Time (space) ^{2} Time
Documentation of and Reflections on the course Media Landscapes

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1   ABSTRACT

The following documentation describes the development process of the final project throughout the fall semester 2009 in the production class Media Landscapes at the University at Buffalo. It documents the development of the idea of time-space from the first and second assignments to the final presentation and is combined with a reflection on the class readings and lectures that influenced its progress.

2   INTRODUCTION

Ever since I quit architecture studies and changed to media I missed three-dimensionality and a locative aspect. Electronic media as it was taught in my previous school was purely screen based and was not integrated in a spatial environment. This is one of the reasons why I chose to continue studies in MediaArchitecture at the Bauhaus-University Weimar and why I chose this production class Media Landscapes in particular. I was very interested in getting to know about the issues this course would address in regard to locative media and landscape-scale media projects.

The course description promised a very interesting approach on landscape and media which was taken up in the readings and lectures. The following chapters are going to reflect upon the readings and lectures from my personal point of view highlighting the ideas that I found most intriguing and that helped me to further develop my ideas. The reflections are combined with the description of the general design and project development process as both are dependent on each other.

3   CINEMATIC VOID, REPRESENTATIONS OF LANDSCAPE AND EIDETIC IMAGE

Our discussion about the representation of landscapes started off with the movie "Zabriskie Point" by Michelangelo Antonioni. The film depicts the cultural tensions and uproar of the movements in the late 1960s which are reflected in the setting. In a tension between urban, cultural control spaces and wild, natural space the desert serves as kind of "locus for cultural critique" [5].

In connection with the reading "The Cinematic Void" by Matthew Gandy we discussed how the film engages different modes of landscape and spatial representations. Amongst others it plays with the notion of orientation and disorientation. The scene of rapid close-ups at the beginning of the movie for example leaves the viewer disoriented. A spatial orientation evolves in review when the camera finally zooms out of the scene and reveals the setting in long shots.

Another interesting topic is the framing of the landscape in Antonioni's screenplay especially in the desert scenes. It takes the varied viewpoints of the protagonists and therefore merges from the birds-eye-view of the pilot and the woman's view framed by the windshield to the view of the couple before it culminates again into a disorientating succession of sand hill shots that finally drift off into a loose succession of erotic fantasies thus blurring the border between reality and fantasy.

As Antonioni is European, his view of the American landscape is that of someone unused to the vastness of the desert and the seemingly void. This made me think about my own first impressions of my surroundings and the American landscape I came to live in. It turned out to become the starting point for reflection on my mapping for the first assignment.

Definitions of landscape and its representations was part of James Corner's writing "Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes". He distinguishes between landscape and landschaft in which landscape is the relationship among geographical components whereas landschaft includes patterns of occupation, activities and space.

He further talks about the general preference of the public for scenic landscapes that goes along with a sense of nostalgia of what seems to be a memory of nature that displaces the viewer and can be seen as a withdrawal from the world. [4] Landscape according to Corner, however, is a manmade construct but "because of the passage of time, landscape decontextualizes its artifactuality and takes on the appearance of something natural." [4]

He tries to introduce a new view on landscape that goes past a purely pictorial representation and includes all senses as well as the spatial perception. He calls this the "eidetic" image of landscape which is placed in space and time. In architectural discourse the idea of the eidetic is in a way related to the discussion about atmosphere which Böhme defines in the following way:

"Atmosphere is the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver, insofar as in sensing the atmosphere s/he is bodily present in a certain way." [1]

Atmosphere is consequently something that exists and defines itself in between a perceiver and the surroundings he finds himself in. It is the interface between object and subject of perception and the space of aesthetic experience. In this regard the eidetic image could be described as something similar to a mapping of atmosphere as long as it is based on Corner's original definition. At a later point, however, he includes analytical and abstract maps in form of MVRDV "datascapes" into the construction of an eidetic argument and thereby detaches it from the purely sensuous approach. [4]

In preparation for the first assignment we also discussed the introductory chapter of "Experimental Geography" by Nato Thompson as well as the reading on Experimental Geography by Trevor Paglen that Thompson refers to.

