O'megaville: Excursions in Planetary Urbanism

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Abstract

Four decades ago Henri Lefebvre anticipated the complete urbanization of the planet, which no longer sounds so strange. Radical shifts seem to appear in our experience of the city, through dislocations of self and body, the World and the Earth. This paper explores a range of concerns underpinning a media performance project – *O'megaVille* – using Google Street View as a platform for critical approaches to planetary urbanism. This has involved dance workshops in Mexico, mobile media actions and video installation in Montreal and New York, and a performance-lecture in Toronto, amongst other events.

In this paper I'll use Google Street View (GSV) to think about how media assemblages play an enactive role in the speculative nature of experience. How may GSV be seen to illustrate what I see as an emerging urban condition that is simultaneously planetary and embodied? What may be at stake here for bodies (broadly defined) that operate within a distributed field of forces – in part nonhuman, often inhuman? And how may these disruptions in the fabric of experience call for a speculative response? Linked to a separate Artist Poster session at ISEA, this paper offers a series of conceptual and theoretical sketches for surveying the ruptured cohesion of Google Street View.

Keywords

Planetary Urbanism, Google Street View, Infrathin, Mondialisation, Cine-philosophy, User navigation, Faciality, Algorithmic intelligence, Image flatness

Introduction

It's not my intention to give an Artist talk here, for this occurs elsewhere, but rather to explore the broader conceptual implications of the project, so these might shift across conference formats in ways that invite disruption. It's also not my intention to comment on the work of other Artists who use Google Street View. Many of these reframe documentary photography in new ways – notably the work of Doug Rickard, Jon Rafman, Michael Wolf, and Mishka Henner. Others offer performative reconstructions of GSV, such as Ben Kinsley and Robin Hewletts' *Street With a View*, or Paolo Cirio's *Street Ghosts*. I'm interested in a more speculative approach for this paper, sketching a broad set of concerns that may find critical and poetic refraction in looking through the lens of Google Street View

as a planetary image machine.

I'll focus on several features within GSV user navigation: first, finding three anomalies, or what I call a Stretch of the Imagination. These will be seen to offer a speculative reading for the future of planetary urbanism, drawing on Marcel Duchamp's concept of the infrathin, Jean Luc Nancy's approach to mondialisation, and Gilles Deleuze's cinephilosophy. Here I hope to locate a grey area for entering the Earth through a geological turn of the image. I'll go on to find what I call three Sites of Dis/Appearance, where Street View feels like the naked stumbling of early cinema, towards something new – taking us through cracks of continuity and smudgings of the subject, to become orbital in orientation. I'll conclude with a speculative proposition for excursions in planetary urbanism, with reference to my Poster session at ISEA where I offer a disruption for entering *O'megaVille*.

A Stretch of the Imagination

Extensive Surface: Google Street View gives us an image of the world as an extensive surface that seems to stretch and tear as we move across it, with each click smudging us further along our way. It's as if the stretch continues to the ends of the earth, or at least a kind of planetary continuation given by the image database. Even though incomplete in reach, it gives us the schema of a terrestrial flattening into the beyond – a stretch of the imagination.

If as Spinoza suggests, the imagination concerns affections of the body implicated with external bodies, present to us as images of things, [1] the question may become, how do digital geographies of this kind effect the way we situate ourselves in the world?

Geo-Presence: there is a sense of 'being there' enacted by Street View user-navigation, through the flattening and repetition of territory in the continuation of surfaces. A new Flat Earth phenomenon appears – especially when we use Street View to arrive somewhere physically, as if falling off the edge through a strange schism.

Historical Displacement: the feeling of geo-presence is nonetheless not quite Now, only until the last update on the image database. In some places we find local anomalies like this village in Sendai, Japan (Figure 1) – not updated since July 2011, soon after the Tohoku Tsunami. A few hundred meters away – on all sides – the reconstruction of

the region is virtually complete in a 2013 update.

