



Notes on Artistic Research in Urban Spaces: Film, Video and Sound Strategies

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Abstract. Over the last years, debates about who owns the public space have received much attention. “Urban space” carries certain images and, with increasing privatisation and commercialisation, becomes a consumable experience, from which, however, many are being excluded. The requirement to consume and the deployment of private security services limit free access to public spaces and, therefore, to the public sphere. Marginalised groups are being relegated to places at distance from the highly frequented areas of the city centres. Next to large squares, busy roads and shopping complexes, the empty spaces between buildings, so-called “terrains vagues (cf. Di Sola Morales 2003),” form places of transit of an open and diverse nature. Different groups test the hidden qualities of these “in-between spaces” and decide whether to use them or not. In this article we explore two different approaches to using and understanding those “in-between spaces,” i.e. the urban space, through the medium of audio-visual strategies. In particular, we are concerned with the audio-visual use and exploration of public space. The contrasting strategies will be analysed by referring to concrete examples. Chapter two looks at Public Screening, current “guerrilla-acts” in which “non-cinema places” are temporarily being used by a group of “passers-by” (people who are actually part of the screening team). In chapter three, we outline a transdisciplinary approach for the analysis of public space and spaces of consumption, the latter being used by the public but private by law. Patterns of the daily use of these spaces, including time, are made visible through audio-visual means. This article reflects the plurality of artistic and scientific methods in use by the members of the interdisciplinary research team, who collaborated in writing this text.

Public Screening – Cinema in “Non-Cinematic-Places”

With the changing material conditions of film, such as digitisation or seemingly permanent availability of films and their media, it is even more apparent that film also represents a spatial tool: not only the setting of the film, but also the location the film is projected at or screened in, will become increasingly relevant to the film’s critical reception and its future. This is made evident by the fact that a film seen in a black box in complete suppression of the space surrounding the viewer is subject to different rules than the reception of film in a night-time urban outdoors environment.

With the idea of using film as a method, instrument and product of artistic research in urban studies, we draw on different current cinematographic strategies in urban spaces. The link between film and site of projection becomes stronger, the more the site of projection directly influences the film, or, on the contrary, the more the film influences the site. Interactivity occurs not only between the film and the viewer, but also between the film and its surrounding space. Space and spatialisation of film allow us to use the site of projection as the point of departure for an analysis of urban paths and social relationships through scientific and artistic means.

A Wall Is A Screen

A landscape of moving images projected in a public space: *A Wall is a Screen* is a Hamburg-based initiative conceived as a cinematic night-walk. It aims at creating in the viewer/user a notion of “in-betweenness” in their reception of the projected films on the one hand and of the city on the other hand. Referring to the *Situationists*, who claimed a different use of the city, the initiative organises a kind of *dérive*. Spaces of consumption as well as the city’s hidden corners are chosen as temporary *lieux* of cinema. Through the Internet, the starting point of the cinematic-night-walk is revealed. After each short projection, the team of *A Wall is a Screen* wanders to the next setting, taking with them their intentional participants as well as the joining passers-by. Once arrived, the projector and the mobile speakers are quickly installed. Each film is allocated its own place of projection, either by trying to respect and react to the “claims” of the city or to overcome these. By walking through and “reading” the city prior to the projections, the team identifies the characteristics of the appropriated spaces of projection, which could be a façade, the base of a monument, a subterranean

passage, a metro station, the hull of a ship in the harbour, etc. The walls are separated by no more than two to three minutes of walking distance. In total, the night walk is no longer than 1.2 km. The alternation between known and unknown spaces gives the walk its own dramaturgy. The viewers draw their own map of “their” city during this cinematographic event. The separation between the film’s fiction and the real space of projection often disappears, as passing police cars and light signals of the city turn into actors of the performance (cf. Fig. 1 and 2.). The walks between the walls are a major component of the project: people and thoughts wander through the urban space, inspired by the films and the venues. The perception of these spaces usually changes irreversibly through a temporary cinematographic situation.

Hit and Run Cinema

The *Hit and Run Cinema* is another urban cinematic trend in Berlin. This initiative of temporary pop-up cinemas has explicitly taken on the task of going to forgotten places to show unknown movies. A team of cineastes leads a group of spectators to hidden places in the urban space. They are instructed by secret newsletters via the Internet. The viewers are ready to engage with a “night out at the cinema,” the venue being unknown at the beginning of the tour. Usually, the viewer discovers unknown places in his/her city, like buildings or subterranean bunkers, the ownership of which is unclear or that lie fallow. Often, closed spaces are used, opened up and occupied by the cineastes for the duration of one evening. A canvas screen is built up, a generator for the projector installed, and the temporary cinema is ready.

