

Inaccurate Coordinates

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How do we locate ourselves? How do we position ourselves in relation to our surroundings?

Location is not a set of coordinates; it is not something static and easily measurable, it is not a case of physical geography but is a state which exists through the complex interplay of history, culture, socio-politics, economics and technologies. Location is a multifaceted context, a situation and state of being and is not necessarily linked to the ground beneath our feet. The expansion and intermix of these various elements means they may no longer be defined by location. A shift from one location to the next seems impossible to define when locations constantly merge with each other, a positioning within multiple contexts and multiple spaces. History, culture etc. are not constructed in one defined place, and our locations are innumerable, dispersed points of reference.

Our notion of our location has never been stable, even in terms of simple geography. Our grasp of place and our means of delineating place have greatly change over the centuries. As David Harvey comments, in the time of European Feudalism 'place assumed a definite legal, political and social meaning. External space was weakly grasped and generally conceptualized as a mysterious cosmology populated by some external authority, heavenly hosts, or more sinister figures of myth and imagination.' This then began to change in the time of the Renaissance as new objectivity and functionality began to enter map making techniques leading to the standard of map we have today — 'maps striped of all elements of fantasy and religious belief, as well as any sign of the experiences involved in their production had become abstract and strictly functional systems for the factual ordering of phenomena in space.' New technologies have the ability to create highly accurate representations of our physical surroundings but they also present us with the opportunity to express location outside of standardised forms and reinstall subjective articulations of space.

With this in mind how may one go about exploring locating media and locative media? The issue of

technology's role in the construction of space and our interaction with space is highly prominent in this discourse. This construction and interaction is perhaps what we can define as locating media. Certainly new technologies are offering new locations, widening our notions of place, with virtual, personalized, augmented space, etc. However they may also simultaneously narrow our sense of location — site specification is removed when the information can be obtained and communication sustained no matter where we are. And as we can connect to 'everywhere', our sensitivity to location specifics may diminish. If we are interacting with other spaces does this mean we are also inactive in our own location? If we talk on a mobile phone, if we chat online, listen to our personal audio devices, do we separate ourselves from where we are? Even if one is mobile in these interactions it does not import 'locatedness' in the particular context of one's surroundings. However it is misleading to conclude that technology destroys space — locality is in a constant state of flux and does not exist separately. But there is a push and pull between senses of location and de-location.

Much of the debate which has surrounded older forms of media such as photography, film and television is applicable to emerging technologies of today in the disturbance of the line between fact and fiction and the impossibility to communicate a direct reality. A medium will always narrow and distort the original experience and therefore when attempting to express a context, a location through media technology, we must be aware of the gaps and transformations which they eschew.

Mediums frame the information they carry — when another context, another location is engaged with through technology only an enframed perspective is offered up — the danger is to assume this is the full perspective. When assessing the use of any medium through which we engage and communicate, theories of linguistics are naturally relevant. What is conveyed through the medium is changed by the medium itself. In the examination of Saussure's signifier and signified we cannot accept the signifier as the entire embodiment of

the signified, as there is of course a loss in translation, a compression in data conversion. But there is also the potential for an extension of meaning through this process, with inaccuracies also leading to new readings, new perspectives. The inaccuracy of communication does not require that we should stop communicating. However when this difference of signifier and signified are overlooked then misconceptions easily occur, as in Baudrillard's *Simulacrum*, hyperreality replacing reality. Heidegger in particular warned of this misconception, cautioning that the enframing which technology presents us with should not be mistaken as the whole picture. Heidegger poignantly remarks "despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remain absent." Technology, new media, in some ways puts a barrier to the true experience of things, the revealing of essence. But he also points to the new perspectives which technology offers us, acting as a magnifying glass, when we frame something we examine it closely, and may become more aware of our relation to it.

In examining questions of location two central problems emerge — how do we interact with location and how do we communicate location. These are central to the meaning of 'locative'. If location is viewed as our surrounding environment — what is our dialogue with that environment — and by dialogue it is meant mutual relationship — of give and take. How do we participate in that environment and how does technology facilitate this?

Our locations are increasingly constructed by new technology, new media, and becoming part of the reality of our located experience. It is neither a separate apparatus, nor merely a portal to elsewhere but part of our encounter of space. While these media merge as part of our surroundings other technologies are specifically designed for the examination of these surroundings. Mainstream engagement with locative media is most probably limited to car navigation, mobile mapping and our passive encounter with surveillance/control technology. Arguably there is little interaction here, in which one is provided with a set of inaccurate coordinates which propagate a quantitative notion of location. How therefore may we interact with our location and express our location?

In any interaction we bring our location with us. Our state of existence cannot be conceived in isolation from that which surrounds us, they define each other. We are therefore constantly engaged in a communication of location in some form. We cannot leave place behind. This therefore also counters the claim that technology can overcome location. Technology is still inextricably linked to location, it is part of location and also constructs location. Location cannot be escaped but nor is it a single point which we are confined within. In the task of locating something, we are not to find

the position in one place, rather in a network whose branches reach in all directions. But when engaging with new media which so easily connects us to elsewhere, through a largely standardised platform, it is perhaps quite easy for one to forget that this entangled network is at play. Internet tourism is a key testimony to this. Lisa Nakamura refers to internet users as tourists, able to selectively 'visit' a location, pick and choose their sightseeing spots but having little insight into the deeper identity, community, culture, experience and context of that location. When we encounter a place through a standard platform, without being physically present in that particular location, the reception of information and images easily implement false impressions. Through a standard platform there may also lead to misconceived standard of thinking — ease at which to assume others are in the same context as you are.

There has been criticism of new media technologies implementing a distancing from our own locations, preventing participation in our local community, isolating us from our surroundings, leading us to ignore our own environment when one is able to access new environments in new spaces. Virilio warns against the loss of geography, arguing that as 'Space is being continuously devalued' in an age defined by speed the departure and the destination are now one in the same. 'With the instantaneous communications media, arrival supplants departure: without necessarily leaving, everything "arrives". The sedentary voyeur is in a constant state of mediated reception leading to the 'Growing imbalance between direct and indirect information'.

In investigating our surroundings does technology present a help or a hindrance? Does it contain the potential to reveal new awareness of our environment? If we want to investigate where we are does new media offer a useful and relevant tool? Instead of interacting with elsewhere, does new media offer an improved interaction with our location? Obviously the answer to these questions relies little upon the technology itself, but more upon our approach to it and our own motivations to explore locality. There is the potential to encounter location in a new and meaningful way, there is the potential to express location with sophistication and sensitivity, if we have the impetus to do so.

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