The Mobile Effect

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In considering the mobile phone I shall here return to a text by Shuhei Hosokawa on an earlier form of mobile media, 'The Walkman Effect'.1 This text, published just a few years after Sony's introduction of the Walkman in 1980, is less about the Walkman as technological artifact than about the emergence of a cultural object at a specific historical moment, with the event of the Walkman - or Walkman as event - and with the kind of spatial and urban strategies it makes possible. In March 2005 Sony Ericsson unveiled the Walkman phone, but my interest is likewise not in the evolution of the mobile as media player or multifunction device.2 Rather, I shall consider Hosokawa's insights into the relationship between the Walkman and the embodiment and context of Walkman users, and how these can help us to account for the way that the mobile phone operates simultaneously as a node within networks and the point of intersection between the virtual space of telecommunications and physical or embodied space. Like Hosokawa, I am interested less in the object in itself, than in the object 'under use'. I shall approach this by drawing upon a consideration of the practice of artists and technologists exploring social and creative applications of mobile technology, as well as upon certain representations of the mobile phone user within popular culture.

The mobile phone enables communication free from physical connections, unfettered by wires and cables. Accordingly, many accounts of the mobile foreground the autonomy of the mobile user and the way the mobile sunders spatial and geographical ties: it extends the workplace to the bus or park bench, expands the web of social relations for young people, stretches the temporal and spatial boundaries of the family unit in the suburbs of England, or enables the rural migrants of China to overcome the distance to the parents left behind. Rather than unique to the mobile phone, this perspective is rather yet another iteration of a standard refrain made in respect of digital and communication media, which are said to render geographical distance or location irrelevant. A particular case is the internet, which is commonly thought of as a place, but a place of a very specific kind: accessed via the platform of a computer terminal by 'going online', it is an indeterminate space in which spatial difference is erased and is experienced as always elsewhere. Like the internet, mobile telephony might be said to be a place out of space and time, a placeless place, where the user is taken to be disconnected from the world around them, and connectivity and mobility to be independent variables, experienced not so much elsewhere as anywhere, or, at least, as far as the network coverage will allow.

Various efforts have been made to refine this picture, highlighting, for example, how mobility should be understood not simply by studying devices or people that move, but rather in terms of a dynamic field of mobile relationships, the kinds of data management that enable a mobile work environment and are a precondition to movement within physical space, or the way the mobile phone creates elastic spatial and temporal relations rather than an abstract mobility. A more stark critique may be found in representations of the mobile user in popular culture. In what has become his trademark routine, the UK comedian Dom Joly walks through public spaces with an oversized inflatable mobile phone shouting 'I am on the train', 'I am in the park', 'I am in a restaurant'. The sketch highlights the way in which the need to locate and navigate - for others or for oneself - while on the move is a part of the everyday experience of the mobile phone. It also underscores the incongruity of the private conversation publicly performed, and, in highlighting the often intrusive and disruptive way

in which the mobile user occupies social space, Joly's sketch neatly punctures the view of the mobile user as autonomous, somehow apart from the environment through which they move, as if sealed from the world by their very mobility.

One context in which the mobile user's occupation of physical and social space is given prominence is within the emerging field of Locative Media. Location-awareness, the technical capacity to locate, has emerged as a key concern across a broad range of contexts, for the routing of calls or the delivery of contextual information – information relevant to that place – across wireless networks. Here the mobility of mobile media, its freedom to roam, paradoxically leads to a reassertion of place and location, which represents a significant departure in the way that mobile media, and the mobile phone in particular, are conventionally viewed. Locative Media foregrounds place and context within social and creative interventions, and explores ways in which the devices people carry, the fabric of the urban environment and even the contours of the Earth may become a digital canvas. Approaches range from user-led or collaborative mapping to using GPS traces within traditional screen-based artistic representations, annotating the city with 'geograffiti', enabling communities to weave local histories through the fabric of the built environment, exploring relationality or embodiment within a location-aware interactive space, and attempts to combine social software with location-based services to create 'social interfaces to places'.[3] Some such projects involve the deployment of a large-scale wireless test-bed, as with Mobile Bristol, Urban Tapestries and Blast Theory's Uncle Roy All Around You.[4] Others such as [murmur] and Area Code involve simple voice or text messages that may be 'placed' and accessed at particular locations, enabling anyone with a phone in their pocket to participate.[5]

