Commentary:

Memory, Mediascapes, and Temporal Circulation in Urban Space; or How Landscapes Were Never as Linear as We Thought They Weren’t

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Abstract: This commentary critically reframes the concept of circulation in terms of time, defining the dislocation of space that occurs with media—defined as technology taken to be a social phenomenon—as an occurrence that creates, and is a result of, simultaneous streams of temporal flow. Counter to narratives that claim for technology and media’s radical altering of subjectivity, I suggest that this notion of temporality was already present in cultural understandings of memory and monuments in the landscape.

Circulation is predominantly thought about by anthropologists in terms of objects moving through space: media from Bollywood in the US hipster’s DVD player, art moving between communities and museums, and cell phones linking Annapolis to Athens, Zion to Zimbabwe in the circulation of information. In what follows, however, I would like to think differently about circulation; I wish to consider temporal circulation, or the ways in which places are the locus of multiple simultaneous temporalities. This overlaps with a consideration of the temporal circulation of ideas in our own discipline today, as circulation harkens to notions of diffusionism (see Giddens 1990 and Jameson 1981) and other prior theoretical constructs. In bringing these parallel thoughts together, I will argue that what seems new is in many instances a resurfacing of an old problem in anthropology, which warrants a re-substantiation of old theories to create new solutions. I do so in order to a) bring new perspective into our conversations of circulation; and b) move towards (re)imaging problems implicated in circulation’s ‘crisis of space’ in creative and emancipative ways. My goal is not to ‘answer’ these critiques and ideas; rather, it is to pose new questions— or, in this case, pose old questions for new materials—intended to shape the readers’ experience of interrogating circulation throughout the journal.

My research in Andalucía focuses on the ways in which contemporary media ecology – defined as the sum total of digital media in an experienced space – affects people’s embodied experience of landscapes, particularly the cultural construction of subjectivity vis-à-vis consumed sound and the clashes that come with embodying public sound symbols in different ways across cultural communities. On Main Street, Gibraltar, sound and its technology circulate freely in space, often with little hindrance besides other sounds and noises. This includes the sounds of Llanito being spoken on the streets, music from department stores that promotes hip and vibrant ‘club’ scenes, shops with ‘exotic’ sounds that attract tourists seeking ‘The Other’ and the ‘Authentic’, TV screens that imply sounds through the showing of photos of the Rock of Gibraltar and WWII monuments, etc. Moreover, there are other sonic experiences, including the silent ‘living statue’ street performers depicting Roman-esque Saints and Sultans of ‘Arabia’, bandoneón players...
projecting the tangos of a Creole southern Spain, and guitar players playing a range of music – from global ‘pop’ to local forms of flamenco-infused folk music. These, of course and most importantly, are all in addition to personal media objects—mobile phones, mp3 players, Gameboys, and PSPs carried by locals and tourists alike.

Personal media devices are quickly becoming the focus of anthropological inquiry (DeNicola 2010, Horst & Miller 2000, Bull 2005). These scholars specifically examine such devices as surface reverberations of the landscape – two-dimensional stimuli that affect perception and interpretation. Exemplary of this, in an early article against the study of acoustic media ecology and soundscape, Ingold (2007) says that the concept of soundscape is “concerned with the fixivities of surface conformation rather than the fluxes of the medium… a world of persons and objects that has already precipitated out, or solidified from these fluxes.”

Instead, I suggest that we consider soundscapes as separate spheres from the physical architecture, and as three-dimensional places moving within a changing space. Where scholars like Schafer (1993) and Ingold (2007) see the dominance of these surface reverberation as creating a possible crisis, and erasure, of place (known in the wider media studies world as the ‘Digital Crisis of Space’), my approach – as seen in Peake (2008 & 2010) – begs the question of whether or not the physical place was ever the only thing present in landscapes (also see Feld & Basso 1996, Casey 1987, Schattschneider 2003). What if we think of soundscapes not as something emitted, but more as a place in and of itself? It is in answering this question, and justifying its asking, that I reach my aim: we might answer these questions in terms of temporal circulation, and get to the notion that we are in a cycle of intellectual inquiry where the past has once again become present and relevant.

