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Hinweis

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Emptiness in Images of Urban Space. Jem Cohen's Film "Chain" and the Concept of "Non-Places"

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"Non-places"

The diagnosis of a western world deeply characterised by mobility seems to be well-nigh trivial: The state of being permanently en-route forms a symbol of late- or post-modern identity. The observation that space at the same time seems to be linked and fragmentised is a commonplace of cultural theory. In the course of this process, so is argued, dichotomies like 'proximity' and 'distance' get under pressure, weak and questionable. In such a way Michel Foucault (1986) alleges that the differentiation of these both poles, whose chaining offers orientation and safety to people, is fundamentally deranged – a consequence of a blurring between spatial entities and the invasion of what he calls the 'inside' by the 'outside'. In succession space seems henceforth to be menacing, unsettling and vexing, feelings of disorientation, even anxiety, diffuse.

French ethnologist Marc Augé (1995) has coined a concept that has become a catchphrase for the changes in perception of spatiality in consequence of the above mentioned developments: the "non-place". "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place", Augé (1995: 77) claims. "Non-places" are emblematic for the post-modern or "supermodernity", Augé argues, they are the "real measure of our time", "one that could be quantified - with the aid of a few conversions between the air, rail and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called 'means of transport' (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks." (1995: 79)

But of what kind are the spaces, where humans situate themselves today – spaces that are solely interstitial places of traffic and transportation? If the transitory space, produced by a social and aesthetic modernity, is actually "invisible", "the spectacle only an idea" (Augé 1995: 104), questions considering representation and politics of visualisation arise.

In his answer to Foucault, Gilles Deleuze (1986) suggests that the visibility of things is no unquestionably given quality sticking to them. In fact it is produced and administered by and subjected to a discursive framing determining what agency belongs to it. Therefore everything visible is a product of visualisation strategies (and the conjugated in-visualisation of something else). The seeable and the sayable are two irreducible forms of knowledge at the same time. The discourse on "non-places" is a product of their visualisation, of the making-visible (and vice versa). But what politic is articulated, when the "non-place" becomes visible?

“Chain”

In his film “Chain” American filmmaker Jem Cohen observes two characters experiencing diverse modes of similar delocalisation. The film can be read as the attempt to conceptualise a heterogeneous world out of shopping malls, theme parks, hotels and airports. But at the same time, these ‘cool’ images that seem so interchangeable at will bear traces and fragments of narrations of the self – images, architectural theorist Anthony Vidler (1992) describes in terms of Sigmund Freud (1999: 227) as “unheimlich”. The uncanny becomes apparent, Vidler (1992: 21) claims, “at empty car parks, in the surroundings of abandoned or seedy shopping malls, at the deserted margins and the surfaces of a post-industrial culture”.

In the form of an essayistic montage “Chain” observes two young women, a Japanese, Tamiko, employee on an incessant business trip, and a destitute American, Amanda, living near a shopping mall in the derelict ruins of abandoned dwellings. Both characters serve as paradigmatic figures contra posed during the film. However most of the time we do not see more than images of parking spaces, approach lanes, motorways, shopping malls and motels. And there is a voice-over commentary, alternately spoken by both protagonists: At one point in the form of an interior monologue, at the other as a secondary staging in the form of a recorded soliloquy. The images “Chain” conceives remind one of the attributes of the “non-places” characterised by Marc Augé. But a further aspect distinctly marks still Jem Cohen’s film: the expression of emptiness – a form of emptiness that can be regarded from two different angles at least.

Emptiness and solitude as medial effects

At first “emptiness” means – in terms of iconology – a certain impression that is an effect resulting from decisions on theme, subject, *mise-en-scène*, montage and narrative structure. “Chain” shows urban outskirts of driveways, arterial roads and industrial estates in form of drive-by-shootings revealing their uniformity and seriality. But these attributions that lead to bleakness and dreariness are an effect of specific medial techniques: like the duration of an unvaried take forming a tension-filled contrast to the marginality of the events shown.

With this emptiness of the images a second form of “emptiness” corresponds on the level of discourse. For example, there is a scene in which Tamiko is stranded and forced to pay her hotel bills on her own since her employer declared himself insolvent. Our understanding of the new situation is provided by a voice-over-narration, while at the level of images we only see the outer forms of an urban environment consisting of industrial estates and traffic facilities. The effect of such a montage: The ongoing existence and working order of traffic remains untouched by the state of its utilising subjects. With this in mind, the impression of emptiness can be understood – figuratively – as the absence of integrating meaning and significance.

Therefore the distinctive tension in “Chain” results from the state of the protagonists on the one hand and the seeable, the visible on the other: A discrepancy, a gap, that lies in the fact that a modern world is focused that found no other representation than the one of traffic and transportation, which, in turn, eludes all ascriptions of meaning and conforms itself to functional acting alone. With its medial techniques of montage “Chain” entwists the pictorial emptiness with the discursive emptiness of meaning. But what consequences might putting figures equipped with the deep structure of characters into traffic have? “Chain” gives an answer by motivating a significant impression of solitude.

