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All

M/C Journal, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2010) - 'ambient'

Home > Vol. 13, No. 2 (2010) > [Bruce Arnold, Margalit Levin](#)

Ambient Anomie in the Virtualised Landscape? Autonomy, Surveillance and Flows in the 2020 Streetscape

[Bruce Arnold, Margalit Levin](#) | [Volume 13](#) | [Issue 2](#) | [May 2010](#) | ['ambient'](#)

Our thesis is that the city's ambience is now an unstable dialectic in which we are watchers and watched, mirrored and refracted in a landscape of iPhone auteurs, eTags, CCTV and sousveillance.

Embrace ambience! Invoking Benjamin's spirit, this article does not seek to limit understanding through restriction to a particular theme or theoretical construct (Buck-Morss 253). Instead, it offers snapshots of interactions at the dawn of the postmodern city. That bricolage also engages how people appropriate, manipulate, disrupt and divert urban spaces and strategies of power in their everyday life. Ambient information can both liberate and disenfranchise the individual. This article asks whether our era's dialectics result in a new personhood or merely restate the traditional spectacle of 'bright lights, big city'. Does the virtualized city result in ambient anomie and satiation or in surprise, autonomy and serendipity? (Gumpert 36)

Since the steam age, ambience has been characterised in terms of urban sound, particularly the alienation attributable to the individual's experience as a passive receptor of a cacophony of sounds – now soft, now loud, random and recurrent—from the hubbub of crowds, the crash and grind of traffic, the noise of industrial processes and domestic activity, factory whistles, fire alarms, radio, television and gramophones (Merchant 111; Thompson 6).

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In the age of the internet, personal devices such as digital cameras and iPhones, and urban informatics such as CCTV networks and e-Tags, ambience is interactivity, monitoring and signalling across multiple media, rather than just sound.

It is an interactivity in which watchers observe the watched observing them and the watched reshape the fabric of virtualized cities merely by traversing urban precincts (Hillier 295; De Certeau 163). It is also about pervasive although unevenly distributed monitoring of individuals, using sensors that are remote to the individual (for example cameras or tag-readers mounted above highways) or are borne by the individual (for example mobile phones or badges that systematically report the location to a parent, employer or sex offender register) (Holmes 176; Savitch 130). That monitoring reflects what Doel and Clark characterized as a pervasive sense of ambient fear in the postmodern city, albeit fear that like much contemporary anxiety is misplaced—you are more at risk from intimates than from strangers, from car accidents than terrorists or stalkers—and that is ahistorical (Doel 13; Scheingold 33).

Finally, it is about cooption, with individuals signalling their identity through ambient advertising: wearing t-shirts, sweatshirts, caps and other apparel that display iconic faces such as Obama and Monroe or that embody corporate imagery such as the Nike 'Swoosh', Coca-Cola 'Ribbon', Linux Penguin and Hello Kitty feline (Sayre 82; Maynard 97). In the postmodern global village much advertising is ambient, rather than merely delivered to a device or fixed on a billboard.

Australian cities are now seas of information, phantasmagoric environments in which the ambient noise encountered by residents and visitors comprises corporate signage, intelligent traffic signs, displays at public transport nodes, shop-window video screens displaying us watching them, and a plethora of personal devices showing everything from the weather to snaps of people in the street or neighborhood satellite maps. They are environments through which people traverse both as persons and abstractions, virtual presences on volatile digital maps and in online social networks.

Spectacle, Anomie or Personhood

The spectacular city of modernity is a meme of communication, cultural and urban development theory. It is spectacular in the sense that of large, artificial, even sublime. It is also spectacular because it is built around the gaze, whether the vistas of Hausmann's boulevards, the towers of Manhattan and Chicago, the shopfront 'sea

of light' and advertising pillars noted by visitors to Weimar Berlin or the neon 'neo-baroque' of Las Vegas (Schivelbusch 114; Fritzsche 164; Ndalianis 535). In the year 2010 it aspires to 2020 vision, a panoptic and panspectric gaze on the part of governors and governed alike (Kullenberg 38). In contrast to the timelessness of Heidegger's hut and the 'fixity' of rural backwaters, spectacular cities are volatile domains where all that is solid continues to melt into air with the aid of jackhammers and the latest 'new media' potentially result in a hypereality that make it difficult to determine what is real and what is not (Wark 22; Berman 19).