As Thompson states experimental geography is based on the idea that "we make the world and, in turn, the world makes us" [10] which means that the landscape is manmade and defined by economic, cultural and political issues which are at the same time influenced by geographical characteristics of the landscape in return. [7] The space we move through also influences our behaviors. [10] Maps are an abstraction of space but are influenced by the intention that lies in the mapping. [10]

Apart from that Paglen argues that every sort of cultural production is at the same time creating or producing space. One of the examples he uses is that of an artist whose works are exhibited in a museum or sold and which help to produce a space called "art world". [7] Experimental geography according to Paglen consequently means to produce space in a self-reflexive way that takes into account that the cultural production and the production of space cannot be separated. [7]

Whereas I agree with the notion that our movement through and interaction with space influences our behaviors and that these influences are mutual I do not agree with Paglen's definition of space per se.

According to his definition there is no difference in between the art world as described above and the space a book that creates up on a shelf. [7] In my opinion he is simplifying "space" thereby sacrificing a clearer distinction between the ideological and physical space in order to make it fit his definition of experimental geography.

Nevertheless the readings of Thompson and Paglen made me aware of the role of space in my daily life and made me think about how I interact with it.

4   FIRST ASSIGNMENT: MAPPING

The development of the first assignment was based and supported by the readings discussed above. As stated in the description of the exercise invisible, inaudible, non-tactile or other aspects of cybernetic landscape conditions that lie beyond human perception should be mapped from a first person approach.

My mapping consisted of two different kinds of mappings. The first mapped space and spatial relationships in my everyday routines. At that time I was still quite new to Buffalo and my mental map of the city was very limited. I felt that my life was determined by the rhythm of student life travelling in between the two campuses of the University at Buffalo. Random attempts to discover the unknown and to expand my map interrupted the routine.

Fig. 1: Mapping my mental map of Buffalo

As already mentioned earlier this idea was influenced by Corner's reading and the idea of perception based image of landscape. I tried to visualize the way I felt and sensed my direct environment and realized that everything beyond was a blank space, a void area.

Furthermore I tried to include the duration in travelling the distances between the places into account. They linked places and distorted the map due to the different velocities of the forms of transportation I used.

Fig. 2: Time and space relation

Continuing in this train of thoughts and watching myself interacting with space and time I realized that space and time were even closer connected with each other in my daily life. My life is determined by the rhythms of daily routines and also of the presence of time in certain spaces.

In my second mapping I therefore tried to map space to time. Having parted with a watch years ago I am used to depend on my inner clock. Nevertheless I cannot escape "conscious" time. I usually come across clocks in space and unconsciously synchronize myself with this outer time. I do know the places on my personal map where I can find time. Taking time has therefore a locative aspect.

 "A day as a flow of time" visualizes the periods of conscious vs. unconscious time and the places or devices as well as the times where and when time was taken. As a second layer the mapping included the tasks or necessities that are related to these locations.

Fig. 3: A day as a flow of time

"A temporal flow of space" visualizes the flow, duration and return of places throughout a day. It shows the recurring event of a location as well as the importance of certain places. The dorm which I called my home is a very dominant place whereas the classrooms of the Center for the Arts are just small islands in the daily spatial rhythm encircled by transportation.
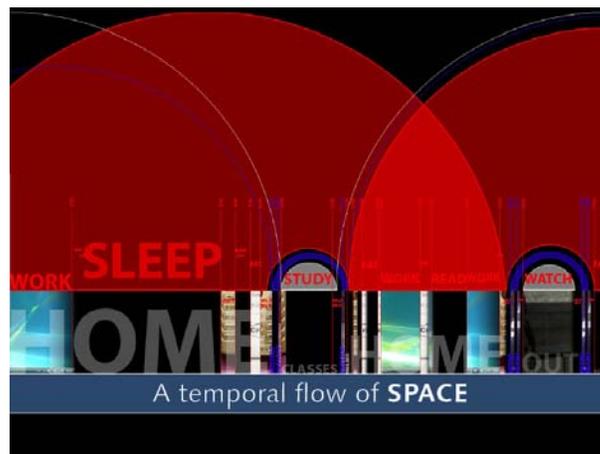

Fig. 4: A temporal flow of space

The idea that emerged out of the critique of the mapping was to develop a new sort, or experimental scheduling interface that would be time and space related.

5   SECOND ASSIGNMENT: MSCAPE

The second assignment was based on mscape an event-based programming environment to create locative and immersive mediascapes that could be played back on a PDA. Part of the exercise was to create a small mediascape project that took up ideas of the first assignment. In my case that meant to start creating an interface that would be space and time related.

