

Federica Timeto

An Introduction

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Symposium / Other Senses of Place: Socio-Spatial Practices
in the Contemporary Media Environment, edited by Federica
Timeto

An Introduction

by Federica Timeto

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Outlining the boundaries of a place is always a social act. No naturally bounded places exist, but it is the encounters, relations, activities and connections that make places and give them sense. Rather than being a unified, measurable and abstract dimension, space is composed of heterogeneous social practices and material arrangements involving different human and non-human actors and requiring constant engagement and negotiation. The title of this symposium draws on Joshua Meyrowitz's renowned book *No Sense of Place* [1985] and, linking his first theorizations to his more recent reflections on place [2005], explores how places are performed, rather than regretted or overcome, when they become an affordance of our mediated sociospatial relations. In light of the more recent scholarship on networked places and mobile locative media [de Souza e Silva 2006; de Souza e Silva and Sheller 2014; Farman 2012; Frith 2012; Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011; Wilken and Goggin 2014] the symposium intends to offer a multifaceted perspective on the conjoined changes of the locative-mobile media environment in which we live, whose hybrid realities are performed by the multiple *tunings* [Coyne 2010] among mobile interfaces and mobile social networks [de Souza e Silva 2006].

As Meyrowitz [1985] has already observed, media changes have always influenced the relationships between places and the localization of information. Before the massive diffusion of electronic media, the existence of material entrances and exits sanctioned a set of "rules of physical place" for the social. With the increasing mobility and speed of information in electronic media, which have loosened –

although not erased – the constraints of physical place on media environments, social experiences are not merely linked to physical location anymore, but broadly relate to the permeable *situation* of communication [Meyrowitz 2005], to a more complex and multilevel positionality in which interaction, proximity and location assume new meanings.

Rather than being a property of specific actors or settings, “addressing” becomes the main capacity of the contemporary geomeia environment [Mitchell 2008; Thielmann 2010], which translates into a new *ecology* as well as a different *ethology* of position [Thrift 2004]. Mobile locative interfaces mediate the ways in which we perform space as the content and also the context of our “roving” interactions [Thrift 2004, 186], in a fundamental recursivity between the ways our sociospatial experiences perform infrastructures and the ways infrastructures perform our experiences [Dourish and Bell 2007; Latour 2005; Thrift 2004 and 2008].

The issue opens with an essay of Marc Tuters, whose name is linked to the first theorizations of locative media in relation to locative arts [Tuters and Varnelis 2006], and whose scholarship has more recently approached the issue of location through Actor-Network Theory [Tuters 2010 and 2012]. In this theoretical essay, Tuters proposes a critique of the concept of positionality, usually associated with the site-specificity of locative media, focusing on the well-known notion of “cognitive mapping” elaborated by Fredric Jameson [1991] as an antidote to the disorientation of the contemporary subject in the postmodern urban landscape.

While acknowledging that an alternative tradition also exists which employs positionality to foreground the situatedness of partial subject positions [see Haraway 1988], Tuters shows how, on the contrary, Jameson’s project still appeals to a subject of history and political action that exists apart from the space *he* is incapable of mapping and for which an alternative, but still totalizing representation is nonetheless invoked. In fact, Jameson’s approach still presupposes a fundamental separation between the subject and the object, between things and signs, that eventually results in a hiatus between the practice and the representation of space, framing mapping as a tool for accessing space rather than a set of place-making practices.

Tuters finds the roots of Jameson’s “metaphysical discourse concerned with identifying an underlying principle governing the relationship between things’ appearances and their true position in the big picture of economic relations” in Georg Lukács’s notion of reification as the subsumption of society to the commodity form, for which the remedy should be, in Jameson’s terms, a renewed practice of signs able to contrast total reification with an alternative representation of totality. However, as I have also written elsewhere [Timeto 2015, 29 ff.], Jameson fails to include in the picture the place of the observer from which the representation he invokes is

produced, thus completely ignoring the spatiotemporal arrangements of locations and precluding from his theory an actual engagement with the politics of space in its openness and multiplicity [see Massey 2005].

As an example of the frequently acritical retrieval of critical positionality, Tuters discusses the employment of such a notion within the Situationist movement. To warn us against the fallacies of overlooking the changes that the concept underwent over time as well as of attributing inherently liberatory properties to positionality, Tuters highlights the way Situationist tactics have been transformed in contemporary military strategies, as well as the mutated forms of power that directly involve those who are actively involved in user-generated mapping.