The spectacular city embodies a dialectic. It is anomic because it induces an alienation in the spectator, a fatigue attributable to media satiation and to a sense of being a mere cog in a wheel, a disempowered and readily-replaceable entity that is denied personhood-recognition as an autonomous individual-through subjection to a Fordist and post-Fordist industrial discipline or the more insidious imprisonment of being 'a housewife', one ant in a very large ant hill (Dyer-Witheford 58).

People, however, are not automatons: they experience media, modernity and urbanism in different ways. The same attributes that erode the selfhood of some people enhance the autonomy and personhood of others. The spectacular city, now a matrix of digits, information flows and opportunities, is a realm in which people can subvert expectations and find scope for self-fulfillment, whether by wearing a hoodie that defeats CCTV or by using digital technologies to find and associate with other members of stigmatized affinity groups. One person's anomie is another's opportunity.

Ambience and Virtualisation

Eighty years after Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* forecast a cyber-sociality, digital technologies are resulting in a 'virtualisation' of social interactions and cities. In post-modern cityscapes, the space of flows comprises an increasing number of electronic exchanges through physically disjointed places (Castells 2002). Virtualisation involves supplementation or replacement of face-to-face contact with hypersocial communication via new media, including SMS, email, blogging and Facebook. In 2010 your friends (or your boss or a bully) may always be just a few keystrokes away, irrespective of whether it is raining outside, there is a public transport strike or the car is in for repairs (Hassan 69; Baron 215).

Virtualisation also involves an abstraction of bodies and physical movements, with the information that represents individual identities or vehicles traversing the virtual spaces comprised of CCTV networks (where viewers never encounter the person or crowd face to face), rail ticketing systems and road management systems (x e-Tag passed by this tag reader, y camera logged a specific vehicle onto a database using automated number-plate recognition software) (Wood 93; Lyon 253).

Surveillant Cities

Pervasive anxiety is a permanent and recurrent feature of urban experience. Often navigated by an urgency to control perceived disorder, both physically and through cultivated dominant theory (early twentieth century gendered discourses to push women back into the private sphere; ethno-racial closure and control in the Black Metropolis of 1940s Chicago), history is punctuated by attempts to dissolve public debate and infringe minority freedoms (Wilson 1991). In the Post-modern city unprecedented technological capacity generates a totalizing media vector whose plausible by-product is the perception of an ambient menace (Wark 3).

Concurrent faith in technology as a cost-effective mechanism for public management (policing, traffic, planning, revenue generation) has resulted in emergence of the surveillant city. It is both a social and architectural fabric whose infrastructure is dotted with sensors and whose people assume that they will be monitored by private/public sector entities and directed by interactive traffic management systems – from electronic speed signs and congestion indicators through to rail schedule displays –leveraging data collected through those sensors.

The fabric embodies tensions between governance (at its crudest, enforcement of law by police and their surrogates in private security services) and the soft cage of digital governmentality, with people being disciplined through knowledge that they are being watched and that the observation may be shared with others in an official or non-official shaming (Parenti 51; Staples 41). Encounters with a railway station CCTV might thus result in exhibition of the individual in court or on broadcast television, whether in nightly news or in a 'reality tv' crime expose built around 'most wanted' footage (Jermyn 109). Misbehaviour by a partner might merely result in scrutiny of mobile phone bills or web browser histories (which illicit content has the partner consumed, which parts of cyberspace has been visited), followed by a visit to the

family court. It might instead result in digital vigilantism, with private offences being named and shamed on electronic walls across the global village, such as Facebook.

iPhone Auteurism

Activists have responded to pervasive surveillance by turning the cameras on 'the watchers' in an exercise of 'sousveillance' (Bennett 13; Huey 158). That mirroring might involve the meticulous documentation, often using the same geospatial tools deployed by public/private security agents, of the location of closed circuit television cameras and other surveillance devices.