The interface was to slowly change its color due to where the person's location. In mscape I placed sensitive areas representing the places I mapped in my first assignment, home, center for the arts and transport. In the space between the color faded from the previous one location's color to the next one the user was heading to. In reference to the characteristics of each place, a tag cloud with related links to other applications or information were generated. The contents of the tag cloud as well as the size of the tags changed in correspondence to the location of the user.

Fig. 5: Mediascape and its different location based background colors

In order to create smooth transitions I tried to combine mscape with Flash and created a flash file that would interact with the gps information of the mscape circles. The circles were placed around the center for the arts and not on exact location so as to facilitate testing.

Unfortunately the combination between mscape and Flash turned out to be very limited in its usability. mscape did not work very well with the Flash file. Due to its size it could not be properly displayed. Therefore I had to change my plans and had to use pictures in the mediascape I presented instead.

Consequently the result of the second assignment was that mscape would not be a suitable tool for the realization of an interface as I had it in mind.

6   MANUFACTURED LANDSCAPES AND LANDSCAPE ART

In following lectures we further discussed the representation of landscape in art and film such as "Manufactured Landscapes" and the respective article by Jonathan Bordo. Edward Burtynsky's photographs show the beauty of manmade environments and landscapes such as mines, wastelands and others which correlate to Corner's "working landschaft" [4]. While referring to our sense of beauty in regard to image composition, color and layout, the represented theme varies a lot from the nostalgic and scenic ideal of landscape which is usually framed and that was criticized by James Corner.

Burtynsky's photographs are a frozen state of the 'present' and represent the framed reality at the time and place the picture was taken. Bordo argues that Burtynsky's photograph "carries and refigures the aesthetic of the wilderness, inverting it into an aesthetic of the wasteland". [2] It does in my opinion not intend to refer to the wilderness per se. It shows instead what the landscape is and does not show what it was or might have been. It rather challenges our romantic ideals of landscapes by using a classic way of landscape depiction in order to beautify the disastrous nature of the reality that surrounds us.

Whereas Burtynsky's photographs view the landscape from a first person's point of view Stalbaum discusses the detached, analytical representation of landscape. His text "Database Logic(s) and Landscape Art" deals with the representation of landscape in form of electronic data and virtual imaging. [8] "Informatics change the nature of place" and it also "changes the nature of being in place, of moving through place, and of collaboration in place." [8] This is one of the ideas in the text that I found very intriguing. Technologies change our perception of place and how we interact with it. By using Google Maps on the iPhone for example we follow the abstract guide of GPS instead of trying to orient ourselves towards spatial and locative clues.

Frauke Behrendt's talk on De Certeau in early November can be situated accordingly in the discussion about abstract and concrete locative information and the related idea of self-consciousness in spatial experience Especially Steve Symons project "Aura" is very interesting in this regard as the sound map fills the environment and eclipses the perception of the physical environment. It creates an auditory space that is very personal as it is only experienced by the person wearing the headphones.

Behrendt mentioned besides a detachment from the environment when concentrating on the audio layer of a sound piece. This refers back to how technologies change our perception of place and how we interact with it. In Aura the interaction with the place was to a large degree determined by the non-perceivable mapping of sound.

7   FINAL PROJECT

In the second assignment's first attempt to create a location-based interface I had faced some problems with mscape and upon reflection it did not take a temporal aspect into account either. Therefore it was necessary to take a step backwards and start a little bit of research to find a theoretical foundation for the idea of a time and space relationship.

Frauke Behrendt's current research on rhythm analysis as well as her talk was very interesting in this regard as it faced a similar direction. The ideas displayed in Kevin Lynch's book "What time is this place?", however, resembled the main topics of my first assignment: the relationship between time and place as well as the distinction between outer and inner time.

Lynch focuses on how the human sense of time affects the way we perceive or change our environment and distinguishes between the social or outside and the personal or internal time which we strive to harmonize constantly. [6] According to Lynch the environment should support us in our zeal to do so. [6] Furthermore defines two evidences of the passage of time. The first is the rhythmic repetition of events such as the heartbeat, sleep, hunger, and so on. [6] The second is the progressive and irreversible change such as growth and decay, alteration in our lives. [6]

In the scope of my final project I wanted to take up some of his ideas and explore the potentials of his idea of "a world in which external time were paced to fit subjective time […] where events speeded up or slowed down as desired" [6]. The aim was to develop a new kind of interface that is time and place related and that takes the subjective perception of time and place into account. It was supposed to be tuned to the rhythmic repetition of daily interactions as well as their alterations in space. The interface was intended for interactive, mobile devices.