At first both Amanda and Tamiko are lonely because they are pictorially isolated, because at no time of the film they engage in interactions with other people and because they are located in a narrative setting that exposes them as lonely. But this experience of solitude, those of the figures as well as those of the spectator – can be brought into line on a larger scale with a discursive framing.

As a matter of fact Marc Augé relates the appearance and the increase of “non-places” to a new experience of solitude being characteristic for supermodernity. Unlike the “anthropological place” “formed by individual identities, [...] the unformulated rules of living know-how” (101), the “non-places” are anonymous and interchangeable. Even though the traveller is “freed from the weight of his luggage and everyday responsibilities” (101), “the non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude” (103).

Jem Cohen’s film “Chain” can be seen as filmic evidence of a canonical appraisal of a society subject to globalisation, in which the “concrete” place gets lost, a society which constitutes itself in permanent traffic, which addresses human beings as traffic participants alone and whose experience is characterised by “solitude” and “emptiness” – A dreary depiction.

Helmuth Plessner’s anthropology of coldness

In 1924, German philosopher Helmuth Plessner (1999) publishes a book. Its title: „The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism”. Its agenda: Finding a possibility for the subject to overwinter in modernity. The aim is to reintegrate the human being by figuratively addressing it as a traffic participant. Plessner adopts a positive attitude towards the lack of inhabitation, mobility, social distance and displacement. He privileges a habitus marked by sharpness of perception, sobriety and realism or “coldness”, as Helmuth Lethen (2002) has suggested.

Plessner’s writing can be localised in a historic discourse, in which ‘society’ and ‘community’ form antagonistic categories. Plessner does not want to overcome the mechanised artificiality of sociality, but rather emphasizes the prospect of a successful conception of the self. His “code of conduct”, as Lethen (2002: 37) puts it, can be described as the attempt to produce certainty of behaviour by learning techniques, “with which people can come close to each other without touching, with which they can diverge without wounding with indifference.” Distance – as Plessner (1999: 39) describes it – becomes a survival strategy of the self in the face of modernity. He believes that “only tense watchfulness and the preparedness to abandon any commitment at any moment ensure mobility.”

This here mentioned mobility is the one of traffic. But what had happened to the civil pathos of traffic, in which “the functionalist perception melts with the lust for urban circulation”? After all, the notion of “everyone is socializing with everyone” was not frightening in the 1920ies. Plessner understands the rationalisation of modern societies and the artificiality of social graces as a chance for creative concepts of the self. But in view of a discourse, in which the “non-place” stands for the dystopy of modern existence at the century’s end – what has happened?

A possible answer to this question shows that in the speaking of the “non-place” the antagonisms of an as historic believed discourse are returning, in which, once more, ‘community’ constitutes the utopian counter project to a plain functionalist ‘society’. Besides,

the images of emptiness and solitude refer to the afflictions of intellectual concepts of identity.

The desire for home

Marc Augé (1995: 94) generates the “non-place” in delimitation from the “anthropological place” and characterises the latter as creating the “organically social”. This ideal of a “organically social” is something that can be found in Jem Cohen’s film, too: In the patterns of the protagonists’ social interaction as well as in the filmic constructions of spatiality. But these inscriptions are written in the optative, they are inscriptions of desire.

What makes Jem Cohen’s figures so conspicuous is the fact they do not act, they simply move, they drift – People, having only a very limited ability to make up their own decisions. This impression is the effect of both narrative disposition and filmic procedures, something that gets quite obvious by looking at a scene, in which we hear the interior monologue of the homeless Amanda. Every day she wanders around, as she tells us, in one of the two malls she can reach by feet. Only when she catches the security guards’ eye she switches to the other location. To disguise herself, she uses a broken mobile phone and mocks conversations. Time and again the film shows her sitting on a bench at the mall. These shots are always the same: From a distance and on the level of iconography the large focal length liberates and dissolves Amanda out of an integrating surrounding. This figure – as such a staging makes obvious – shares no interaction touching personal matters, and even communicating using her telephone is mere simulation. Her solitude is legitimised through the narrative. This narrative enables us to notice that this character has no relationship, no linking to others, because she fell out with her family, and fled from home. But family shapes in Amanda’s narration of self as a vanishing point those ‘community’ whose desire marks the horizon of character concept and narration.

