

Chapter 42

Ground Control to Major Tom: Satellite Seeing, GPS Drawing, and (Outer)Space

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter I explore satellite seeing in the convergence of global visual culture as a human-satellite co-figuration. Satellites, Global Positioning Systems, and mobile devices are engaged as prosthetic extensions of an embodied experience that can augment the potential of place-based learning. I engage this co-figuration through Mirzoeff's (2000/2006) notion of intervisuality and diaspora, the work of contemporary artists Trevor Paglen and Jeremy Wood, and my experiences with graduate students in Helsinki, Finland in an intensive course that developed understandings of the city as a site of geographic and cultural identity while exploring ideas of public space and performative interventionist practices in art making. The relations of the human-satellite co-figuration give insight as to the convergence of the local as a scale of the global, imprinted with transcultural pathways for understanding how we are located in the world.

INTRODUCTION

If you have ever relocated you know what it feels like to be lost. I just recently changed jobs and find myself navigating around a new town and campus. As I settle into my new environs sometimes I wander about just to get a sense of my new surroundings. Often during these sessions of aimlessness, I recognize a window or the side of a building, and it seems like my awareness of the geography gets stitched together like a giant mental quilt that I keep storing away for reference. Spatial cognition scientists would call my metaphorical quilt a cognitive map that is stored in the hippocampus region of my brain. In spatial navigating, the building of these maps can actually lead to increased neural pathways to this region of the brain and is related to increased brain function (Maxwell, 2013). Other times I will have sudden moments of feeling lost when several familiar components such as a public sculpture or parking lot entrance

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-5357-2.ch042

become juxtaposed in such an experiential way that my mind and body seem to contort under a certain disorientation: do I know this place? Have I been here before? In these times I often rely on a kind of habit of navigation, or what is known as stimulus-response navigation, as if on autopilot heading in a direction on instinct until I am able to connect again to my cognitive map. My cognitive map constantly needs extending and I try to note the details of my surroundings as I build it out.

More often than not I need to be somewhere and so wandering gives way to finding, and in these situations I am usually holding a smartphone in my hand accessing Google Maps. As I walk and look for the little dot on the screen that represents me in space, my act of spatial navigation is coupled with my active embodiment of being in a place simultaneously with being the dot on the map. I am at the street corner and trying to figure out which way to turn. I am facing a building that rises up in front of me and alternately looking at the screen in my hands to try to figure out which side of the brown rectilinear shape on the map I am on. Oftentimes in this synthesis of the body-me and dot-me, I turn the phone in my hand to effect a certain orientation so that my sensory faculties can mesh with the vector lines of the map. Sometimes, a moment of panic erupts as my cell carrier data feed grows weak or the map interface takes a moment too long to update my current location leaving me altogether off the map. During these instances there is a very real sense of anxiety and even a slight motion sickness as the dot hovers from one location to the next as the Global Positioning Systems (GPS) tracking tries to locate me. I've caught myself multiple times during these moments of being lost and disconnected, holding my phone up into the air higher and rotating around as if I was trying to catch a signal (looking foolish I'm sure).

In moments like these, I imagine millions of people experiencing the same all over the world, and it is at this intersection of the body and geolocation that I examine as an important site of convergence of global visual culture. In order to explore this site of convergence in this chapter, I examine a human-satellite co-figuration through concepts of satellite seeing and embodiment in (outer)space. By (outer) space I am referring to the simultaneity of the body as a nexus of psychic-sensorial experience. In this relation between the mind (psychic) and the feeling of the body (sensorial) I would like to focus on both inner space, as in the nerve-synapse combinations that populate feeling, and outer space as the prosthetic awareness of visible and invisible relations structured by computation. I am interested in how the body thinks feeling both in the body and through the projection of the body afforded us by mobile computing devices similar to my own experience of being on the street corner and in the map simultaneously. By examining a co-figuration, I am articulating the qualities of convergence in global visual culture through an understanding of the geolocated moment as co-constructed by both the agencies of human bodies and satellite computational networks such as the civilian use of GPS. Contemplating (outer)space embodiment is viewed critically through a framework of sensory-inscription (Farman, 2011) to evaluate the body in formation with mobile computing as both a sense-being and a socio-culturally inscribed subject.

Central to my investigation will be a review of project work from an intensive higher education course called "City Writing: Mobility, Multiculturalism, and Public Space in Art Education" from May, 2015 that I taught at Aalto University, Helsinki, Finland as a visiting professor. I will review our collaborative public performance that used GPS drawing in Senate Square, a central tourist destination in the city of Helsinki. The seven graduate students that enrolled in the course represented a global membership (from Brazil, Iran, Finland and United States) investigating notions of multiculturalism within Helsinki, embodiment and mapping, and how we see ourselves being seen by satellites and the geolocation technologies so prevalent to mobile computing. My analysis focuses on ways the human-satellite co-figuration impacts global visual culture and what it teaches us about seeing and finding ourselves in the world.

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