Theoretical model of time-space and representation of places in time

One of the challenges in developing a different kind of scheduling interface was to find a way how to depict time and events apart from conventional representations such as in regular schedulers. Based on my personal perception of events I came up with the idea that events have a certain kind of attraction that draws and directs temporal organization towards them. In answer to that idea a classmates suggested to treat events like black holes in one of our class discussions. With this remark in mind I began to research the theory of space-time.

In the theoretical model that evolved time is treated similar to space in the physical model of space-time-distortion [9] thus creating a sort of time-space that is bent by the gravity of the events that are placed within it. People are drawn towards events which influence their perception and organization of the time before and after.
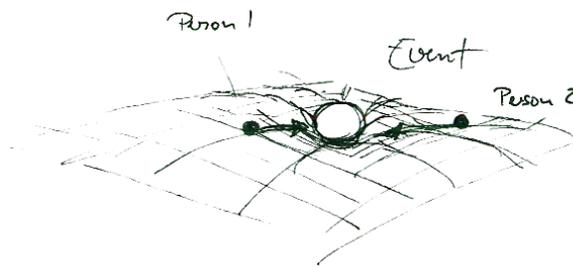
Fig. 6: Event based time-space bending

Events are at the same time space related because every event does have an equivalent location assigned to it as for example a classroom, office or conference room. Thus people are drawn in time as well as in space. This is valid for more than one person if events are scheduled for several people. The time-space of different people be overlaid and will find a bending in a mutual event.
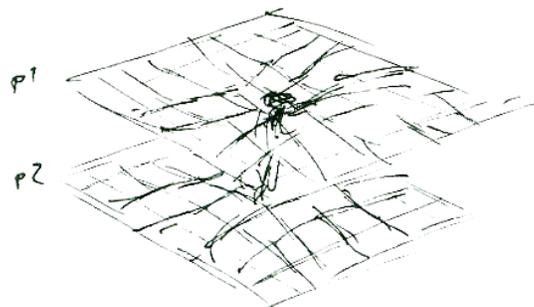

Fig. 7: Interpersonal time-space bending

Those kinds of events are located in social time. They can also be recurring such as classes for example. On the other side there are personal events referred to by Lynch as rhythmic repetitions such as hunger and sleep that follow internal time. Chronobiology is the science that researches biologic time structures in living beings including the rhythms of life. [3] Chronobiological events keep reoccurring as they are bodily needs based on our natural necessities and they follow certain rhythmic patterns.
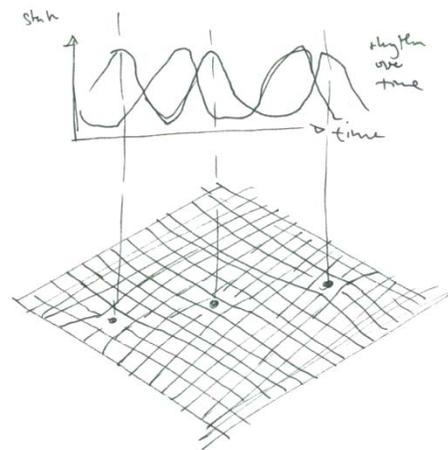
Fig. 8: Chronobiological events

Both kinds of events need to be joined together in the model of time-space bending. Events with a stronger attraction influence other events in their vicinity and either attract or repel them thus influencing their rhythms as well as maybe their location. For example if a meeting is set at lunchtime one will need to advance the meal or postpone it. The same is true for a dinner invitation that times the meal regardless of the chronobiological rhythm.
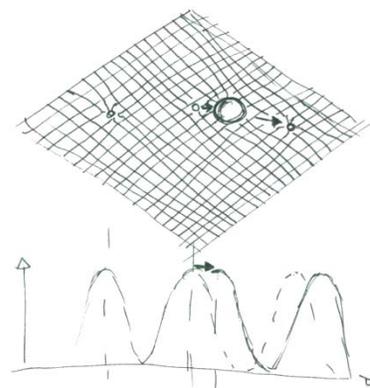

Fig. 9: Combined time-space bending

Referring to the of the first assignment's representation of space in time I extended the depicted period to five days in order to emphasize the recurrence and rhythms of place and spatial interaction. I took the information from a diary that I had kept over time and which included temporal and spatial information of my daily routine. Figure 10 shows the pattern of places in reference to the dorm in which I lived. My stays were interrupted by visits to other places such as the class rooms or the shopping center. Longer durations especially during weekends are indicated by a higher reaching circle.