At the time when Augé explicitly uses the term “community” describing an utopia in contrast to the “non-place”, and when “Chain” bewails the loss of family ties, such reactions constitute an antithesis to what Helmuth Plessner claims in his philosophical anthropology. First and foremost Plessner’s project must be seen as an anthropological disquisition, a “code of conduct”, more precisely a “cool conduct” (Lethen 2002). But it might be possible to read it less as an instruction, but as politics, and with this understanding its claim for an affirmation of society’s artificiality could be easily positioned against a film like “Chain” continually asserting, defending and desiring a substance of inwardness. Already in 1903 Georg Simmel (1950: 409), one of the first generation of German sociologists, writes: “The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life.”

People in traffic – An intellectual self-concept

All the deliberations of modern man in traffic share one common concept: There might be no “home” anymore but a desire for home is articulated, in speaking of the “Unheimliche” (Freud 1919), the “Unbehaglichkeit” (Flusser 1997), the “Unzuhausensein” (Heidegger 2001) as well as in the way the protagonists in “Chain” signify their surroundings of motels and shopping malls – “spooky”, “creepy”.

The images “Chain” conceptualises are characterised by a deep contemporaneousness and ambivalence. Being immersed in traffic, being *in transit* seems to be dreaded and desired full of relish. I would like to argue that one particular condition preceding certain modern forms of the sublime lies in the alienation of the passenger of “non-places“, in the asworn recognisance of the momentum of traffic perishing any self-narration. The cultural conception which stands as a trope for this cultural conflict is the one of the *flâneur*. Anthony Vidler describes the figure of the *flâneur* as a try of mastery, as the pursuit to occupy a privileged position even in traffic – that of an observer. Thereby the *flâneur* appears as a figure circulating amongst the urbanely crowds of industrialised, modern cities, pegged into a play of signs, at home in a self-chosen separation and solitude. The *flâneur* had become such a favoured figure because in a zone of the insecure he radiates certainty, Vidler (1992: 22) claims.

Still the conception of an observer is a highly intellectual construction. As one can learn from Helmuth Plessner, traffic does not allow a position of the exterior, or any privileged position at all. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004) criticises the discourse of intellectual “dislocalisation” as what it is: kitsch. “Let, for a start, the warmth sink in, with which the humanities for the last twenty years write and speak about the ‘flâneur’ in the bohemianised version of Walter Benjamin or about the anaemic functionalised ‘observer’ of social systems theorist Niklas Luhmann. Both, Benjamins observer-flâneur and Luhmanns observer (of second and all other orders) are affection initiating figures of self-observation, because intellectuals do not want anything else than that: being marginal. And so with such intensity, that they account marginality as a condition precedent to intellectualism. A notable border to embarrassment is crossed over, when professors in huge numbers mutate to intellectual ‘nomads’”, Gumbrecht claims.

“Non-places” under the condition of mediality

If we consider the existence of modern man as taking place at the “non-place” in traffic – however inconclusive, indiscernible, unseen and ephemeral this sphere turns out to be, its representations will constitute all those “terms, under which the individual imaginary (for example the dream) circulates with the collective imaginary (for example the myth) and fiction“ (Augé 1997: 19). But since traffic as a „non-place“ sums up for ‘anything’ as well as it sums up for ‘nothing’, its representation becomes a field of ascriptions and attributions.

By showing the emptiness of car parks, motels, shopping malls and motorways that can be found in their uniformity anywhere and everywhere, “Chain” possesses a setting that does not refer to a tangible place anymore, but a filmic space alone henceforth. As a matter of fact Jem Cohen combines takes of different locations all over the world to an imagination of a locality solely produced by the formal logic of a synthetic montage. This place is quite simply “no place” at all, since it can be anywhere at the same time.

Under the impression of social developments characterised by seriality and mass production and in the face of a reality where meaning is conceivably a scant resource, a continued assertion of a self-conception of inwardness seems questionable. At this very point the recurring, regressive aspect in speaking of the “non-place” is located. The diagnosis of “Chain” is to that effect general: The uniformity and formatting of modern western societies evokes an experience of reality that no longer has the power to create identity. The impression of uniformity and formatting does not exist *a priori*, but is always the effect of genuine medial operations, a specific adjustment and dressing of the seeable and sayable, though. Mediating

the social upheaval of modernisation, traffic forms in its representations no options for making meaning. On that score the “non-places” are always imaginary spaces of the medial and, especially, of the filmic. The “non-places” of the urban and the filmic are mutually dependent on each other. They are bound to strategies of making visible. They do not merely ‘exist’, but rather are products of image-politics. And in the case of “Chain” these politics are those of emptiness and solitude.

The “non-places” frame the filmic image as a phantasm: What seems to be a “non-place” is an object of desire, which recognises the visible as a medium, a medium of projection, a medium of make-believe and estimation, a medium of identification. On this note, the perceivableness of the “non-place” only exists in the dependency of the visual and the imaginary: With the saying of the “non-place” the visual and the imaginary of the urban are intrinsically tied to each other. This dependency is of symbolic nature: the visual is inseparable from the imaginary.

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