Loose Coexistence: Technologies of Attention in the Age of the Post-Metropolis

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New Technologies of Information and Communication (NTIC) have recently begun to double as technologies of attention, and to determine what could be called a new *attentional regime.* Yet this phenomenon cannot be attributed solely to the fact that the diffusion of temporal objects plays a direct influence on the user-consumers' psyche. The process through which flows of consciousness tend to be synchronized points, at a deeper level, to the spatiotemporal reorganization of the very conditions of attention. Seen through this lens, the sly marketing strategies or simply cynical motivations of the tycoons of the cultural industry are not the main issue. Their ruthless arrogance is only the epiphenomenon of a movement, the leadership of which they lost a long time ago, that marks a profound change in capitalism as a system. Such a change is indeed inseparable from the transformations affecting urban life, or from what is often referred to as the 'post-metropolis.' Our goal in the following is to show that such a change is directly connected to the manner in which configurations of coexistence emerge and are formalized – configurations that, it is argued, are at once more fundamental and more concrete than the amiable discourses praising 'together-ness' or 'communal living.'

Distraction   How can we deal with this issue without being too naïve about the emphatic praise of technological innovation? How can we circumvent ideological pitfalls in order to tackle the underlying aesthetic conditions of coexistence that, being at the heart of the mutations we have just mentioned, shape the ways we feel and think? On this matter, it would be tempting to merely extrapolate a few empirical features borrowed from a spontaneous phenomenology of the alienated or destructured consciousness. For instance, one could emphasize the worrying multiplication of symptoms pointing to a syndrome of generalized attention deficit, mainly among young people: the difficulty to concentrate or sustain continuous attention to keep up with the linear trajectory of a narrative, a demonstration, or any succession of discursive ideas, etcetera. 'Distraction' seems to be the moniker that sums up all the evils associated as a whole with new technologies in audio-visual broadcast, the latest improvements in chat and SMS communication, as well as the waves of multiple flows going through computer screens, cell phones, MP3 players and other forms of 'personal digital assistants.' We are suffering from a new form of 'mass distraction,' or so it would seem. The cause of this *mal d'époque* does not reduce to an external chaos distracting our minds from much more important and necessary chores: it corresponds to a structural transformation, a new regime of attention (and inattention) that is all the more adapted to our technological environment since it is, essentially, induced by it through the massive use of new cognitive prosthetics.

On the whole, there is obviously no objection to this type of diagnostic. It should primarily concern experts in management as they are facing the perverse effects of real-time technology on their employees' productivity. There is no point arguing that the time and effort required to read *Othello* comes nowhere near the level of natural disposition that results from the intensive use of a

cell phone or a video game, or even data mining via Google. However, to simply state the obvious, namely that the time required for reflection and research is incommensurable with the sustained flow of performance and *just in time* logic, does not bring us very far. What is really at stake is to find out which type of skills, which potentials for creativity may lie in this new attention regime and, by the same token, what we can attempt to gain by either reversing some of its vectors or playing them out against one another. YouTube, Facebook, and the innumerable blogs and RSS flows are indeed our new *pharmakon*: in the poison lies the remedy, and it all becomes a question of *composition*. Such is indeed Bernard Stiegler's main purpose in prescribing a 'pharmacology of attention' adjusted to our times.[1]

Granted, the task of composition and, therefore, of critical evaluation, implies that one goes beyond the most obvious effects and after-effects of the industries of distraction in order to uncover the *uses* that makes them so effective. Still, behind the uses of technology, there lie *forms of life*, or to speak more accurately, forms of coexistence, namely modes of circulation and connection that determine the most generic spatiotemporal conditions of individual lives. For NTIC users are far from being 'no-life' zombies, glued to their screens and cut from the surrounding world: most of them do go about cities followed by waves of flows. Needless to say, the spatiotemporal conditions of these innumerable networks include the space of flows woven by the proliferation of communicational prostheses. Among those, one must now include geolocalization tools such as GPS, as well as all kinds of pervasive objects scattered around the urban environment. The gift of ubiquity appears as a dream come true as innumerable interfaces (info stations and boards, wi-fi outlets, webcams, and so forth) locally implement spatially separate and yet simultaneously unfolding processes.

Space of Flows and Simultaneity

This notion of ubiquity requires closer inspection. We cannot be content with such global designations as the 'space' of networks – an expression that often lends support to lamentations about the universal 'enframing' and 'mobilization' of conscience achieved by modern technology. As a matter of fact, the space of networks – or flows – is less unified than what some candidly catastrophist theories would like us to believe.[2] Some of its most peculiar effects are the result of the disparities between individuals, as well as of differences in places within the same territory, differences in mobility, access to networks or connecting speed. These disparities must in turn be considered in relation to the conjugated phenomena of spatial hyper-concentration and dispersion, or else to hybridations that, from a temporal perspective, take place between imposed time and chosen time.[3] To sum things up, distraction always builds over *viscosity*, which involves the notion of a differential. Far from the metaphor of the digital ether, flows are halfway between liquid gas and solid matter, which means that they would not exist without the differentials in mobil-

