnemonic operator, but in this case the mnemonic operation is not performed in order to recall a past life. Rather the mode of inventory *describes* some of the ways in which users operate in a world that demands that they operate in many places at once. The inventory thus describes the means by which individuals negotiate their way between and across the multiple overlapping *spaces* they inhabit simultaneously, to different degrees, in different *states*, when they use mobiles and other similar technologies. This mode of inventory begins with the list itself. With lists of friends perhaps. With the numbers ascribed to them, with the number ascribed to the caller. The inventory includes a certain degree of codification, reflecting Perec's ongoing engagement with numerology. But, like other experiments with numerology and even automatic writing, inventory-making is also a *poetic* process, albeit a peculiarly automated one. The inventory allows for the systematic collection and ordering of objects, but it also guarantees that the list so collected will itself be productive, will have new implications. The space produced through the inventory, the space produced through the process of use, is in this way also 'space as invention'. As Perec said once, space is a *doubt*.

Perec's sense of the inventory exposes a real difference between two ways of thinking about the database operations. The first focuses on a technical architecture (this essentially is Manovich's approach), the second focuses on the database as it is used,

insisting that the user is brought into the loop. Why does this matter? All databases involve codification – and therefore a process of compression and randomization (the compression of the non-absolute into the reductive mode of the pre-programmed experience). However all database *use* also involves a process of decompression or translation – and this is a process in which the user is *implicated*, a process that does not end with a technical operation. *Many kinds of databases tend to become inventories when they are accessed.* In short, the inventory makes it more feasible to consider narrative processes even in the fractured conditions. Consideration of the mode of inventory can suggest something specific about the processes of translation that go on in relation to mobile phone use, and in relation to forms of mobile subjectivity. It may help account for movements in and out of virtual spaces in general, and perhaps for movements 'across and between' mobile bubbles and city streets.

Consideration of attention / inattention rather than presence / absence on the one hand, and of the inventory that distends, rather than the database that compresses, on the other, come together to suggest an approach to thinking about (telephonic) mobility and everyday life that does not focus on disconnection and fragmentation as an assumed starting point. Rather, it produces a focus on how connection and continuity get made across and between different spaces.

Finally, it may also be possible to use the mode of inventory to say something about the nature of these new forms of (multiple) space and the nature of this practice of space / spaces as a *social* practice. The mobile phone is an(other) example of the dialectic characteristically operating around information technology, which offers us more freedom and simultaneously exerts more control over us. This dialectic might be opened up precisely by exploring the numerological production of a space, regarded not as a technological space only, but as a material *social* construction. Regarded as a practice of space, and as a practice that makes space, the mobile phone draws up the cultural conditions under which it itself is made, the species of space it engages, into itself: like a map, a dream, or even like a prayer might do.[14] Paradoxically then, these private bubbles into which we speak, these bubbles which demand our attention, in which we find a particular form of self validation, in which we tend to speak one-to-one, these spaces that seem so intimate, so personal, and perhaps so free, are actually neither individual nor private spaces. Rather, they can be viewed as collective constructions. They are *socially* symbolic.

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Footnotes

1. See *Species of Spaces,* where Georges Perec asks his readers to investigate 'how many movements' it takes to dial a telephone number. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces* (London: Penguin, 1997).
2. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California Press, 1984).
3. This is also true for web sites, as Matt Hills among others has pointed out. See Matt Hills, 'Virtually Out There', in: Sally Munt (ed), *TechnoSpaces, Inside the New Media* (London: Continuum, 2001).
4. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, op. cit., 113.
5. Perec, *Species of Spaces*, op. cit., 13.
6. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception* (London: mit Press, 2000), 1.
7. Ibid., 46.
8. Michael Bull, 'Personal Stereos and the Aural Reconfiguration of Representational Space', in: Munt, *TechnoSpaces*, op. cit.
9. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, op. cit., 39.
10. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
11. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, op. cit., 1.
12. Lev Manovich, *The Database as a Symbolic Form*, 1998, transcriptions.english.ucsb.edu, or www.manovich.net.
13. Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge, 1966).
14. Frederic Jameson suggested that the narrative text 'draw[s] the Real into its own texture' and might thus work to map the world as dream or prayer, Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Metheun, 1981), 81.

Tags

Media Society, Public Space, Urban Space, Sound