The secret place as a refuge from “everything is known,” the re-appropriation of the city – both are underlying aspects of the same question: who owns the city? The collective walk to the “cinema” is like a weekend hike and integral part of the cinematographic concept. The relatively unknown films (no rental, no copies, not economically viable, etc.) get their own site of projection. The places are chosen in such a way that the diegetic space of the film converges with the space of the projection as to their look and architecture. The real space of projection is loaded with new content through the film. The viewers-participants experience a new, individual city through the projection of the film in the outer and inner space of the city.

Cinema Strategies: Appropriation and Exploration of Space Through Sound and Film

The film's effect does not remain autonomous during a cinematic night walk, as it starts to communicate with its environment (cf. Fig. 1. and Fig. 2.). During the project *A Wall Is A Screen*, the communication between the film and its environment produces new perspectives on the city. Although most of the films were not shot there, they give the viewer information on certain corners of the city. They pose questions from different times or cultural regions of the world whose importance and timeliness is reflected by the local mise-en-scène of the film's projection.

The temporary cinematographic appropriation of the city also raises the question of "who owns the city?" Moreover, peripheral and for various reasons inaccessible parts of the city are made experienceable for the pedestrian for the duration of the cinematic night walk and after. In this way, film contributes to their re-appropriation by the pedestrian. During *Hit And Run Cinema*, cinematic space and projection space strongly converge. The cinematic space is expanded into the auditorium. This occurs not only in the mind of the viewer, but also in the built environment of the temporary cinema. This active viewing refers to an existing school of viewing, which wants to create participants rather than mere spectators. The audience itself becomes part of the film. For its duration, the film becomes part of reality by the way the viewer is absorbed by it, although he does not intervene in the plot or narration.

The movie does not begin with the first light of the projection beam, but already on the way to the cinema site. The movie ends somewhere on the way while the spectator is leaving the cinema site. What remains as a lasting experience for mind and soul, is often the site rather than the film itself. Film manages to alter a place for the duration of the temporary cinema event, to make real locations more visible and to activate the viewer as a user of the city and make him aware of his own user's rights.

Temporary mobile cinema, not in the traditional sense but to the effect that, literally, "going to the movies" plays a crucial role: strolling between projections or collectively walking to the screen as an appropriation of public space. The theme of the *flâneur*, based on Walter Benjamin, and the renewed adherence to Guy Debord's concept of *Dérive* in current forms of district inspections and urban anthropology, finds new possibilities of application in the encounter of the urban user with both permanent and temporary urban screens.

To space, time, and sound in the original diegetic sense as *constructed* space (i.e. time and sound within the film) the *real* space, time and sound surrounding the film's projection is added. In the process the contrasts between cinematic space and projection space are turned visible. This effect has the potential to strengthen or weaken the message of a film in a certain environment of projection. The point of reference is the real urban space. This apparently so visible and real urban space, however, holds inherent aspects of hegemonies of power. Political decisions and the sometimes rapid sell-out of public and open space imply that residents themselves can hardly recognise the different layers stacked upon the built up city as visible and invisible history.

To further explore the relationship between the reception of the film and the district inspection or cinematic nightly walk, we propose to ask the following question:

What does the City Hear and See?

Recently, the urban sociologist Saskia Sassen asked: "What does the city see, when it looks at itself?"¹ Paul Virilio as well already changed the point of view on the city-site as he picked up Paul Klee's quotation "now the objects perceive me" in his last chapter of *The Vision Machine* (1994, 59). We perceive the city every day and produce it: city-slang, urban fashion à la "Urban Outfitters," big city music and architecture associated with our specific city. We react to the city in all of our forms of expression and thereby attach an image to it. This takes place at the macro- and the micro level. The typical Berlin-T-shirt shows the silhouette of the television tower or the iconic "Ampelmännchen" traffic lights. At the micro level, it is the group of youths at a bus stop in the so called "problem suburbs" with their own codes who imprint their presence on the city.

What, however, does the city see if it looks at itself? This implies the question: what does the city see when it sees us; assuming that we are part of the city and constitute "city" as a construct and network of social relationships as much as the buildings do.

Which aspects of maladministration, neglect, forgotten things, or the passage of time does the city see? How does it express itself? Its presence might be detected in decayed houses (delegation back to nature) or open space, which is never free of interests and history, or environmental "problem locations" that are just a reaction to urban life.

1 NECS conference "Urban mediation" in Istanbul, June, 2010.

This doubling of a site (what do I see, what does the city see) is also part of various cinema strategies in the public space.