Fig. 10: A temporal flow of space over a five day period

Temporal and Spatial Interface

As a next step I tried to combine the theoretical model of time-space bending as well as the of space over time to an interface concept that would change over time as well as space. Therefore I created a small mock-up in Flash which was supposed to show the general idea of how such an interface could be laid out.

The objective time is displayed at the bottom of the screen and indicates objective time. It serves at the same time as navigation to move forward and backward in time on a daily or monthly scale. The temporal screen interface references the idea of time-space and is made up of a grid that is bent by the events that can be placed within it. Events are surrounded by a zone which represents their location. The zones change with the movement of the user in real space as well as the passage of time. They merge and are at the same time an indicator for their own recurrence based on past and future events that are connected to the same location. The interface displays the advance of events as well as places in form of an abstract depiction.

Fig. 11: Temporal interface layout

The locative screen interface, however, tracks the movement of the user through actual space in his attraction towards locations of events or tasks. The map used in the example is taken from Google maps but should rather be adapted to the user's point of view and direction of movement thus bending space to a personal point of view.
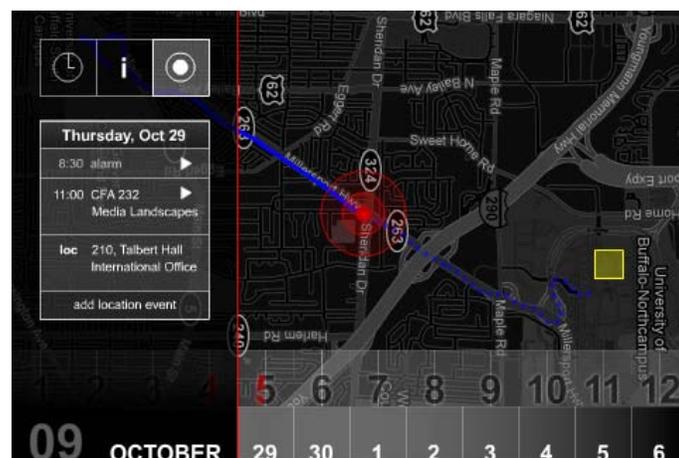

Fig. 12: Locative interface layout

Final Critique and critical Reflection of final project

One of the objections made in the final critique which I personally found very interesting concerned the mappings of space on time. Guest critic Nashid Nabian noted that space per se and also its quality is not visible in the mappings. Upon reflection I have to agree and have to add at the same time that the quality of time is not apparent either. However, I reduced spaces to places and a symbolic description instead of using an iconographic one in order to simplify the mapping. Therefore the

graphics are rather abstract depictions of my concept of reoccurring places that are not intended to make a statement about the quality of place and time.

Although the project itself is to a large degree quite personal it is at the same time quite abstract. The basic idea was to develop something that has a more general value out of personal observations and perceptions. As mentioned in the final critique it would therefore be advisable at this stage to take other people's point of views and perceptions into account.

Reflecting upon other points of the final critique such as the design of the interface as well as the general outcome I came to the conclusion that the idea and concept of time-space bending is quite successful and very well suited as theoretical and physical model but that the attempt to use it as an interface might not have been the best choice as it was not backed by a sensible concept for its application.

A question that I had continuously asked myself during the process was besides how sensible it is in general to develop a locative interface. In general the attention of the user should not be detached from his environment and traffic. However, the attraction of the application lies in the change that is generated by the user's movement through this environment. Media facades actually face a similar problem in public space as they are to catch the attention of the passing crowd but at the same time are not allowed to distract.

As sort of outlook and conclusion the project would either need to be reframed taking the above mentioned problems into account or set up in a different manner that is not necessarily screen based and more spatial and interactive.

8   CONCLUSION

The course Media Landscapes opened my horizon for the broader discourse of media applications on landscape scale and in public space. Coming from a rather two-dimensional view on media applications and especially in regard to my master studies in MediaArchitecture I enjoyed the insights I got due to the class readings, lectures and discussions.

Although I am not sure about continuing to work on the interface of my final project, the concept of event based time space-bending might be worth of further exploration and might be integrated in a more spatial and interactive project.

9   REFERENCES

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