One outcome is the production of maps identifying who is watching and where that watching is taking place. As a corollary, people with anxieties about being surveilled, with a taste for street theatre or a receptiveness to a new form of urban adventure have used those maps to traverse cities via routes along which they cannot be identified by cameras, tags and other tools of the panoptic sort, or to simply adopt masks at particular locations. In 2020 can anyone aspire to be a protagonist in *V for Vendetta*? (iSee)

Mirroring might take more visceral forms, with protestors for example increasingly making a practice of capturing images of police and private security services dealing with marches, riots and pickets. The advent of 3G mobile phones with a still/video image capability and ongoing 'dematerialisation' of traditional video cameras (ie progressively cheaper, lighter, more robust, less visible) means that those engaged in political action can document interaction with authority. So can passers-by.

That ambient imaging, turning the public gaze on power and thereby potentially redefining the 'public' (given that in Australia the community has been embodied by the state and discourse has been mediated by state-sanctioned media), poses challenges for media scholars and exponents of an invigorated civil society in which we are looking together – and looking at each other – rather than bowling alone.

One challenge for consumers in construing ambient media is trust. Can we believe what we see, particularly when few audiences have forensic skills and intermediaries such as commercial broadcasters may privilege immediacy (the 'breaking news' snippet from participants) over context and verification.

Social critics such as Baudelaire and Benjamin exalt the *flaneur*, the free spirit who gazed on the street, a street that was as much a spectacle as the theatre and as vibrant as the circus. In 2010 the same technologies that empower citizen journalism and foster a succession of velvet revolutions feed flaneurs whose streetwalking doesn't extend beyond a keyboard and a modem. The US and UK have thus seen emergence of gawker services, with new media entrepreneurs attempting to build sustainable businesses by encouraging fans to report the location of celebrities (and ideally provide images of those encounters) for the delectation of people who are web surfing or receiving a tweet (Burns 24).

In the age of ambient cameras, where the media are everywhere and nowhere (and micro-stock photoservices challenge agencies such as Magnum), everyone can join the paparazzi. Anyone can deploy that ambient surveillance to become a stalker. The enthusiasm with which fans publish sightings of celebrities will presumably facilitate attacks on bodies rather than images. Information may want to be free but so, inconveniently, do iconoclasts and practitioners of participatory panopticism (Dodge 431; Dennis 348).

Rhetoric about 'citizen journalism' has been co-opted by 'old media', with national broadcasters and commercial enterprises soliciting still images and video from non-professionals, whether for free or on a commercial basis. It is a world where 'journalists' are everywhere and where responsibility resides uncertainly at the editorial desk, able to reject or accept offerings from people with cameras but without the industrial discipline formerly exercised through professional training and adherence to formal codes of practice.

It is thus unsurprising that South Australia's Government, echoed by some peers, has mooted anti-gawker legislation aimed at would-be auteurs who impede emergency services by stopping their cars to take photos of bushfires, road accidents or other disasters.

The flipside of that iPhone auteurism is anxiety about the public gaze, expressed through moral panics regarding street photography and sexting. Apart from a handful of exceptions (notably photography in the Sydney Opera House precinct, in the immediate vicinity of defence facilities and in some national parks), Australian law does not prohibit 'street photography' which includes photographs or videos of streetscapes or public places. Despite periodic assertions that it is a criminal offence

to take photographs of people—particularly minors—without permission from an official, parent/guardian or individual there is no general restriction on ambient photography in public spaces.

Moral panics about photographs of children (or adults) on beaches or in the street reflect an ambient anxiety in which danger is associated with strangers and strangers are everywhere (Marr 7; Bauman 93). That conceptualisation is one that would delight people who are wholly innocent of Judith Butler or Andrea Dworkin, in which the gaze (ever pervasive, ever powerful) is tantamount to a violation.

The reality is more prosaic: most child sex offences involve intimates, rather than the 'monstrous other' with the telephoto lens or collection of nastiness on his iPod (Cossins 435; Ingebretsen 190). Recognition of that reality is important in considering moves that would egregiously restrict legitimate photography in public spaces or happy snaps made by doting relatives. An ambient image—unposed, unpremeditated, uncoerced—of an intimate may empower both authors and subjects when little is solid and memory is fleeting.