ity and access, concentration and dispersion, constraint and freedom that make up the spatiotemporal framework of our lives.[4] We believe it is through this angle that we ought to assess the impact of the current artistic practices that are developing around so-called 'locative media' – or, if one prefers, localized or localizing media.[5] We can only hope that the artists who are taking up these new technologies will open up new paths for critical reflection, while laying the ground for a creative reappropriation of geolocalization and real-time techniques. Yet the meaning of these very practices – which will only be examined in the concluding section – cannot be considered apart from the diversity of the material usages that complicate the forms of coexistence attached to the contemporary post-metropolis. For in so far as it involves genuine *practices* of simultaneity, coexistence has now become an issue of both spatial and *temporal* interconnectedness. As such, it cannot be reduced, as Virilio imagined, following in Kant's footsteps,[6] to the optical blinding of instantaneous communication or action at a distance. In other words, the space of coexistence cannot be identified with mere instantaneous space viewed as a transversal slicing of the universe at 'instant t': it cannot be considered apart from the manner in which heterogeneous durations and rhythms connect at the local level.[7] Even geographers, who were believed to be chiefly concerned with spatial notions, are now more inclined to think in terms of timespace.[8]

1 Bernard Stiegler, **Taking Care of Youth and the Generations** (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

2 I am referring here to some of Paul Virilio's most extravagant statements concerning 'real time,' 'ubiquity,' and 'instantaneity.' I have tried to dispel certain confusions surrounding these notions in 'The Compression of the World,' **Art Press** 354 (2009): 39-41.

3 On these issues, see **24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society**, eds. Robert Hassan and Ronal E. Purser (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). On urban spacetime and its relation with new technologies, see also **Cybercities**, ed. Stephen Graham (New York: Routledge, 2004).

4 The paradigm of percolation introduced by Michel Serres can be used as a guide, see Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, **Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time**, translated by R. Lapidus (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995) 58. Cf. Serge Galam, 'Le portable et les autres,' in **Mobilités.net: Villes, transports, technologies face aux nouvelles mobilités**, eds. Daniel Kaplan and Hubert Lafont (Paris: LGDJ, 2004), 348.

5 For examples, one may visit the following website: 'We Make Money Not Art' (http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/), under 'locative.'

6 The theme of coexistence or community is the nerve of 'the third analogy of experience' as presented in the analytics of principles in Kant's **Critique of Pure Reason**: although the analysis is conducted along the lines of the temporal form (which explains the emphasis placed on the notion of simultaneity), coexistence ends up being defined through the concept of reciprocal action, which provides – in accordance with the framework of Newtonian physics – a first metaphysical characterization of physical **space** as the locus of 'community' or instantaneous interaction.

7 This, by the way, is exactly what is at stake in Bergson's confrontation with relativity. See Henri Bergson, **Durée et Simultanéité** (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009 [1922]), translated as **Duration and Simultaneity** (1965). Note that video art deals with the same issue according to its own means when it provides montages of movements or fluxes that are the spatial expression of so many **local durations** (what physicians would call 'proper times.') Some of Mark Lewis' work – such as **Airport** (2003) or **Downtown Tilt** (2005), featuring barely perceptible movements – result in the subtle composition of spacetimes interlocking with each another in the way animal **Umwelts** are described by ethnologist Jakob von Uexküll. If the relative nature of simultaneity (see below) prevents us from gathering these local durations in a single, encompassing space, the only way to go is through local connections operating from point to point.

8 See Doreen Massey, 'Space-Time, "Science" and the Relationship between Physical Geography and Human Geography,' **Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers** 3

As for attention, here is the idea that guides us: the attentional apparatus encapsulated by the concept of distraction is better determined, and also more capable of initiating, critical operations when considered in relation to the spatiotemporal configuration manifested by the embedding of NTIC-connected activities within the real environment where everyone finds their bearings. Remarkably enough, most of the time, attention scatters without dislocating. This amazing property of consciousness cannot be explained by merely referring to the 'plasticity' of the human mind. Without denying the effects of maladaptation or relative destructuration induced by attention technologies, it is important to understand what is being created there by circumscribing more closely their operational potential. When it comes to technologies of simultaneity or action at a distance, there is no doubt that the reason why attention manages split ('split attention') in an effort to follow, in parallel or alternation, a plethora of sources of stimuli or data through fast oscillations of consciousness, is because it is capable of *setting up its own dispersion* on various levels by distributing itself in embedded space-time sequences. When it comes to a new regime of attention, what is at stake is not so much the dizziness or vertigo that may accompany sensorial hyperstimulation or informational saturation, as this higher-level skill that enables us to articulate various spatiotemporal frameworks of experience – these frameworks being themselves inseparable from the actual relations that make them up. 'Split' or 'distributed' attention is split or distributed among distinct planes of composition which it actively sustains, rather than between bursting fluxes of impressions received in a state of shock or sheer passivity. Only in cases of extreme perceptual disorganization can the sensorial input be compared to parallel, disconnected series of external stimuli.

Distraction as a Skill: Dispersed Attention, Diffuse Attention

In this respect, we need to keep in mind that Walter Benjamin's use of the notion of 'distraction' already pointed to something utterly different from the mechanical after-effect of an intensification of nervous life induced by the new urban environment. Turning back to his analyses will allow us to clarify certain points about attention, while assessing how remote we are – nearly a century – from the early stages of the issue.