Figure 1. Google Street View: Sendai, Japan. © Google

It's an historical displacement that feels somehow continuous with the movement of the world via the flat earth effect of GSV. (Or where the History View function also allows users to move back in time). These disruptions are especially uncanny here in Sendai as an echo of the devastation that was felt at the time – with the sweeping helicopter shots on News media and the invisible catastrophe that followed with Fukushima; to be felt everywhere as something planetary and embodied at an inexplicable rupture of scale.

An Infinite Now: for the purposes of user navigation its as if captured time becomes an enacted moment that repeats itself endlessly, giving us a fractured duration held somewhere between the image database and the act of arriving. A real place and a singular moment, but always there, pregiven and extensive, both untimely and enactive.

Planetary Urbanism

This inexplicable folding of a planetary surface opens in real terms to the kind of space-time disruptions we may see occurring in the experiential fabric of the City. In the 1960's Henri Lefebvre foretold the total urbanization of the planet. [2] But was this ever going to proceed as an even wave? Contemporary permutations of planetary urbanism are characterized by an uneven totality – a full datum of singular events within a complex whole, one in which the social tissue of experience is mutually affected by the built fabric and its surface distributions.

Black Hole Cities: Lets take Moscow for example. Moscow journalist, Ellen Barry, explores the involution of rural areas towards the urban metropolis. She says:

"…the death of a village is a slow process. A geographer, Tatiana Nefyodova, calls them "black holes," and estimates that they make up 70 to 80 percent of Russia's northwest, where Moscow and St. Petersburg act as giant vacuum cleaners, sucking people and capital from the

rest of the country" [3]

Or is it Moscow that's the black hole – a dynamic collapsing mass that pulls everything into its event horizon? And then at its core we pass into a parallel universe shared by Global cities the world over, where territorial abstractions acquire the floating density of integrated capitalism. It's as if we were to suddenly pop out the other side to find ourselves in New York, Tokyo or London, more so than any native country.

Topological Density: There are limits to the metaphor. But perhaps we can say that all are drawn along a strange horizon where uneven urban densities are distributed across the surface of the earth, subjecting all entities at whatever scale or category of existence to disruptions of an experiential fabric as much as a built one. An uneven topological field unfolding in and upon itself, through the systemic self-regulation of cities and their effects on all entities invested in the urban milieu.

We can see it in the trans-local evolution of global cities, transnational corporations and consumer products; we see it in the folding of reverse migration, or the donut effects of gentrification and economic polarization. We can almost feel it as a change in atmosphere as we move through the city. What I'm proposing here is that these contemporary permutations of planetary urbanism articulate an affective area beyond or further to normal space-time parameters, at a level that is simultaneously worldwide and embodied.

Entering the Infrathin

So how can we imagine such an area? Marcel Duchamp offers a useful conceptual figure for thinking about such a space – the infrathin. Not an actual space *per se*, but more of an abstract relation wedged in the concreteness of things. Donald Kunze defines the infrathin as "any delay between a conventional meaning and a further-on meaning." [4] Duchamp refused its definition, preferring to give examples: "The thickness of a shadow, the difference between two objects cast in the same mold..." [5] In Landscape Design Mary Kate O'Brien sees it in "...the thinness that separates artifact and site, the frame from the view, surface from depth, the distance between one moment and the next." [6]

These are all very instructive for GSV. The infrathin is that moment of the stretch, delimited by an extensive planetary surface; between navigation and being there; or of something having been there, now here. It's the strange fringe horizon of historical displacement, geopresence, and an infinite now; shifting points of disruption subtended by the full datum.

A World Without Another: If the infrathin helps to locate an image for this abstract relation, what is at stake here for planetary bodies, including our own, and how do we proceed? With globalization the World seems to have reached a territorial limit, to fold back through many black hole

scenarios, expanding and contracting, inventing new spaces for occupation. How do we renew our belief in the World when it brings us to a point of exhaustion?