Some working within Locative Media contextualise their practice in terms of a convergence of geographical and data space, and as "putting a sense of place back into cyberspace."[6] This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the concept of 'geoannotation', where digital content is assigned spatial coordinates such that it may be accessed from a specific geographical point with an appropriately enabled device.[7] To the extent that Locative Media seeks to make data geographically specific in this way, where we speak of the Any-place of the mobile phone, or of the Non-place of the internet, we might therefore refer to the This-place of Locative Media. And yet this becomes problematic if analysis stops at the point of an abstract positioning that reduces a dynamic relationality between geographical and data space to a correspondence, as if an indexical relationship should imply an identity, which would be to reproduce the autonomy of the mobile user at another level. Accordingly people are increasingly looking beyond the fact of this return to the world, to the nature of the return, and asking what kinds of dynamic relationalities between user and world emerge in the context of this reassertion of location, and how we can move beyond an abstract positioning towards a consideration of the context that the user both occupies and constructs.[8]

It is useful in this light to consider how questions of context and relationality have been approached in respect of other forms of mobile media. Deconstructing the autonomy of the mobile user was the primary concern of Shuhei Hosokawa in 'The Walkman Effect' (1984). Initially, the Walkman would seem a poor point of departure for a consideration of the mobile phone. Both are mobile media, designed to be carried on the body, and used by a single person, but whereas the mobile is oriented to connectivity and communication, the Walkman is oriented towards an individualised listening experience. In this sense, the apparent disconnection with the immediate environment is even greater, and yet Hosokawa is fundamentally interested in deconstructing the apparent disconnection and isolation of the Walkman user. The Walkman listener is 'found in the world of listening to music alone'[9], separated from the world and those around them by the physical membrane of the headphones, occupying a solitary auditory universe. At face value, the Walkman user is isolated and apart from the world, oblivious to that which unfolds around them, creating their own context, one which is complete and closed. And yet Hosokawa questions this autonomy by demonstrating multiple levels upon which their closure and isolation is punctured, and highlighting that the Walkman experience is never hermetically sealed but

'incidentally overlapped by and mixed up with different acts'[10]: walking, eating, drinking, playing, etc.. Just as Locative Media challenges the placelessness of digital media, so Hosokawa sets out to show us how the Walkman experience is intimately connected with the place and context of the user.

What we can say is that there is a distance between the Walkman experience and other actions it is continuous to, a doubling between mobile media and world, between media space and physical space, between a private world and the social environment. Hosokawa identifies a similar phenomenon in the Walkman experience to that played upon in Joly's sketch: the way that the Walkman user occupies two spaces at once, and the discontinuity that results between the individualized listening experience and the social interactions of the listener. But Hosokawa is quick to deconstruct the unity of the Walkman experience and the binary between inside and outside, isolation and connection. He employs Deleuze's theorisation of 'and', which draws on the play between the verb être ('to be') and the conjunction et ('and'), to call attention to the way that and signifies not a determinate state of being but rather a mobile relationality, one that 'puts all into variation, constituting the lines of a generalised chromaticism'.[11] The act of listening to the Walkman is additional to the user's experience of the world, in a way that segues with and extends a series of discontinuous acts. Another example, reminiscent of the Joly sketch, occurs in the TV comedy Nathan Barley by Chris Morris and Charlie Brooker. Here the title character performs a constant monologue in public space by talking into a hands-free set, conversations and actions punctuated by speech and gesticulation that comes from no-where and is seemingly to no-one. This creates an incongruous and discordant commentary that pervades every social space he passes through, one that requires an exceptional intervention, such as when the hands free set is removed by a barber, for it to be interrupted. In the place of Joly's singular intervention here the intervention is persistent and recurring. Where differences arise is at the seams within the connected series, in the pacing of the different acts, in the "stuttering' function of the Deleuzian and'.[12] Furthermore, for Hosokawa such a phenomenon illustrates the kind of 'spatial and urban' strategies available to the user, and in particular the performative strategies for inhabiting urban space users adopt, even if in this case it is a performativity that only serves to confirm that the character will always be a 'Hoxton Twat'.[13]

We see here how meaning arises at the seam between embodied and telecommunications space. And, in emphasising the disjunction and incongruity between mobile user and those around them, both Joly and Morris call attention to the fact that this seam - between the virtual space of telecommunications and embodied, social space - is commonly encountered as disruptive rather than smooth. The "seamfulness" of the mobile experience has been the focus of work by members of the Equator network, in particular Matthew Chalmers at Glasgow University, developer of the Seamful Game.[14] The Telco industry's vision of 'deep networks', where calls and data are routed seamlessly over differing wireless infrastructures, ignores the extent to which loss of signal or difference in resolution is an integral part of the everyday experience of wireless communications. In contrast the Seamful Game harnesses "negative aspects of infrastructure technologies, which are normally concealed and unexplained, and present[s] them as game features" which players can creatively exploit.[15] Here the glitches and idiosyncrasies of the medium can be thought not as imperfections, but as opening possibilities for action for the mobile user. The task becomes to explore how people negotiate these distances, and how they present not so much resistance to some pure or unfettered communication, but rather a point of departure that is both creative and social. After Hosokawa we see that the seams of the mobile experience are many, encountered internally to the medium, between users, and between users and world.