Like Simmel, Kracauer and a few others, Benjamin believed in the themes of *shock* and *fragmentation*, two recurrent perspectives on city life. With the Berlin of the 1920s in mind, Kracauer writes that the city is 'the locus of a life that has been sucked dry of its substance, that is empty like a white metal tin and that lacks inner connection [*Statt des innerlichen Zusammengangs*] and is instead made of isolated events that assemble in a kaleidoscopic manner in a series of ever renewed images.'[9]

He further writes: 'Whoever lives in Berlin long enough ends up not knowing

where he is truly from. His existence is no longer shaped like a line but like a juxtaposition of dots.'[10] Referring to Baudelaire's image of the *flâneur* built around 'his frequent contact with enormous cities' and 'the junction of their innumerable connections,'[11] Benjamin similarly refers to a perpetually titillated consciousness, 'one that has to be alert as a screen against stimuli,' forced as it is to be 'on the watch' at all times in order to avoid blows, 'to parry the shocks.'[12] Perhaps the man who avoids blows is most often prone to the discontinuous exercise of automatic activity, soliciting a new regime for memory. Benjamin has explored this aspect of the 'shock experience,' drawing from Bergson and Proust. What concerns us here is the fact that sensorial hyperstimulation and the ensuing state of shock usually translate into a form of psychic depression doubled with spatiotemporal disorientation.

Already Simmel insisted on the direct correlation between hyperesthesia and 'lassitude,' resulting, in this case, in the dulling of sensitive skills. Neurasthenia, a typical theme of the era, naturally comes to mind, and so does the state of catatonia to which hyperstimulation might lead in some subjects. Yet, this phenomenon appears in its ordinary state through the crisis of the forms of spatiotemporal coordination. The superposition of traditional frames of reference (those of the 'city in the process of its disappearance'[13]) with new frames, the simultaneous presence of the horse-drawn carriage, streetcar, and automobile, make the simple act of crossing a street already difficult.[14] This is an obvious instance of the phenomenon of viscosity: the coexistence of heterogeneous speeds within the same traffic space commands caution at any time. The flexibility and mobility of lifestyles is the source of new tensions, as the multiplication of urban rhythms and spacetimes requires increased coordination, synchronization, exactness, and punctuality.[15] Thus, uniform and universal 'clock time' – the time of clocks distributed all over the city space – becomes the symbol of a generalized rationalization of human conducts adjusted to the demands of mechanized production. This rationalizing process is all the more intrusive as it takes place at the

(1999). See also **Timespace: Geographies of Temporality**, eds. John May and Nigel Thrift (London: Routledge, 2001). On this issue, there exists a specific connection between recent conceptual shifts in geography and the reflection conducted by some philosophers of science on the physical notion of spacetime: see Milic Capek, 'Time-Space Rather than Space-Time,' in **The New Aspects of Time: Its Continuity and Novelties** (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academics Pub., 1991).
9 'Ein Film,' originally published in **Frankfurter Zeitung**, 4 February 1925, reproduced in Siegfried Kracauer, **Kleine Schriften zum Film, 1921-1927** (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004), quoted by Stéphane Füzesséry and Philippe Simay (eds.) in **Le Choc des métropoles** (Paris: Editions de l'éclat, 2008), 14.
10 'Wiederholung,' quoted in ibid., 37.
11 Charles Baudelaire, 'To Arsène Houssaye,' in **The Prose Poems**, translated by R. Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 30.
12 'Une conscience perpétuellement aux aguets,' Benjamin writes, describing 'l'homme qui pare aux chocs.' The quotes are from 'A propos de quelques motifs baudelairiens,' in Walter Benjamin, **Ecrits français** (Paris: Gallimard, 1991, coll. 'Folio,'), 317, and 'On some motifs in Baudelaire,' in **Illuminations**, translated by H. Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 163.
13 Walter Benjamin, 'Notes sur les **Tableaux parisiens** de Baudelaire,' in **Ecrits français**, 305.
14 Füzesséry and Simay, **Le Choc des métropoles**, 33.
15 Cf. Georg Simmel, **Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben** (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006), translated as 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' in **On The Sociology of Georg Simmel**, ed. K. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950), 412-13.

the very moment when the spacetime of functions and uses looks more fragmented than ever by the multiplied functions and possibilities of interaction offered by a metropolis that apparently never sleeps. In this respect at least, it is obvious that we are no longer living in the same world: the temporality of 'network space' is that of a generalized *asynchronicity* (however coordinated or connected) that has definitely shattered the rigid frameworks of universal and linear time.[16]