In *The Vision Machine* by Virilio, which particularly focuses on surveillance technology, the delegation of seeing within this doubling is discussed. These cinema strategies fight to regain the right to view and experience city by oneself, which may be inferred from the general development of technical capabilities. Photography and film made visible as material made time visible. The material of clothes changes, as time leaves its traces. And although we think of Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and the loss of aura, new auras created themselves in the visible traces of time.

In today's virtual age these contemporary witnesses seem passé. A new positioning of the image replaces the "depth of time" (Virilio 1994, 61), using a moving image to call attention to a concrete site again. For Paul Virilio, public space yields to public image. This is meant to change with the new cinematic strategies.

Audiovisual Exploration of Urban Space

Before we enter into detail on the transdisciplinary analysis of urban space, we briefly introduce the research design of our project.

The project aims at analysing spaces of urban expansion through the perspective of the pedestrian. We are particularly interested in asking how the function of urban open spaces and marginal spaces can be reinterpreted in such a way as to serve their inhabitants.

The border between the core of the city and its periphery is fluid. However, the peripheral zones are characterised by certain typical elements that form what we call the "constellation-space." What we refer to with this term, is that peri-urban spaces are defined and characterised by elements like residential areas, especially large-scale housing estates, the establishment of industrial, commercial and logistical centres, shopping malls, access roads, allotment associations and enclaves of settlements. On Figure 1 you can see the *Constellation Space* we are focusing on in a first step. It lies in the 2nd district of Vienna and is called Großjedlersdorf. This *Constellation Space* is characterised by very particular sounds and soundscapes, a particular imagery, tonality and ambience.

Through different methods and instruments we conduct a mapping and anthropological exploration of this constellation space. The exploration comprises the self-perception of the inhabitants, discovering places of identification from an inside and an outside point of view, an "experience-based" map of Großjedlersdorf

based on a subjective, pedestrian focused perception of this place and media-based self-portrayal of the constellation space as well as its mediatic representations.

Aside from already well established tools of scientific analysis like social area analysis or discourse analysis, we especially rely on art-based ways of knowledge production, because we consider it a good means to make visible the invisible, the subjective, the experience of space and sound and the appropriation of space by its different users and inhabitants, despite only focusing on its mediated objectifications. Furthermore – after subjecting the so detected observations to scientific scrutiny – the artistic product is a good medium to disseminate the results of our investigation.

From the different disciplinary backgrounds of the members of our research team,² a mix of methods emerges: case studies, analysis of existing socio-demographic data, interviews with experts, media analysis and the transdisciplinary approach through the implementation of artistic works (video- and audio-based mapping of the *Constellation Space* drawing on artistic means).

In what follows, we briefly outline the strategies and methods to research and map the *Constellation Space*. The name of the artistic branch of our research group is Couscous³. It was founded in 2006 as band and video-sound-installation project. Currently it is purposively developing its focus on the urban periphery and public space.

Urban space carries a certain image. In case of the cities' peripheries, it is strongly connected to the concept of consumption. An exemplary audiovisual work called *Scannertrip*⁴ (Couscous, 2010) was shot in the *Constellation Space* of the city outskirts of Vienna, a place dominated mainly by the dimension of motorised traffic and big scale housing estates. Here the pedestrian has to cope with large distances and barriers and is exposed to an undefined, fragmented open space. Since consumption is an important part of the daily routine, covering many social aspects as well, the mall is the centre of our attention. But this semi-public space is under the control of private property with its own rules and interests. This part of the project aims to analyse the paths and rhythms surrounding the shopping experience and is divided into different parts:

- the conditions of open space for different social groups, especially marginal groups like old age or homeless people,

² Architecture, Social Sciences, Film and Media Studies, and Cultural Studies.

³ For further information see the following websites: <http://www.myspace.com/couscousband> and <http://www.couscous.cc>.

⁴ To watch the video *Scannertrip* see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdbudyItCWM>.

- the approach to the mall in the perspective of different users like the pedestrian and the motorist,
- the culmination of these paths in the centre of attraction, the mall out of the perspective of the pedestrian and the motorist, eyeing to the left and to the right of a shopping cart (the main symbol of the shopping experience).

The Concept of Space: the Interaction between the Visually Represented Space, the Musical-Space and the Sound-Space

In the case of *Scannertrip* the attempt was to isolate the sound of the till from the place of its origin and to transfer it into the larger space within and outside of the supermarket (cf. Fig. 3.). This newly structured space is converted into the object of experience. In general, the sound is always bound to its surrounding space so it describes spatial contexts, synchronicity and rhythms. These characteristics can be influenced alternately by rhythmic/musical/artistic intervention.