In sum, navigational and “wayfinding” practices need to be properly positioned each time if we actually intend to understand how to engage with both the situatedness and also contradictory embeddedness of locative media environments, rather than endlessly look for a correspondence between space and its representations [see Hemment 2004; November *et al.* 2010; Parks 2005; Timeto 2015]. Through locative media, maps and territories are integrated in a common experiential field, where maps do not represent spaces but rather describe spatial relations and behaviours that actualize places differently each time [Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011; Kitchin *et al.* 2009; Wood 2006].

The relational complexity of places is taken into account in Fabien Cante’s essay, which starts from the assumption of place “as a *meaningful configuration of proximities*” in which certain proximities, intended as meaningful relations that are not necessarily physical or close ones, are given value over others, in often contested and always provisional enactments. Drawing on non-representational geography, Cante believes that place-making is a performance supported by repeated actions and pre-conscious habits that create transversal, collective forms of nearness which sediment in the construction of specific localities. Media have an active function in the social and material making of places, in that they, as Cante writes, “orientate [...], are orientated, and [...] create and sustain orientations” by means of shared meanings and representations, and not secondarily by shared infrastructures and materialities – all traversed by a multiplicity of belongings and conflicts.

For his theoretical analysis and his ongoing fieldwork on small-scale broadcasting, or “proximity radio,” in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Cante relies on an anthropological-sociological version of Sara Ahmed’s [2006] concept of orientation. With and through Ahmed, he intends to *queer* the traditional phenomenological readings of place that prioritize the subject’s experience [see Casey 1997], and rather approaches place as an embodied, collective and public construction, where media are localized and assume particular meanings in specific material-semiotic configurations.

Cante reads Ahmed's notion of orientation as a non-essentialist, historically locatable and politically useable concept, which shows how the different media environments are traversed by navigational attitudes, pre-existing competencies and institutional power networks that, while not acting as (pre)determining forces, nonetheless orient the occurrences and performances of body-space assemblages. Rather than assuming such assemblages as a point of departure, then, orientation allows the researcher to study them at their point of arrival, where they happen in often unexpected and also dis-oriented ways that can deviate from their initial directions.

Cante's re-elaboration of the phenomenological approach to the experience of place and place-making practices is further deployed by Simone Tosoni who, in the first part of his essay, elaborates a critique of the dominant phenomenological approach in urban media studies, to which he counterposes a post-phenomenological and relational reading of mediated urban spatial performances. Tosoni strongly refuses the ontological essentialism that such phenomenological notions as familiarity, domesticity and inhabitation often disguise, and the binaries that they perpetuate (such as place/space, content/context, domestic/public). He also contests the ways in which such notions, prioritizing subjective symbolic experience, deflect our attention from the equally important component of media materiality of place-making practices. Bringing forward some previous assumption of his research with Matteo Tarantino [see Tosoni and Tarantino 2013], Tosoni foregrounds how sociospatial practices take place in a regulated materiality, whose infrastructural constraints require constant negotiation, in a process of continuous "translation" between informational and material assemblages [Latour 1999], where certain spatial experiences are made possible over others – very often serving precise power relations that preclude minoritarian practices.

As a case study, then, Tosoni brings his ethnographic observation of the "*captive audience positions*" of train commuters at the Cadorna station in Milan, where nearly 70 screens displaying announcements and advertisements have been placed since 2007, particularly near turnstile points. With this expression, Tosoni refers to "those situations in which we are somehow forcedly put in the position 'to audience' a media spectacle, with *position* referring both to a social role and a physical disposition in space." As he further explains, such positions are "produced by a complex interplay between material elements (spatial patterning, architectonic features, technological devices), practices (the choreography of the place ballet), and the interactional frames that are implied by the symbolic meanings of the station."

The political implications of Tosoni's analysis, which draws our attention to the power forces at work in the experiences and configurations of space, are brought to the fore by Robert Prey, whose essay focuses on the political economy of digit-

al media spaces and the phenomenon of music streaming in the post-Napster era in particular, as an indicator of the shift from the commodification of music to the commodification of the spaces of music consumption. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's [1974] spatial trialectics of space as perceived, conceived and lived, again as an antidote to binary thinking, where Marxism and phenomenology fruitfully combine prioritizing relationality over the individual dimension, Prey analyses the similarities between music streaming services and the abstract spaces of capitalism as theorized by Lefebvre: quantifiable, highly instrumental spaces that, while serving productive interests, also retain social value for their clients.