As Jean Luc Nancy suggests, the World reaches an external limit as a transcendent ideal following historical vectors – Church, State, God, Empire, even Capital. [7] To find a 'world without another' we become earthbound, mondial or worldwide – in the sense of relating to or involving the whole World at once. We have already fallen off the edge of that other World - to find that this edge is in fact a crack taking us into a different flatness; a continuous surface where differential limits fold and spike across ruptures of scale.

A Different Flatness

There are always infrathin areas that escape capture, when we take time to pause, veer off and zoom into the fabric, to find an enactive depth within an event.
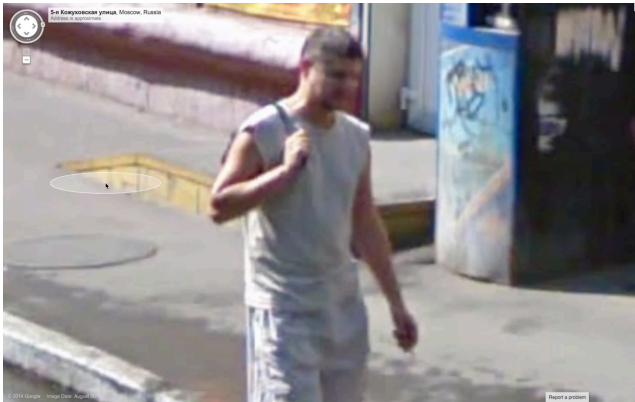

Figure 2. Google Street View: Moscow, Russia. © Google

There's something quite cinematic about Street View, when we reselect what has been randomly captured. Returning to Moscow, here's a young man walking down the street (Figure 2). Zooming in we find a different navigation and a different flatness – off track, at the limit of the image. Here depth-of-field is so shallow that everything seems to sit on the same plane – intersecting lines, dissolving colors, bleeding contours and textural artifacts – all co-existing on the surface with a painterly flatness. Then there's the way this young man raises his foot or holds his head with a pensive quality at the point of capture. It all indicates a life in motion – held for a moment – not just his life, or even a human one, but a life of intersection; an event ecology. The still image becomes cinematic in the way it singularizes a world, delimiting an expanded field of relations.

Cinematic Singularities: In his Cinema books Gilles Deleuze finds something unbearable in the World – in the limit of thought and the weight of time, where micro-intervals of experience shift within a given milieu. [8] In Cinema he also finds reasons for believing in the World

once more, in its singular construction of 'a' world. Two useful concepts here are 'camera consciousness' and a 'filmic subject'. The way the camera moves around a scene gives us a nonhuman or more-than-human perception, letting us see and feel things beyond selective consciousness and subjective perception. The kind of subject this enables is not just one of human agency, but the film itself as a broader process of individuation.

Cinema constructs a singular world without another, while making possible modes of perception that may take on the World all at once. Movement and time enter disruptive delays and relays, through circuits of perception, affection and relation, giving the image an enactive plasticity in the event. We see this for example in the suture of cinematic montage, with the fullness or fracture that results when Film directors manipulate gaps and elisions, to elicit affective shifts in the spectator.

Google Street View has its own scopic specificity, but cinematic parallels become useful for the way these contemporary permutations of planetary urbanism may generate disruptive and productive contrasts with singular aesthetic worlds. As we've seen, strange hybrids of movement and time appear in the Street View image – geo-presence, historical displacement, the infinite now – mediated as a full datum. (Or at least, via the scopic assemblage of user navigation, image database, algorithmic intelligence, and satellite array).

Sites of Dis/Appearance

Moving towards a kind of Conclusion, I'd like to revisit a Stretch of the Imagination by locating what I call Sites of Dis/Appearance; where people seem to fall into the Earth – through the image – at the limit of the World.

Differential Flatness: The first of these is our young guy in Moscow, where a world appears just as the subject disappears into it – a different flatness becoming differential at its limit.

Scene: In terms of montage, there are about 4 or 5 image captures taken by the 9-Eyed camera of the Google car before it moves on. If we follow our guy we get a sense of moving around a scene, like a series of jump cuts, with all the gaps in continuity dropping us into a wider plenitude: the machinic vision of a planetary assemblage.