The randomness and interferences of the scanning process itself (wares being pulled steadily over the scanner, the pause during the payment process) produces a permanent stream of new rhythms. The isolated scanner sound is fragmented, reassembled and looped, the process of randomness being transformed musically. The resulting long, bumpy rhythm pattern, now difficult to recognise due to its misplacement, forms the new basic grid for the perceptive experience. It is a sequential placement of goods and its connected ideas and feelings, just like in a mini-click TV. The rhythm of the till becomes the pulse generator for both the picture and the experience of space. The voluntarily introduced rhythm is finally reduced to its own, principal characteristics – appropriation, fragmentation, composition and finally the restoration of the primordial status.

Translation and Deconstruction of City Soundscapes

In some cases, the object of investigation is defined by a typical sound, so this sound is used as the leitmotif, like for example the sound of a rickshaw, the sound of railways, the shouts and slogans of tea-vendors. Referring to *Scannertrip*, the o-tone of the scanning process is the leitmotif, the keynote sound (see: Schafer 1994). In other cases, like multi-split-screens or video-mapping, the sound is integrated via superimpositions/interferences, omission, alienation etc.

Conclusion

Art refers to science and vice versa. Artistic creation and the object of art itself allow for a fusion of aesthetic and epistemic practices (cf. Mersch 2007; Schenker 2007). Thereby, sound-art is an instrument that represents specific experiences and produces certain reflections and actions. The work itself is not to be viewed as the final goal, rather, the focus lies on the process of producing a piece of art. Hence, the “invisible” can be made visible and then subjected to scientific scrutiny. With the help of the artistic end product, results can be disseminated. A transdisciplinary approach can be the key to generate knowledge on urban space. In this case, social area analysis is of particular importance within the mix of methods as it represents the connecting link between the artistic and scientific methods.

The public screening strategies in urban space show different aspects on the same field of interest. Analysing the experiences and situations, which result from the entry of the image into the city and from the city turning into a lieu of production and projection, we argued for the actuality of Guy Debord and the *Situationalist International* with regard to film. The analysis is inspired by the idea to regain public spaces and the public areas of the pedestrian for the moment of film production and projection.

The described strategies of audiovisual use and research on space documented how urban space and spaces of consumption can be used audio-visually and thereby turned into objects of analysis. On the one hand, guerrilla-acts like the *Hit and Run Kino* open up questions about the legitimate ownership of public space, at the same time outlining strategies for the appropriation of space. On the other hand, artistic-scientific tools of analysis are able to describe complex processes of fragmentation and appropriation and yield interesting insights into the use and production of urban space.

The video/sound-space installation *Scannertrip* is an attempt to approach the complex structure of lived reality by experimenting with sound-image-remontage and sequentiation.

Both audiovisual strategies question the image of public space: the first by returning agency to individual actors, the second by using the subjective view of its users to be able to simulate the relative space of the rhythm of their activities.

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Figures

Figure 1: A Wall is a Screen Supermarket, Hamburg (Picture: Uschi Feldges)



Figure 2: A Wall is a Screen Mosque, Hamburg (Picture: Uschi Feldges)



Figure 3: Outline of the *Constellation Space*, 21st district of Vienna (Picture: Couscous).

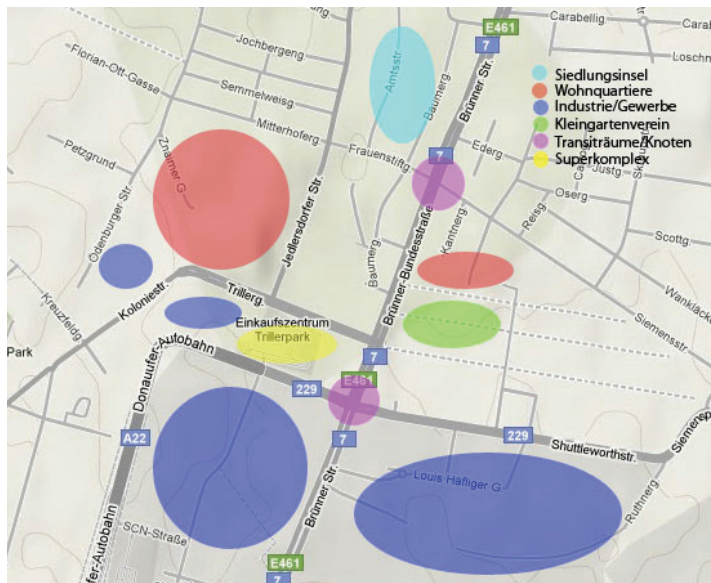


Figure 4: View over the *Constellation Space* (Picture: Couscous).



Figure 5: Screenshot *Scannertrip* (Picture: Couscous)