What makes Benjamin's writings especially topical, however, is the following: beyond the automated response triggered in the hyperstimulated urban subject, 'parrying the shocks' can also take a positive and potentially emancipating turn, provided that one can see in it a capacity to develop new perceptive skills. This is how one ought to consider the themes of distraction and fantasy, as well as the figures of the *blasé* and the *flâneur* which echo – or maybe act as a counterpoint to – the both explosive and cruel nature of urban experience in the context of the modern metropolis. Benjamin suggests that such 'urban skills'[17] can translate as a 'truly political expertise.'[18] In this perspective, the incapacity of the urban wanderer to pay attention to solicitations from the outside expresses a power for *indifference*. 'If you head towards the train station through Friedrichstrasse, you can see the powerful locomotive of an express train that is overhanging above…. Is it a hit among the crowd? No, no one notices it. Coffee shops, shop windows, women, self-serve buffets, newspaper headlines, neon signs, policemen, omnibuses, music-hall pictures, beggars – all these impressions at human eye's level – are too strong stimuli for the passers-by to apprehend properly this form popping up in the distance.'[19] Sociologist Isaac Joseph reminds us that, overall, passers-by are rarely faced with the 'otherness' of others. This is no reason, however, for overemphasizing the idea of atomized individuals lost in anonymous crowds, locked up in their own thoughts as if in a bubble. The truth is that passers-by deal with 'anybody' (*tout un chacun*), whether it is a mere silhouette or a 'mobile unity' in movement (*unité véhiculaire*) offered to a non-focused attention, capable of obliterating sequences of sensations that are of neither concern nor interest.[20]

Such a filtering or screening of the perceptual field, maintaining in a state of indifferentiation whole slices of the urban environment,[21] is utterly ambivalent. Thanks to the works of experimental psychology, it has been known since the end of the nineteenth-century that focused attention, conceived as active conduct, results in a reduction in the perceptual field. John Dewey, among others, rightly insisted on this point: the intensification of perception on a specific point in perceived space presupposes the *anesthesia* of peripheral zones,[22] so much so that any process involving attention also involves an element of distraction. Conversely, any distraction can engender an increase in attention, provided that it is coupled with shock. Therein lies the dialectic nature of the filmic image. As Benjamin

writes: 'The shock effect of the film … like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind.'[23]

While Kracauer still links distraction to the simulacrum of the entertainment industry (a real *Zerstreuungsfabrik*, or entertainment factory[24]), it is quite clear that Benjamin holds a radically different view on its meaning. Distraction no longer consists merely of a way to become immunized from the traumatizing effect of shock. It also serves as an 'apprenticeship,' or a 'training' for 'reception in a state of distraction.'[25] With cinema as its corollary, and contemporary with experiments by Haussmann or Moholy-Nagy, it appears not only as an essential prerequisite for acquiring and owning skills in general,[26] but more importantly as a reflexive skill of a specific genre. There is, in this respect, a true homology between the spatiotemporal experience freed by cinema and the spatiotemporal experience of the city and its architecture: 'Only film commands optical approaches to the essence of the city, such as conducting the motorist into the new centre.'[27] So says Benjamin who, we know, dreamt of a movie based on the map of Paris.[28] Yet what really sets cinema apart from other forms of art is not the fact that it conjures up the 'dynamite of tenths of seconds' in order to 'blow up' the 'carceral setting' of modern life along with its offices, stations, factories, and furnished efficiencies; it is not chiefly its capacity to deconstruct the gloomy functional organization of modern life and denounce its violence through the surgical scrutiny of

16 Cf. Mike Crang, 'Speed = Distance / Time: Chronotopographies of Action' in Hassan and Purser, **24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society**, 51.

17 Füzesséry and Simay, **Le Choc des métropoles**, 39.

18 Ibid., 50.

19 'Lokomotive über der Friedrichstraße,' originally published in **Frankfurter Zeitung**, 28 January 1933, quoted from Siefried Kracauer, **Straßen in Berlin und anderswo** (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009), 43.

20 Isaac Joseph, **L'Athlète moral et l'enquêteur modeste** (Paris: Economica, 2007), 311-2.

21 Cf. what Simmel says about the 'blasé attitude' and the 'blunting of discrimination,' the 'discoloration' or 'hollowing out' of experience it involves (in 'The Metropolis and Mental Life,' 413-5).

22 Cf. Jonathan Crary, **Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture** (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 24.

23 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,' in **Illuminations**, 238.

24 See 'Cult of Distraction,' in Siegfried Kracauer, **The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays**, translated and edited by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 323-8.

25 Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,' 240.

26 'The distracted person, too, can form habits. More, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a matter of habit. Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception.' (Ibid.)

27 Walter Benjamin, **One-Way Street and Other Writings**, translated by E. Jephcott and K. Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), 298. Quoted by Graeme Gilloch in 'Urban Optics: Film, Phantasmagoria and the City in Benjamin and Kracauer,' **New Formations**, special issue on Siegfried Kracauer, 61 (2007), 118.

28 'Couldn't an exciting film be made from the map of Paris? From the unfolding of its various aspects in temporal succession? From the compression of a centuries-long movement of streets, boulevards, arcades, and squares into the space of half an hour? And does the flâneur do anything different?' Walter Benjamin, **The Arcades Project**, translated by H. Eiland and K. Mclaughlin (Cambridge, MA: 1999), 83.

close-ups and slow motions, the critical montage of debris and fragments. The proper function of cinema is not to double the optical dazzle of urban life either; it is not to provide, on the glimmering surface of the screen, the optical hit-and-run that will act as a compensatory *ersatz* for the shock or vertigo experienced in the streets of the metropolis.[29] What makes cinema so special is that its distracting factors concurrently call for heightened attention, a form of vigilance that brings about the likelihood of a new *disposition* and indeed of a new *taste* for anything urban.