The same caution might usefully be applied in considering alarms about sexting, ie creation using mobile phones (and access by phone or computer monitor) of intimate images of teenagers by teenagers. Australian governments have moved to emulate their US peers, treating such photography as a criminal offence that can be conceptualized as child pornography and addressed through permanent inclusion in sex offender registers. Lifelong stigmatisation is inappropriate in dealing with naïve or brash 12 and 16 year olds who have been exchanging intimate images without an awareness of legal frameworks or an understanding of consequences (Shafron-Perez 432). Cameras may be everywhere among the e-generation but legal knowledge, like the future, is unevenly distributed.

Digital Handcuffs

Generations prior to 2008 lost themselves in the streets, gaining individuality or personhood by escaping the surveillance inherent in living at home, being observed by neighbours or simply surrounded by colleagues. Streets offered anonymity and autonomy (Simmel 1903), one reason why heterodox sexuality has traditionally been negotiated in parks and other beats and on kerbs where sex workers ply their trade (Dalton 375). Recent decades have seen a privatisation of those public spaces, with

urban planning and digital technologies imposing a new governmentality on hitherto ambient 'deviance' and on voyeuristic-exhibitionist practice such as heterosexual 'dogging' (Bell 387).

That governmentality has been enforced through mechanisms such as replacement of traditional public toilets with 'pods' that are conveniently maintained by global service providers such as Veolia (the unromantic but profitable rump of former media & sewers conglomerate Vivendi) and function as billboards for advertising groups such as JC Decaux. Faces encountered in the vicinity of the twenty-first century *pissoir* are thus likely to be those of supermodels selling yoghurt, low interest loans or sportsgear – the same faces sighted at other venues across the nation and across the globe. Visiting 'the mens' gives new meaning to the word ambience when you are more likely to encounter Louis Vuitton and a CCTV camera than George Michael.

George's face, or that of Madonna, Barack Obama, Kevin 07 or Homer Simpson, might instead be sighted on the tshirts or hoodies mentioned above. George's music might also be borne on the bodies of people you see in the park, on the street, or in the bus. This is the age of ambient performance, taken out of concert halls and virtualised on iPods, Walkmen and other personal devices, music at the demand of the consumer rather than as rationed by concert managers (Bull 85). The cost of that ambience, liberation of performance from time and space constraints, may be a Weberian disenchantment (Steiner 434).

Technology has also removed anonymity by offering digital handcuffs to employees, partners, friends and children. The same mobile phones used in the past to offer excuses or otherwise disguise the bearer's movement may now be tied to an observer through location services that plot the person's movement across Google Maps or the geospatial information of similar services.

That tracking is an extension into the private realm of the identification we now take for granted when using taxis or logistics services, with corporate Australia for example investing in systems that allow accurate determination of where a shipment is located (on Sydney Harbour Bridge? the loading dock? accompanying the truck driver on unauthorized visits to the pub?) and a forecast of when it will arrive (Monmonier 76).

Such technologies are being used on a smaller scale to enforce digital Fordism among the binary proletariat in corporate buildings and campuses, with 'smart badges' and

biometric gateways logging an individual's movement across institutional terrain (so many minutes in the conference room, so many minutes in the bathroom or lingering among the *faux* rainforest near the Vice Chancellery) (Bolt).

Bright Lights, Blog City

It is a truth universally acknowledged, at least by right-thinking Foucauldians, that modernity is a matter of coercion and anomie as all that is solid melts into air. If we are living in an age of hypersocialisation and hypercapitalism – movies and friends on tap, along with the panoptic sorting by marketers and pervasive scrutiny by both the 'information state' and public audiences (the million people or one person reading your blog) that is an inevitable accompaniment of the digital cornucopia—we might ask whether everyone is or should be unhappy.

This article began by highlighting traditional responses to the bright lights, brashness and excitement of the big city. One conclusion might be that in 2010 not much has changed. Some people experience ambient information as liberating; others as threatening, productive of physical danger or of a more insidious anomie in which personal identity is blurred by an ineluctable electro-smog. There is disagreement about the professionalism (for which read ethics and inhibitions) of 'citizen media' and about a culture in which, as in the 1920s, audiences believe that they 'own the image' embodying the celebrity or public malefactor. Digital technologies allow you to navigate through the urban maze and allow officials, marketers or the hostile to track you. Those same technologies allow you to subvert both the governmentality and governance. You are free: Be ambient!

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