DECONSTRUCTING AND MEDIATING THE EXTENSIONS OF SPACE TOWARDS HYBRID REALITIES

Bettina Schulke, PhD Candidate
University of Lapland, Faculty of Art and Design, Media-studies, FI

Abstract

Our current concept of space is going through a radical change of perception. While some theories proclaim skepticism about the disappearance of space, other theories talk about the extension of space. For millennia of years our perception of space was dominated by a body-focused spatial experience. Today static definitions of visibility are increasingly replaced through a new flexibility, dynamic and mobility. The physical coexists with the electronic space yet at the same time the sensual feeling of space vanishes in the virtual world. Influenced by telematics media and machines we are blurring the boundaries of our physical space towards the virtual reality (VR). As consequence a new form of hybrid spaces appear. Space is no longer exclusively the housing for context anymore, instead networked contexts generates space and extend it towards another dimension. Characterized by immateriality, nonlocation and the leave of the container space new forms and aesthetics appear. This article explores how processes connected with a spatial-specific focus might drastically change in the near future.

Keywords: Physical-, virtual -, social -, hybrid spaces

I.
Introduction:

In the 21st century we are living in a world, which is characterized by the coexistence of the real and the virtual, the natural and the artificial. Our here and now is fundamentally influenced by telematics media and machines which clearly effects on the relation of location and space as a variable. Location mutates to nonlocation, presence to absence and the disappearance of space is widely discussed. In contrary, proponents of the spatial turn commonly express their skepticism about the theory of the disappearance of space and announce a new paradigm shift. However, already in 1967 Michel Foucault points out that that the big obsession of the 19th century was history, but our time rather can be defined as the age of the space.

In 1884, Edwin Abbott narrated in his short story “Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions” about a two dimensional world. This classic from the science-fiction genre and “mathematic satire” tries to demonstrate the difficulties of understanding the concept of higher dimensions. The story describes the journey of a square living in Flatland (two-dimensional) and tells about the squares adventures visiting Dotland (no-dimension), Lineland (one-dimensional), Spaceland (three-dimensional) and ending up visiting a land of four dimensions. In this story Abbott refers to the intolerance and ignorance of accepting the existence of other spatial concepts as those people are used to live in. On the other hand he demonstrates the difficulties to step outside of acquisitioned knowledge and constricted imagination.

Today we are living in a three-dimensional world, but scientists already know about the existence of higher dimensional spaces. Even though if we believe in their existence, it is

difficult for us to visualize them. Similarly it might have been in the Victorian time when Abbott wrote his satire. That time, nobody would have been able nether to in-vision nor understand what it means when we talk today with a matter of course about the cyberspace or the virtual reality (VR). At the beginning of the 21st century it is absolutely normal for us that we inhabit both, the "real" physical and the virtual reality (VR) at the same time. It also seems naturally for us that the boarders between these worlds are blurring and new, different realities are able to emerge.

Such developments not only change the nature of the spaces we inhabit, thus they change the entire way of *how* and through *what* we inhabit them. As a result they modify the entire concept of space and we, as human beings are an active part of this process. When spaces in the virtual world mute increasingly to information space and storage for data, it affects reciprocal on our understanding of the physical space, the attached sociological component and the aesthetics of space. This paper examines the shift of changing spatial concepts.

Changing aesthetics of space:

In the following I will discuss about different developments of spatial understanding and related theories. My analyses include a short introduction about the spatial turn, what leaded to todays changing spatial understanding, how we are entering virtual spaces through the virtual window, the idea about User Generated Spaces (UGS) as information space, social influence on space, the leave of the container space and the important of uploading physical space with value. Several analyzed components essentially effect in the one or the other way on a new understanding of spatial concepts that essentially manifest in a new understanding of hybrid spaces. All here discussed influences should demonstrate that our previous ideas about space are going through a radical change and still lot of research on related topics will be needed.

By the end of the 1980´s various areas such as for example cultural sciences, humanities, geography, media art theories or sociologies started to discuss about the spatial turn, but finally it took till towards the end of the 1990 to talk about a serious change of the paradigm. The expression spatial turn dates back to 1989 when it was first mentioned by the North American geographer Eduard W. Soja (1989, 10-42) who refers in his ideas to the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre. The term spatial turn is still understood varying; depending in which context it is discussed and occasionally also referred to as topographical or topological turn. While some clearly talk about a new paradigm, others discuss about a shift of scientific attention.

In 2008, JörgDöring/Tristan Thielmann published the first comprehensive anthology about the spatial turn. As they say, their goal was to close the gap between many different spatial turns. What previously was discussed inner-disciplinary, they say their aim was to start a discourse on a transdisziplinary level to create common ground between several scientific disciplines. Further they point out, if there is any common ground, it is the skepticism about the "disappearance of space". At a similar time when the discussion around the spatial turn started, began a huge hype about the virtual in the 1990s. This meant different directions clashed upon each other as for example the discussion about the disappearance of space and the extension of space towards the virtual. In the following I will analyze some of the reason what actually leaded to such developments and the important role technological developments played in this relation.