Thus, editing procedures such as montage, superimposition, and cross sections (*querschnitt*)[30] that have become staples in the film industry, translate in their own way the emergence of a new *perception apparatus* capable of integrating and surpassing the traumatic dimension of the shock, as well as the threat of disruption borne by the swirl of sensations which, whether as signs or, even more often, as mere signals, end up saturating the visual and auditory fields of urban subjects.[31] Still, what this city/cinema homology operates, by capturing the alert reverie that is typical of the *flâneur*, eventually amounts to a *depsychologization* of the very concept of distraction, which thus becomes available as a genuine operator for perception. The experimental approach to 'reception in distraction' results in reversing the common relation between attention and distraction. As Graeme Gilloch writes:

> Distraction refers not to the inability to concentrate, to mere inattention *per se*, but rather involves attention directed elsewhere, a concern with the peripheral, marginal, and neglected. Conceived in this way, distraction signals an openness to contingency and happenstance, a penchant for the diffuse and dispersed. It is a form of accomplishment rather than a failing. Distraction, like losing oneself in a city, is a skill to be learned and honed, it requires that time spent on the 'training ground'.[32]

In other terms, distraction does not merely stand for the element of anesthesia necessary for any effort to focus; it now signals a lateral opening of the perceptual field that is capable of embracing singularities as such. Distraction is no longer basic inattention; it is not the absent, scattered, or disseminated attention of a mind unable to concentrate. It is the diffused or floating attention of a mind that actually refuses to focus, so as to make itself receptive to the occurrences happening on the surface of the most familiar urban weave; and to let emerge, through an almost tactile apprehension of the glittering visual space,[33] happenings that jut out from the cover of perceptive habits. It is thus reasonable to hope that the man of the metropolis, 'spiritually homeless' as Kracauer phrased it, can again be *moved* by things in a lateral and peripheral relationship with an enveloping environment.[34]

Post-Metropolis and Distributed Attention   In the context of the contemporary *post*-metropolis however, the problems raised by Benjamin require that we turn to a third definition of distraction – or distracted attention. Cities have indeed changed; they might already be things of the past. For one thing, the very idea of an urban *form* becomes problematic in a way unfathomable to Kracauer or Benjamin. The erosion of urban space, both concentrated and spread out on larger and larger territories; the tendentious blurring of traditional distinctions between centers and peripheries; the multiplication and densification of networks that support its activity; all these factors make it more and more difficult, even from a theoretical standpoint, to assign a *form* to the city. If it has now become impossible to 'read' a city, it is due to a radical turn that goes beyond the dizzying experience of the passer-by submerged by the continuous flow of Potsdamerplatz. The issue here is that of urban form as such, a form that no cross section can totalize and represent as a simultaneous whole, to the extent that 'instantaneity' – despite all the fuss about telepresence and ubiquity – only survives as a simulacrum. The emergence of this 'nonplace urban realm,' as Melvin Webber had it, is one of the reasons why Benjamin's project of a film based on the Paris map is, more than ever, relevant. To a certain extent, Bruno Latour carried out this idea with *Paris ville invisible*. This book, an illustrated meditation on the idea of the network-city made of a collage of texts and images (photographs, maps, diagrams), can be read as Latour's updated version of *The Arcades Project*.[35]

29 Posters, signs and billboards: fashioned for the 'mercantile gaze,' the city, Benjamin writes, 'hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen.' 'One-Way Street,' in **One-Way Street and Other Writings**, 85.
30 See what Kracauer says about 'cross sections' (**querschnitt**) in Walter Ruttman's symphonic depiction of Berlin: **From Caligari to Hitler** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 182-5.
31 See **Berlin, Symphony of a Great City** by Walter Ruttmann (1927) and **Man with a Movie Camera** by Dziga Vertov (1929). Should one search for the figuration of contemporary city or post-metropolis, they would need to turn to films or TV series the topic of which is not the city **per se**: from **Taxi Driver** to **Lost in Translation**, from **Collateral** and **The Wire** to **24**. On this last example, see my article '**24 ou l'art du contrôle**,' **Trafic** 68 (2008), republished in **Faux Raccords: la coexistence des images** (Arles: Actes Sud, 2010).
32 Gilloch, 'Urban Optics: Film, Phantasmagoria and the City in Benjamin and Kracauer,' 129. See Graeme Gilloch, **Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations**, (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 189-93.
33 Benjamin speaks of a 'tactile appropriation' in 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,' in **Illuminations**, 240.
34 Further development of such issues can be found in Deleuze's evocation of the 'brain-city' (**ville-cerveau**), in relation to the transformations in cinematic imagery induced by digital media. See 'Letter to Serge Daney,' in **Negociations** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 76-8. The projection of city lights in motion onto the car's windshield in **Taxi Driver** is an allegory of the switch from the aesthetics of shock to what could be called an aesthetics of hypnosis or free-floating attention. See Dork Zabunyan, 'The Image beyond the Shock Wave,' **Art Press** 354 (2009), 43-6.
35 Bruno Latour and Emile Hermant, **Paris ville invisible** (Paris/Le Plessis-Robinson: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 1998). English translation available on http://www.bruno-latour.fr/virtual/index.html. Latour's metaphor of the urban 'plasma' is strangely reminiscent of Benjamin's description of Baudelairian Paris as 'a submerged city, more submarine than subterranean,' see Walter Benjamin, **Reflections**, translated by E. Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 157. But Latour's point is precisely that we should not expect too much from such blanket metaphors: there are only **local** projections of the city, which themselves function as new mediations in the network. Every panoptic view is, in the end, an 'oligoptic.'