Stitch & Fray: As we move around the scene, the stretch from point to point reveals the way it's all stitched together. People seem to disappear when we try to follow the thread of the montage, especially at traffic intersections. This is because the Google car follows an economy of movement, cutting the city grid in lines – this way and that. On the database the temporal disjunction is stitched together to give the illusion of spatial continuity. At intersections you will often pass through these temporal dislocations, where people seem to appear and disappear as if through a crack.

Blur: Yet another flatness, and this time where the subject really disappears – into the scopic assemblage and out to a different milieu. Our man in Moscow has his face blurred to satisfy privacy concerns, as does everyone in the Street View world. It's a neat paradox – privacy is protected just as the public is privatized. Google owns the image, as if removing us from public space in a twofold pincer move. Or perhaps this is just another fold in the surface of planetary urbanism. Our faces are erased rather than identified – but the effect is the same, through face recognition software. In a reciprocal overcoding of power and overdetermination of desire we allow ourselves to be profiled, simultaneously fixing and mobilizing the subject within the computational agency of self-as-world.

Smudge: White Wall / Black Hole

For Deleuze and Guattari the notion of faciality operates as a grid of power - the White Wall of the face and its Black Hole orifices become a machinic configuration of significance and subjectification. [9] Street View blurs the two in a single smudge, making something inhuman of the face, and beyond it something strangely nonhuman.

An algorithmic intelligence saturates the scene, extending the smudge of significance and subjectification across each and every locale – including linguistic identifiers such as street signs and number plates. Anexact in measure, it accidently overreaches its protocol to find faciality traits in the pattern of leaves on a tree, or an arrangement of trash. It de/faces each location to excess, just to be sure, so all sorts of things get caught up in the strange horizon of the White Wall / Black Hole system.

Gridlock: Face recognition software calculates variations on a grid – mouth-line and eye-line across the bridge of the nose. Its not much of a stretch to see how the Grid as a primary urban condition allows an extensive surface for the White Wall, with all its ruptures of scale through the Black Holes of planetary urbanism; more-or-less human / more-AND-less human.

But lets not fall into an easy dystopian critique. Deleuze and Guattari saw the potential for defacializing the face with the notion of Probe Heads – the invention of new Black Hole / White Wall configurations; faciality machines that multiply and transform traits, becoming abstract to excess – something animal, botanical, architectural perhaps.

Conclusion: A Proposition

For *O'megaVille* I'm interested in tracing a migration of faciality traits within a given location, plunging through the face to find other smudgings across the scene. Here I aim to take this paper through a speculative segue as a practice-based research project. I'm also presenting an ISEA Poster session using a Google Cardboard VR headpiece for building Probe Heads out of things found on the street. I'm curious as to how Cardboard VR recalls early 3D Cinema glasses taken into the mobile-media space,

where the flatness of Street View may acquire an orbital dimension for the cinematic futurity of planetary urbanism.

I want to hang this out there as a teaser, offering it as a proposition rather than a conclusion. Where this paper cross-links may be an opportunity for disruption, and for further excursions into planetary urbanism. I invite you to join these forays, from the flatness of this paper to embodied dislocations in the orientation of theory and practice.

For more information, see: michaelhornblow.com/omegaville

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Author Biography

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Michael has a background in Performance Art / Dance, Video / Media Art, Philosophy and Teaching. Originally from New Zealand, his Doctoral research performed intersections of the body and the built environment at RMIT's Spatial Information Architecture Laboratory in Melbourne, Australia. He has performed and exhibited in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Europe, and the US. In 2012 he was Creative Director / Producer and Video Artist for Grobak Padi at Melbourne Festival 2012, and ISEA 2013 in Sydney. More recently he spent three months in Indonesia on an Asialink Residency, hosted by Sahabat Wayang Ukur in Yogyakarta.