We see here how the distance between mobile media and world or between user and others is not negative but productive, a positive distance, where 'Distance ... is the affirmation of that which it distances'.[16] For Hosokawa it is a distance marked not by a disengagement from the world but by relationality, and it is in this relationality, in the overlapping of

discontinuous spaces, that new kinds of meaning and new kinds of sociality can emerge. Hosokawa offers the example of a boy and a girl at a party, who are too shy to talk and only manage to connect through the mediation of a Walkman. Using two sets of headphones connected to a single source a fleeting link is established, and a communication that cuts across their individual isolation. A listening experience that is private, but shared for that moment between the two, makes possible the communication of difference: 'The happy pair dance to the different music, to the different rhythm'.17 This exceptional case - a transient meeting of private spaces - illustrates for Hosokawa a general rule, namely that the Walkman user is always communicating, but it is communication of a particular kind, one only possible by virtue of the distance and doubling of the Walkman experience, the discontinuity between physical and media space. The Walkman user's isolation represents not a hermetic seal, but rather a membrane through which the world is encountered and the user's relationship to other users and to the world is acted out. The Walkman is simultaneously boundary and interface, modulating the way the world is encountered and making possible encounters of a wholly new kind.

One site where such a phenomenon - meaning produced at the boundary between overlapping but discontinuous domains - may be encountered in mobile communications in the case of the wireless flash mob. In the flash mob phenomenon groups of people mobilised by e-mail or text materialise in a public place, act out according to some loose instructions, and then melt away as quickly as they formed. In the case of Mobile Clubbing participants armed with AA batteries and headphones show up in a pre-arrange place and dance to their favourite tunes.18 While participants in Mobile Clubbing, like Hosokawa's party-goers, listen to a private soundtrack, a similar project, Radio Ballet by the independent radio group LIGNA - an 'exercise in unnecessary loitering' - involves a more choreographed response to a localised broadcast over a free network.19 In each case passersby are confronted by an unexpected, unexplained and seemly spontaneous party, uncertain where the event begins and ends, who is participating and who an innocent bystander. The unwritten rules that compose public space are disrupted and new meanings put into play, creating a site of ambiguity that disrupts the context of familiar actions and where meaning and purpose are uncertain. Mobile Clubbing and Radio Ballet force a reconsideration of the nature of public space and the possibilities for collective experience in wireless environments, and illustrate the process of deconstruction and construction of meaning Hosokawa located in the Walkman experience.

Mobile media has no context proper to it, but equally there is no context that cannot be appropriated by it: 'It decontextualises the given coherence of the city-text, and at the same time, contextualises every situation that seemingly does not cohere with it'.20 The experience of mobile media comes to be seen as a potential site of disruption where the city is remade: 'The Walkman user is able to construct and / or deconstruct the network of urban meaning', thereby 'transforming decisively each spatial signification into something else'.21 This suggests a dynamic relationship between user and world, and Hosokawa draws on Greimas, de Certeau as well as, again, Deleuze to argue that the urban environment is remade by every inhabitant and every walk act. The individual is a part of the environment, and this is a dynamic and cyclical process by which each is transformed, the city, individual, and the individual's frame of reference undergoing mutual revision. The ways that inhabitants interpret the city space opens a plurality of perspectives, and 'the environment [itself] is susceptible to transformation through this act'.22 Hosokawa foreshadows the interest of architects and designers today in mobile and pervasive media, looking at the way in which the city can be rewritten at street level, and how it is open rather than completed by the urbanist's plan. To paraphrase Hosokawa, to think about the mobile is to reflect on the urban itself: the mobile as urban strategy.23

Hosokawa's analysis of mobile media offers one way of approaching the kind of political position opened, or closed, by the mobile. To the extent that the ability of the mobile user to 'figure out a 'short circuit' in the place he is walking around' has a resonance beyond the