The perspective upon which such questions are based can no longer be that of a Baudelairian wanderer or his Berlin-born avatar. We have moved away from the aesthetics of shock. To begin with, the urban man is no longer a pedestrian. In that respect, most derivative practices – in the sense of the situationist *dérive* – envisioned during the twentieth century still retain in them, whether they want to or not, something of the first experience of the urban shock: they offer creative – if somewhat anachronistic – counter responses to a type of urban experience that is not fundamentally different from Baudelaire's. What situationists, like surrealists before them, mostly lacked, and what still represents a challenge to some of their contemporary counterparts (such as Stalker or Hendrik Sturm), is the automobile. Let's hypothesize: given that the topology and dynamics of the city are deeply configured by circulation networks, an artistic experiment adjusted to the dimensions of the contemporary metropolis, to its spread and tendantial dispersion (*urban sprawl, città diffusa, Zwischenstadt,* etcetera), is bound to focus, sooner or later, on the urban flows and trajectories themselves. It then becomes necessary to go beyond a certain speed limit, which does not mean, of course, that one is doomed neither to ride incredibly long routes, nor to move around simply by car. The point is rather that even the walking tours favored by most contemporary artists-wanderers will bear meaning so far as they are likely to introduce a difference within the 'speed space' of the city. Such a speed space, by the way, does not reduce to the trajectories traced by physical bodies (pedestrians, cars, goods); it also includes all kinds of digital flows. This is why the use of digital prostheses will most often suffice when it comes to capturing an experience of urban space (*ubicity* as we sometimes read) that is no longer separable from the intensive use of information and communication technologies. Portative or 'pervasive' devices, combining real-time information and geolocalization, actively participate in the reconfigurations of urban form, in addition to the morphological transformations that affect territories, as well as to the circulation network and the physical conveyers (automobile, public transportation) that ensure the mobility of people and goods. These technologies are of course technologies of control, but it is mainly as attention technologies that they are of interest to us. As such, they set up a *contrapuntal* perception of the city, drawing from all possibilities of spatiotemporal short circuits, shortcuts, and compressions engendered by electromagnetic transmission. On this issue, prophets of ubiquity proceeded too fast: blinding themselves with the mirage of real time and telepresence, they never were in a position to perceive distraction in any other way than as a giddy consciousness bombarded with signals transmitted at infinite speed. This is why they are of no real help today in the fine tuning necessary to solve the various issues surrounding noo-technologies.

The third form of attention to which we alluded above is that of dissociated attention, or to speak more accurately, *distributed* attention.[36] Distributed atten-

tion is neither scattered attention nor diffused attention. It better suits the new figure of the *flâneur* emerging from the context of ubiquitous technologies. We have already pointed out its formal characteristics: attention is distributed along several tracks, several levels as it were, that work as many planes of organization of spatiotemporal experience. If we had to single out one cinematic technique that seems well adjusted to this new attention regime, we would need to turn to cross-cut editing rather than to the cross-section image favored by Ruttman or Vertov. This being said, distributed attention seems to accomplish what cinema can itself barely emulate on its own without resorting to artificious means, namely the *simultaneous* capture of several shots and apparently incompatible – or at least disjoined – frames of reference. Split-screens exhibiting simultaneous sequences in parallel can only provide an awkward and, ultimately, too literal illustration of attention's propensity to distribute itself in order to operate, in the same way neuronal networks are said to, through 'parallel processing.'

Dissociation, or bisociation, as Arthur Koestler put it,[37] might be the origin of all creative process. Bergson, in a way, anticipated this concept in his article 'Intellectual Effort,'[38] in which he stressed how global restructurations were solicited by the intensive circulation among heterogeneous planes of consciousness, and how they each time solicited a specific degree of tension of the mind. The study of risk management techniques, at the level of structures such as the 'control and command' unit of an underground railway system reveals, through a different angle, the values of distributed attention. Isaac Joseph's analysis is quite enlightening: in the absence of any hierarchical chain of command or centralized structure, the working team's goal is to coordinate localized perspectives overlapping each other. It is 'a complex and irregular process in which the agents' attention constantly oscillates, as a pedestrian walking, between "focused attention" and "distributed attention".'[39] No rigorously appointed stations, but polyvalent skills and scattered working areas functioning as knots connected to a number of different networks. No 'just in time,' but the alternation of moments of heightened vigilance and moments of sleep – that is, wait and active reserve. Focused attention, the intensive use of monitoring screens and communication tools needed for the conduct of some urgent tasks, share the same background of mobile co-presence: a field of virtual visibility, of evenly hovering or suspended attention. To be on the watch is to pay lateral attention to what is happening on the side of a main activity – in the fringes, to use one of William James' gimmicks. As a matter of fact, improvised cooperative chains often operate along weak lines or links, building marginal or peripheral bridges between moving poles. The way the