The problem with considering soundscapes as purely emitted from within a landscape is that the landscapes are then situated linearly in time; that is, they move forward temporally as if beyond the presence of the past, in a linear, simple relation. Instead, to engage with the issue of media saturation, I suggest we look at places as a plurality of non-static temporalities. Places are not moving through time, rather, time is always moving through places, which affects their movement in time, the complex relations between time and space intertwined in a makeshift notion of time-space (Greenhouse 1996, Lefebvre 2004, Townsend 2000), and a dynamic social landscape (Vigh 2008, 2009). This insinuates a notion of ‘progression’ unlike the one of ‘progress’ defined by Western notions of ‘moving forward’; rather, it is a progress much like interpretations of Darwin’s notion of evolution—a-directional and estranged from any direction or its moral connotations. This approach brings us to the core problem in the aforementioned scholars’ thought: that a space is ever just one place. From my experience in Gibraltar, Andalucían signifieds of identity that exist in media ecologies are used with little concern for the British-national signifiers that serve as their vehicle; Andalucían and British places co-exist in the urban space of Gibraltar as two sides of a piece of paper.

Considering media ecology in this way, I approach the second part of my title—how landscapes were never as linear as we thought they weren’t—by returning. Many considerations of media in space consider space a linear thing, while past scholarship, especially in anthropology, has already deemed space a non-linear entity. Thus, we might return to the past scholarship on monuments – those old spatial forms that mediated place to us before the echoes of televisions, stereos, and ‘media’ – in order to understand a) that physical place was never just one time, and b) that the current crisis of space is simply a temporal circulation in our own discipline. As the philosopher Bachelard (1994) noted, in reflecting that his new home had the ‘smell of raisins’ from his childhood home although no one else could smell them, places are never in the world; rather, we carry them within us. A space is always both the physical world AND the memories—including
also imagination, ideas, expectations, and hopes (Connerton 1989) of it or those similar to it (a place needs only to stimulate a previous memory form another one to become two places at once). One might also turn to Derrida’s (1992) notion of ghosts in the landscape, apparitions of memories that linger only to deconstruct the present, and further to de Certeau (1988), who notes that urban streets are always icons of the past, that give, and attempt to over-determine, meaning to the present. Numerous anthropologists have also wrestled with this idea in terms of memory, history, and monuments, as well (Abrahams 1991, Bahloul 1996, Carr 1986, Herzfeld 1997, MacCannel and MacCannel 1982).

Adding the notion that media is not just a thing, that the Facebook, video games, phone conversations, and soundscapes are not surface reverberations, we can see media as, not just mediating messages, but mediating worlds; these ‘media’ are not two-dimensional, but carry with them a sense of social depth. Simultaneously, we must understand that all media use always happens in space (although which space to privilege is becoming increasingly unclear). Be it memories of a time past, or media depictions of the Jetsons’ time future, space has never been just one place. In this way, media is not an erasure of the physical world, and the ‘digital crisis of place’ is not a new concern; it is the repackaging of our uncertainties about the connection between times and places, memories and spaces. The Mediascape, conceptually speaking, is the new Memoryscape, which was the new Taskscape, which was the new Timescape, and so forth. What is on the screen is its own world, with its own timeframe, juxtaposed on another more ‘touchable’ world. Thus, to understand the state of our lived places as temporal circulations, we must re-circulate old thought in new ways. We must (re)imagine (that is, spin off, readapt and not re-imagine as true, or use unchanged) old understandings of the social world, social process, and social places. We must think of our discipline in its own temporal circulation in order to move beyond its orbit and ask new and intriguing questions. We must, as many papers in this collection do, (re)imagine and (re)theorize circulation.

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It has recently been argued that interpreting moral codes in life history offers the researchers “a more intimate entry into everyday lives of our subjects” (Steinberg and Wanner 2008; Zigon 2008a; Zigon 2008b). Through the lens of morality we are able to discern “the interpreted locus of the personal and the shared”, the lived experience, in contrast to mere “imposition of institutions and transcendent structures onto passive agents” (Zigon 2008a). In this paper, I will divulge the changing power dynamics, racialized discourses and symbolic meaning of the ex-Soviet physician’s work in Africa, using as my example the life-history of a Ukrainian physician, whom I will refer to as Dr. Valerio. Dr. Valerio spent 6 years in Angola during the Soviet regime (1980s) and has spent more than 10 years in Mozambique since Ukrainian independence. Dr. Valerio’s story offers a window on the post-socialist phenomenon of physicians returning labor migration to the African countries formerly ruled by socialist governments (i.e., Angola, Mozambique, Algeria, Libya, Ghana). No official statistics on the number of physicians from the former Soviet Union working in Africa are available. Because of this, ethnographic research methods are especially valuable and revealing. Post-socialist physicians return to their prior work destination, but they do that in a different era. They are no longer representatives of the powerful and attractive Soviet regime. Their status shifted to that of labor migrants from struggling developing states. In this work, I use Ong’s (1999) idea of...