purely personal, their engagement in urban space may be seen as a political intervention. For Hosowaka the isolation of the Walkman user serves as a metonym of the atomistic individualism of the 1980s, a relationship which he describes in terms of a non-causal 'positional correspondence'. Likewise, the mobile phone could be taken to stand for the connectedness of contemporary global societies today, whilst also embodying some of their contradictions. One of these is the ambiguity inherent in the self same tracking techniques being used in military surveillance and social projects, within court cases and by artists. Another is the polarisation between the centralized and proprietary model that still structures the Telco industry today, and the (relatively) horizontal and peer-to-peer domain of global protest and free software.24 The uncertain distance inherent in the mobile experience hints at the possibility of a critical perspective on the operations of control in mobile telephony, while the doubling that we have seen to be at play in mobile media helps us understand this ambiguity. Perhaps more significantly, by shifting the focus to minor deviations and low-level interventions, Hosowaka helps us see how the polarisation is encountered on a micropolitical level, in the experience of the mobile user, where a centralised infrastructure is appropriated in decentralised, distributed ways. This can take the form simply of local appropriations of existing technology, or of new technical solutions that enable the centralised networks to be evaded altogether, through ad hoc connections that are not routed through the GSM network, but rather flicker across the surface of network culture. While we can point to overtly political action that exploits the GSM networks, such as the use of text messaging in political protests, of equal interest is the way that such low-level interventions betray an alternative strategy to using communication technology, one that has become mainstream with WLAN in the form of the Free Network movement, but which has been foreclosed with GSM because of the centralised, proprietary and expensive infrastructure involved. One way in which this approach is being successful employed within mobile telephony, if in a fairly basic and circumscribed way, is through the imaginative (mis)use of Bluetooth. One example is the pranksterism of 'Bluejacking', in which unsolicited messages are sent to people's phones.25 Another - less intrusive and in many ways more interesting - example is the way that during the 2004 US election people renamed their device 'Bluetooth Against Bush' and set it to discoverable, so that the new name - and political message - appeared in the Bluetooth logs of any enabled device in the vicinity.26 And finally the Loca project seeks to make visible the otherwise imperceptible infrastructure of synaptic surveillance by 'tracking digital objects through physical space.'27 Some of these projects are playful and look at localised appropriations of space through mobile media, while others are more overtly oppositional, seeking to expose or intervene in the operations of power in mobile telephony. In all of these cases, however, 'The Walkman Effect' forces a consideration of the more subtle affects that play on the boundary of mobile connections, the site at which the meaning of the mobile experience is negotiated and remade.

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[1] Shuhei Hosokawa, 'The Walkman Effect' in *Popular Music Vol.4: Performers & Audiences*, ed. R. Middleton & D. Horn (Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 165-180.

[2] Hosokawa offers an interesting account of how the Walkman emerged through a process of technological *reduction*, and as such exemplifies the inversion of the logic of technological progress: it is 'a cassette recorder *minus* the recording function and the speaker. It is technologically a simpler object. ... [I]t represents functional reduction, technological regression'. See Hosokawa, p. 168.

[3] For an account of different creative and social approaches see Drew Hemment, 'Locative Arts' in *Mobile Histories*, a special issue of *Southern Review* (Forthcoming).

[4] http://urbantapestries.net, http://www.uncleroyallaroundyou.co.uk.

[5] http://murmurtoronto.ca, http://www.areacode.org.uk.

[6] Phrase coined by Cal Henderson, author of the *London Bloggers* tube map (http://www.iamcal.com/misc/londonbloggers_v1/). Cited by Edward Mac Gillavry at the 'Collaborative Cartography' workshop (*Next5Minutes*, Amsterdam, 12th September 2003).

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[7] In the case of *[murmur]* and *Area Code* the method is different but the effect the same. Here the content is not accessed via a location-aware device, instead the information required to access that content (eg. a telephone number) is only made available at that place.

[8] The Joly sketch offers an instance of how an initial statement of *physical* location opens onto an intervention in *social* space, underlining a wider context beyond a simple reading of position.

[9] Hosokawa, p. 167.

[10] Hosokawa, p. 176.

[11] Deleuze and Felix Guattari, p. 124 cited Hosokawa, p. 171.

[12] Hosokawa, p. 176.

[13] More generally it also highlights the way that new kinds of transgression continue to emerge in the use of mobile media, long after the novelty of encountering the Walkman user receded, and what was once experienced as a site of difference and curiosity came to be experienced instead as an irritation and an affront.

[14] http://www.seamful.com/

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaux, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) cited Hosokawa, p. 170.

[17] Hosokawa, p. 170.

[18] http://www.mobile-clubbing.com. See also http://www.futuresonic.com/futuresonic/mobile_connections/.

[19] http://www.ok-centrum.at/english/ausstellungen/open_house/ligna.html.

[20] Hosokawa, p. 171.

[21] Hosokawa, p. 178.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Hosokawa, p. 171 & p. 176.

[24] See Drew Hemment, 'The Telephone Exchange', *Receiver* #11 (Vodafone, 2004). http://www.receiver.vodafone.com/11/articles/06_page01.html

[25] http://www.bluejackq.com

[26] This case is interesting because it uses the inherent surveillance potential of the mobile for grass roots activism, but in a self-disclosure by which surveillance is inverted. http://www.bluetoothusersagainstbush.com/

[27] http://www.loca-lab.org - a project in which the author is involved.