36 Although fascinated with the McLuhanian concept of the 'global village,' Glenn Gould was fully aware of the experimental potential to be found in new distance technologies. The pianist's reflections on divided attention and the notion of environmental music constitute both a precious resource and an antidote to catastrophism. They are indebted to his cumulative experience in media (radio, telephone) and (peri-urban) car driving. See for this matter my article, 'La coupe, l'écran, la trame: dispositifs et musique d'environnement selon Glenn Gould,' **Cahiers de médiologie** 18 (2004). Cf. Stiegler, **Taking Care of Youth and the Generations**, chapter 5, §25.
37 See Arthur Koestler, **The Act of Creation** (London: Hutchinson Press, 1964).
38 See Henri Bergson, **Mind-Energy**, translated by H.W. Carr (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1920), 186-230.
39 Joseph, **L'Athlète moral et l'enquêteur modeste**, 377.

group apprehends itself as a collective has to do with a global vigilance that the English term 'awareness' captures more accurately than the French *attention*.

What is required is a form of 'parallel thinking and perception' by which one may at any time distinguish between and operate on several planes of simultaneous activity.[40] There is no doubt that such a non-hierarchical management of activity corresponds to the specific regime of governance that Agamben, in the footsteps of Foucault, identifies as a 'control' regime distinct from that of 'disciplinary' societies.[41] The question is to know whether the skills developed in this context can be moved to new terrains in a creative way.

Urban Form   In order to better lay the groundwork for this program, let us review the terms in which we have formulated the issue of coexistence so far. This issue, as we conceive of it, originates at the crossroads of three distinct yet intricately woven lines. Our discussion needs to cover: 1) the general issue of urban form as such; 2) the massive phenomenon of the diffusion of telecommunication technologies adjusted to the forms of contemporary mobility; and 3) a new attention regime, that of distributed attention, itself inseparable from a group of procedures typical of 'societies of control.'

How do these lines communicate within the same problematic framework? The answer appears more clearly once we move deeper into the abstract level and ponder for a while on the concept that underlies all the above issues, namely, that of simultaneity. In this regard, we can turn toward Henri Lefebvre and his explanation that the urban form is that of a determined *spatiotemporal unity*. The problem is quite simple: What is it that makes us think of Paris, Los Angeles, Shanghaï or Tehran as so many individualized cities? What does it take for a city to be identified as an individual, apart from the linguistic, political, or administrative uses that give it a place in our system of representations? If urban form is definitely a matter of spatiotemporal unity, how is this unity to be regarded? What makes it possible to identify the process of spatiotemporal unification – if not the spacetime – that is specific to a given city? The answer that Lefebvre provides is quite straightforward: Whatever the case may be, the essence of urban form is simultaneity.[42] This statement needs to be understood in the most general sense, to the extent that the urban realm defines a form of experience in itself, involving the simultaneity of events, perceptions and elements of a concrete whole in the 'real.'[43] From a social perspective though, simultaneity also means 'gathering.' There should be no reluctance to give back to the term its generic meaning as 'crowd gathering' or 'demonstration.' It is not by mere chance that cities have become the cradle of revolutions – or more recently, 'flashmobs.'

Viewing urban form as a form of simultaneity allows us to view the issue of urban sprawl and the diffused city along new lines. We briefly alluded earlier to the fact that the paradox of contemporary cities lies in the double tendency to intensification and dispersion, to densification and scattering of relations of simultaneity between the events that punctuate the lives of numerous individuals. On the one hand, urban life is synonymous with an increase in the opportunities to meet and congregate. On the other it is synonymous with dispersion: division at work, segregation between social groups, and material or spiritual separations of all kinds make up its weave. What is remarkable is that far from objecting to the idea of simultaneity, the contradiction that often gets pointed out between these two tendencies has now become an operating condition of urban form. Indeed, 'these dispersions,' as Lefebvre explains, 'can only be conceived or appreciated by reference to the form of simultaneity. Without this form, dispersion and separation are purely and simply glimpsed, accepted, confirmed as facts.'[44]

It is indeed through this constitutive tension that urban form can start to identify determined *contents*, thus ceasing to appear to be the generalization of some global empirical fact, a sociological or morphological feature arbitrarily selected as 'significant' (for instance, the city as a place where power and industrial production are concentrated). Lefebvre's reading of Hegel is correct: true content does not stand to form in an external relationship; the former is not submitted to the latter the way the specific is to the general. Form is indeed the very movement through which the dispersion of contents contradicts the formal unification operated within the scheme of simultaneity.[45] Thus the challenge of the urban amounts to coming to grips with *a dispersed unification or totalization*. This is the reason why it calls upon philosophical reflection as much as sociological field work. Concentrated, and therefore constantly distracted: such are the characteristics of the contemporary metropolis or post-metropolis, reflecting on its own scale the distributed attention of consciousness.