Somehow echoing Tosoni's arguments, Prey writes that "digital space, much like urban space, is the always-conflicted nexus where abstract space and social space collide." For instance, Prey examines the Spotify application "Moodagent" which delivers mood-based playlists tailored to the users' moods and, at the same time, allows brands to better customize their ads to specific emotional profiles, as an exemplary case where "algorithms help '*perceived* space' adapt itself to '*lived* space' in order to produce abstract space." As Prey shows, the increasing use of music streaming services on mobile devices in hybrid spaces [see de Souza e Silva 2006] not only changes the perceived interfaces of listening spaces, but generates a larger amount of (locative) data about the users' behaviour that can also be capitalized on to spot the right time-place for delivering ads, predicting and orienting consumption and thus increasing profit. Needless to say, this often leads to the production of highly "personalized" acoustic spaces that are hierarchically ordered and *oriented* [see Cante in this symposium] towards the more desirable, as more profitable, consumers, often excluding less "representative" ones. However, consumer practices also have a role in transforming the social spaces of music streaming services, causing conflicts that imply adaptations, as the additional examples discussed by Prey in his essay show in detail.

As a matter of fact, locative data can serve different interests and are used by different social actors for several purposes. A very different sense of the space that locative data produce is offered by the work of Salvatore Iaconesi, an artist with a background in engineering, hacking and interaction design and founder of the Art is Open Source (AOS) duo, together with his partner in life and work, Oriana Persico. Here, Iaconesi explores the ways in which our geographical imagination of places in the contemporary infoscape takes shape in embedded and embodied feelings, perceptions and emotions that locative media make ubiquitously accessible and increasingly communicable and shareable, and that also tag our physical environment with digital artifacts that enrich and hybridize our sociospatial experiences. Iaconesi's essay moves from his collection of data from various social networks, generated between 2012 and

2014 in some of the cities where the artist resided on the occasion of the launch of the *Human Ecosystems* projects, which in some cases also coincided with critical events.

Using Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA), Iaconesi has basically mapped the synsets – or sets of synonym words – of the large semantic datasets collected onto urban places in order to understand the emotions conveyed by the messages in different parts, times and contexts of each city and thus identify emotional patterns. Selecting a series of possible stimuli belonging to the citizens' daily activities, either in ordinary or exceptional situations, Iaconesi's visualizations identify urban epicenters, or what he terms "emotional landmarks," for different kinds of emotional expressions: spatio-temporally localized "places which constitute stimuli for people's emotional appraisal which are particularly strong." As an example, Iaconesi discusses the case of the Sao Paolo drought of 2014, whose emotional landmarks he was able to map after collecting and analysing its citizens' user-generated contents (usually highlighted by expressions of anxiety) on social networks.

If Iaconesi believes that such an analysis could serve to fix specific urban problems and eventually promote more inclusive and positive urban experiences, he also does not omit a consideration of the weight of technical and contextual limitations for such analyses, like for example the variable percentage of social media usage in different places, or such aspects that cannot be confronted by merely using algorithms, such as the use of ironic language. Finally, discussing the possible uses of locative information, Iaconesi also prioritizes the importance of dealing with data, including locative data, in a transparent and easily manageable way for users, as in the Ubiquitous Commons initiative, to which Iaconesi adheres in all his projects.

The locative information provided by hyperconnected users of digital media (not necessarily location-based social networks) living in the city of Rome, Italy, is the focus of the qualitative research of Lorenza Parisi. Considering place both as the context and content of communication [Adams 2010], Parisi investigates the motivations and perceptions that lead digital media users to transform physical places into locative data in media environments, and conversely to treat the latter as places where social interactions occur. In her essay, Parisi defines "hyperconnected digitally mediated place experience as a 'where 2.0' place experience: a participatory experience intensively shaped by a real-time (intentional and unintentional) spatial informational exchange and by the social interactions taking place among the members of the networks we belong to."