Space as variable:

Beginning with the Industrial Revolution (about 1760-1830) and the development of machines such as trains, cars or later on plains, the physically change of location drastically

speeded up. Along with a machine-focused spatial experience it seemed that distances between places began to shrink which essentially leaded to todays discussion about a metaphorically vanishing of space. Along with such developments another revolution occurred, the revolution of speed. Soon after, not even a century later, the next revolution was initiated with the development of novel communication techniques. With the development of telematics media began another radical change of the human perception and sensation of reality. Peter Weibel (2004, 444) addresses in this context that the deepest transformation caused through this process was the displacement of the body-centered experience of space and time initiated through a machine and media focused experience of reality. He explains (Weibel, 2005, 264):

"The actual revolution of the spatial experience lies in the bodyless transmission of signs. When signs could for the first time travel without a body, be it via electromagnetic waves or cable etc., the foundation for bodiless spatial experience was laid. Telematic machines, ranging from trains to plains, and the telematics media, from television to the Internet, have ultimately dismissed the discourse of location of our society. What we urgently need now is a new dynamic concept of space that is characterized by immateriality and nonlocation. Architecture as spatial design has to adapt to this new 'condition humain'."

Weibel´s analyzes emphasize what happens when we are giving away the monopoly of a body focused spatial experience. Along with the developments of telematics medias and machines a new discourse arises characterized by the non- or dislocation of space, invisibility or absence. Static definitions of visibility are increasingly replaced through a new flexibility, dynamic and mobility on several levels. Today the physical coexists with the electronically space and even can merge as I will discuss later on in my ideas about hybrid spaces.

Anne Friedberg who was Professor, historian and theorist focused on modern media culture and cinematic arts at the University of Southern California investigated in her book "The Virtual Window, From Alberti to Microsoft" (2006) the relationship between the window, the human experience and what does it mean when we enter the virtual through an opening of the dematerialized reality framed on a screen. For Friedberg virtual images and in the following virtual spaces "radically transformed the twentieth-century understanding of reality" (2006,4). She proposed that such developments essentially led to end of perspective how we knew it.Entering a virtual space often takes place "through" a framed window such as screens or displays. Friedberg reminds us that how the world is framed is as important as what is the frame. But how do we perceive virtual spaces?

Manfred Fassler, German Media theoretician and Professor for Cultural anthropology refers in that relation that processes connected with spatial-specific orientated focus might drastically change in the near future. He explains that in the future not only User Generated Content (UGC) will be the outcome, instead he introduces the term User Generated Spaces (UGS) and suggests his theory about Cyberlocalism (Fassler, 2008, 189). Such User Generated Spaces are often characterized by their qualities as information space or networked contexts. Today it is impossible to separate the virtual from our physical environment, as both areas are closely tight together. While we are embodied in the physical world we are traveling with our minds in the virtual world. New codes are pushing the boundaries of the traditional concept of borders; question the meaning of inside or outside, presence or absence, on-or offline.

Digital spaces merge with the physical space, which leads to a new understanding of spatial dimensions and asks for new concepts. Consequently, the current increased interest about the concept of space is not surprising. In Manfred Fassler´s opinion we have reached a point where space needs to be reinvented. He argues that it might be a similar process like in physics, when Newton´s belief of an absolute space and absolute time got abruptly to leave on the turn to the 20th century (2008, 201). As outlined above, many theories question the

previously understanding of space. Under the impression of a new focus on bodily involvement arises dialectics around the physical perception of space. The bodily involvement can be for example bodily-focused, social, emotional, sensual or mental.

Spaces as result of action:

In 2001, the German sociologist Martina Löw released her "Soziologie des Raumes" where she introduced her idea about relational space-models. The goal of her theory is to bear down the separation between an absolute and relative position of spatial thinking. For her, spaces are the result of action. According to Löw, simultaneously structures space actions, which means that spaces can activity define and restrict, as well as allow. Her rather process orientated understanding of space enables to understand space not as static dimension anymore. For Löw such spaces emerge through the interplay between objects and bodies, structures and actions that essentially leads to interplay between the material world and symbolic dimension of the social world.Löw takes in her theory a leave on the imagination of the container space towards a social construction of space.

Similar like Löw, the Icelandic/Danish artist OlafurEliasson emphasizes the important of a bodily involvement within space to define it. Eliasson´s personal artistic work is mainly dedicated to the content of space and temporality. He founded the Berlin based InstititutfürRaumexperimente (2009-2014), which functioned as laboratory and research project for spatial experiments through the arts and was affiliated to the University of the Arts in Berlin. He analyzes "… if people are given tools and made to understand the importance of a fundamentally flexible space, we can create a more democratic way of orienting ourselves in our everyday lives. We could call our relationship with space one of co-production: when someone walks down a street she co-produces the spatiality of the street and is simultaneously co-produced by it." (Eliasson, 2008)

Our physical environment we only can fully understand and perceive through experience. The above-discussed examples approach the topic of experience form different sides. To construct reality, various modes, if they are passive or active senses such as smell, taste and touch effect where at the same time emotions reflect on our experience.

Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), a human geographer merging the fields of geography with philosophy, art, psychology and religion, provided fantastic analyses on the questions what are places, what are spaces, from an architectural, social and humanistic point of view. He emphasizes the importance to upload a place with value to build a connection with it. Even though he discusses such issues from the perspective of being involved with places and spaces in the real, physical world, several topics can also be applied and extended towards the virtual world. As experience is essential for any spatial perception, it implements that several of our senses are active to create a spatial feeling. There are countless ways to generate a spatial understanding for our surrounding environment. To name a view examples, space can be experienced through distances, location, movement, smell, skin sensitivity, sound, noise, reverberation, in geometrical terms, size, shape or tactile perception. Yi-Fu Tuan points out that man is the measure of space and that the human body is the measure of direction, location and distance (Tuan, 1977, 45). For developing any sense of size and distances in the physical world it is needed to move.

But how can we generate a feeling for distances, time and location in virtual spaces? Timelessness can be characterized through eternal, ageless or immortal qualities that are not affected by time. It can also mean that something can have no beginning or end, or is not restricted to any particular date or time. Yi-Fu Tuan describes timelessness as another quality of distant places and refers to the Taoist lore, where the timeless paradises are located myriads of miles from any known human settlement (1977, 122). In that sense it could be said

that timelessness is also closely connected to nonlocation, which both are qualities virtual spaces often generate.

As discussed above, traditional concepts of space are equalized with limits, sense and authenticity. These values are still having their authorization, jet at the same time they are not applicable anymore today in such a narrow point of view. One of the main reasons therefor is that space became a dimension of the interface. Spatiality provides space for novel coherence and goes along with a variable codification and flexibility. However, today we are blurring the borders between the physical and the virtual. At the same time there emerge many other forms of spaces that I see as form of hybrid realities.

Hybrid spaces:

Today we are blurring the borders between the physical and the virtual. At the same time there emerges many other hybrid forms of spaces. Lev Manovich discussed in his essay "The poetics of media surfaces" (2006) how the idea of hybrid spaces formed previously and how spaces turned into augmented space. He argues about the general dynamic between spatial form and information. Therefore he is analyzing for example how the physical space is turned into data space by extracting data or augmenting it with data. This implements "the layering of dynamic and contextual data over physical space as aesthetic paradigm: how to combine different spaces together" (Manovich, 2006)

Such kind of differentiation of spaces and how data relates to them will certainly gain on important in the future. Today different species of augmented spaces are combined into one and I am convinced that this is just the beginning of a new form of spaces, which I define as hybrid spaces. Important for my understanding of this term is, that I am seeing these new form of emerging spaces not only as mapped upon each other, instead I am seeing such developments as a new species that emerges.

Conclusion:

We are currently at a point where it is nearly impossible to draw a strict line between the physical "real" space and topologies in the virtual world. Our understanding of reality is always subjective, but for sure is that the borders between worlds are becoming increasingly blurred. Different levels of spaces and realities merge so that we can encounter them simultaneously. Parallel constructed realities enable to create a new universe of discourse. The question is not about the disappearance of space anymore, rather about the extension of space towards more flexibility, fluidity, simultaneity and syncretism, which creates a new form of understanding reality.

References:

Abbott A. Edwin: Flatland: a romance of many dimensions, Ed. OffizinParvus, , 1884. http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/5/flatland_.Consulted 12.8.2014.

Döring Jörg andThielmann Tristan: Spatial Turn: Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur-und Sozialwissenschaften, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2008.

EliassonOlafour (2006/8): Your engagement has consequences. Internet source: http://olafureliasson.net/archive/read/MDA109985/your-engagement-has-consequences#slideshow. Consulted 15.9.2014.

Fassler Manfred Cybernetic Localism: Space, reloaded. In Döring Jörg andThielmann Tristan: Spatial Turn: Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur-und Sozialwissenschaften, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld,2008.

Friedberg Anna: The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft. MIT Press, 2006.

Foucault Michelle: Of other Spaces, Heterotopia, 1967. Internet source: http://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en.html.

Consulted 15.8.2014.
Levebvre Henri: The Production of Space. Blackwell Oublishers Ltd. Oxford, 1991.
Löw Martina: Raumsoziologie, SurkampVerlag, Frankfurt am Main,2001.
MANOVICH, Lev. The poetics of urban media surfaces.**First Monday**, [S.l.], feb. 2006. ISSN 13960466. Available at: <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1545/1460>. Date accessed: 1 Nov. 2014. doi:10.5210/fm.v0i0.1545.
Soja Edward W: Postmodern Geographies: The Ressertation of Space in Critical Social Theory. Verso. London, 1989.
Tuan Yi-Fu: Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1977.
Weibel Peter: Gamma und Amplitude. Philo & Philo Fine Arts, Berlin, 2004.
Weibel Peter: Architecture-from location to nonlocation, from presence to absence. In thebookDisappearingArchitecture: From Real to Virtual to Quantum. Georg Flachbart, Peter Weibel (eds). Birkhäuser-Publishers forArchitecture. Basel, 2005.