What emerges from her study is that, on the one hand, locative data are mainly used with three often intermingled aims: orienting in space; shaping users' personal identity through carefully constructed and performed locative visual-narrative storytelling; experiencing space through its user-generated locative reputation. On

the other hand, her study also confirms the existing scholarship in this field, finding that media environments such as Instant Messaging applications (IM) become the context of communications where sociospatial interactions based on different levels of proximity and intimacy are formed and fostered, at the interface between online and offline spaces (with some age-related differences, as the author observes).

The social practice of synchronizing online and offline spaces is also at the core of Claudia Streußnig, Matthias Wieser and Rainer Winter's essay, although with a completely different focus on mobile gaming. Today, the pervasiveness of mobile gaming practices linked to the diffusion of smartphones as game platforms leads to the creation of new (play)spaces that exceed traditional ones. In contemporary culture, gaming interlaces with several other everyday activities: what have been called "app-based media ecologies" [Hjorth and Richardson 2014, 259] erode the idea of separated circles where specific activities like gaming take place, but also make it difficult to rigidly categorize both players and ways of playing, as the authors show, discussing the inadequacy of labels like "casual" which are often attributed to gamers and gaming practices.

Gaming takes place in practices that are always historically and geographically situated in specific contexts and that give rise to different, idiosyncratic "assemblages" each time. So, drawing on a trial of the location-based multiplayer urban game *CityCachers*, Streußnig, Wieser and Winter explore the interdependencies between the technical and social dimensions of mobile gaming. *CityCachers* is part of an interdisciplinary project being developed by the authors at the Lakeside Labs of the Lakeside Science & Technology Park in Klagenfurt (Austria), in which social and computer scientists collaborate to research the hybridization of digital and physical spaces by means of a game designed and primarily employed as a playful social research tool.

The game basically requires that the players collaborate to collect parts of a machine that cleans the environment from pollution, which are disseminated in various zones of the city. The authors developed a tracking system to retrace the movements and actions of the test players during their fieldwork, and also adopted participant observation. Combining quantitative and qualitative data, they show how players continuously switch between different contexts and mindsets and how this switching is based on continuous synchronization and multiple engagement and also involves bystanders who, although not directly involved in gaming, end up "invading" the game spaces, highlighting the latter's permeability.

As the essays collected in this symposium all make clear by their adoption of different perspectives and exploration of different senses of place in the contemporary media environment, our experiences and practices of places always involve a con-

textual combination of symbolic and material assemblages that include many socio-technical actors and the power forces at stake in their relations at different levels. In fact, since we have not lost our sense of place because of the massive diffusion of digital media, we do not need to appeal to the increasing availability of mobile locative media to retrieve it. To paraphrase what Katherine Hayles [1999] has written about the human in the posthuman era, what we have lost is not place, but rather a specific imagination of place: that of place as the proper place of an invisible and centred (either individual or collective) subject, a homogenous, unitary dimension of belonging and inhabitation. The openness of place is, simultaneously, its power of connectivity *and* differentiation. The features of the mobile locative media environment today make both these aspects more visible as well as more traceable and traversable and, while foregrounding the networked mobility of location in unprecedented ways, at the same time also draw our attention to the importance of localizing locations [see Latour 2005], giving us the opportunity to devise this spatial complexity and engage with it without needing to overlook either other senses of place or reduce them to our representation [Massey 2005].

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An Introduction

Abstract: This introduction offers an overview of the different sociospatial practices of the contemporary geomeia environment which are discussed in the collected essays of this symposium. Although they have varied theoretical and practical approaches, ranging from media theory and media and communication sociology to urban media studies, game studies and the digital arts, all the essays in the collection bring to the fore the performativity of places, which locative-mobile interfaces make increasingly visible and traceable today, urging us to consider – contingently as well as conjoinedly – the mobility and positionality of any location.

Keywords: Place; Socio-Spatial Practices; Performativity; Mobile Locative Media; Positionality.

Federica Timeto has a Ph.D. in the Aesthetics of New Media from the University of Plymouth, UK, and a Ph.D. in the Sociology of Communication from the University of Urbino “Carlo Bo,” Italy. She is a Lecturer in the Sociology of New Media at the Academy of Fine Arts in Palermo, Italy, where she lives. Her last book, *Diffractional Technospaces. A Feminist Approach to the Mediations of Space and Representation* [Ashgate, 2015], adopts a non-representational methodology to deal with space and representation in contemporary technospaces.