This being said, it is still possible to view this process from a strictly morphological perspective. The erosion of the urban fiber as seen in the phenomenon of sprawl is a good example of the double movement of concentration and spreading encapsulated in the issue of dispersed unification. Nevertheless, it only points to one of its possible dimensions. The same could be said of the acceleration of exchanges and flows, the corollary of which is, as we know, the creation of enclaves, ghettos and other types of gated communities. Lieven De Cauter's critical response to the theme of the 'generic city' elaborated by Koolhaas takes account of this dialectic in its own fashion:[46] as the city spreads its uniformed network in all directions, alveoli and capsules multiply so as to

40 Ibid., 383.
41 This is most clearly illustrated in a series such as **24**, in which multiple decision-making and action protocols are staged and in which leading roles are given to the telecommunication and geolocalization tools and equipment. Cf. '**24** ou l'art du contrôle.'
42 Henri Lefebvre, **Writings on Cities**, edited and translated by E. Kofman and E. Lebas (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 138. See Henri Lefebvre, **The Urban Revolution**, translated by R. Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 118-19; **The Production of Space**, translated by D. Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 101.
43 Ibid., 138.
44 Ibid.
45 'Movement in its emergence reveals a hidden movement, the dialectical (conflictual) movement of urban content and urban form: the problematic. The form in which this problematic is inscribed raises questions which are a part of it.' (Ibid., revised translation).
46 Lieven De Cauter, **The Capsular Civilization** (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005).

recreate, at the local level, artificial and controlled atmospheres that clash with liberal ideology and its sanctified celebration of the universal circulation of flows. Behind all these examples and analyses there lies, however, a core issue, of which the specific spatial practices just mentioned are only local projections. We need to reconsider the principle guiding these practices,

so as to resist the temptation of viewing them as governed by some totalizing abstraction such as 'social space.'[47] For it is an illusion to think of social space as a sort of common framework or universal container.[48] The truth is that there is no absolute space left, instead there is a seemingly infinite set of moving reference frames. Reflection on urban form is now at the same stage physics was at a century ago after Einstein, in a decisive gesture, decided not to refer movements to an all-embracing motionless ether and, instead, to resort to the laws of spatio-temporal perspective that make it possible to shift from one system of reference to another.[49]

Conclusion: The Prospects of 'Locative Media'

It is not necessary to know much about physics to acknowledge that distance communication technologies and their electromagnetic infrastructure play an active part in the minute redefinition of the conditions of lived simultaneity. Their role in this regard is indeed fundamental, owing to the gap introduced in our general world-view by what one may call the locality principle, that is, the principle exemplified by the local – one step at a time – propagation of signals traveling in space at a necessarily *finite* speed (indicated by the symbol c in the fundamental equations of electromagnetism). Granted, the Einsteinian concept of 'relativity of simultaneity,' according to which two events that are simultaneous in a given spatiotemporal perspective cease to be so in another, has no sort of direct impact at the scale where human actions come into play. For all practical purposes, 'real time' as we know it provides an acceptable equivalent for instantaneous communication. It all seems as if distance technologies achieved instant communication, thus preserving the deeply ingrained intuition of absolute simultaneity. Things are quite different, however, from the conceptual point of view required by the task of developing a global representation of the space of flows to which cities eventually amount. The principle of locality indeed forces us to renounce the classical image of a spacetime that would somewhat be obtained by piling slices of the universe on top of each other, each slice being cut at a particular instant within the universal flow. There is no means to unify space at once by magically sidestepping distances: there is no such thing at instantaneous action or connection at a distance. Reality is more complex, connections always take place one step at a time. What distinguishes the relativist spacetime from Galilean or Newtonian spacetimes is the fact that it integrates within the very unity of its form the inevitable breaks in simultaneity, desynchronizations and phase shifts induced by the coupling of locality (finite speeds) and relativity (systems of reference in relative motion).

As for distributed attention, relayed as it is by new technologies of simultaneity, it will become more capable to liberate new powers if it is actively cultivated as a *pragmatic* of distance connections. It is a matter of becoming more sensitive to the singularities emerging in the fringes or the interstices of the spacetimes within which we circulate and which we occupy, either simultaneously or alternatively, wavering quickly between the two. Rather than rejoicing over the exhilarating prospects of real time and instantaneity, rather than feeding on the illusion of a panoptic standpoint that would encompass at once the extended diversity of the processes and durations of the world or the city, we should look everywhere for the *jump cuts* that may give us a concrete grasp on the fragmenting totality, or fragmented totalization that makes the urban form: compression and dilatation of time and space, interference or congestion effects, delays, latencies, and falling in and out of rhythm due to differentials in speed …[50] In this regard, the practices claiming an artistic appropriation of 'locative media' point to new directions, although they seem to be largely dominated by the ideology of instantaneity – even when they indulge in the celebration of local, embodied co-existence. Let us conclude with a few remarks on this rapidly developing trend among media artists.

Any digitalized information system is referred to as *locative media,* as long as it is registered at the local level within a physical space. Tagged with geographic coordinates, such a system may be traced in real time. The art of locative (digital and contextualized) media can then be defined in two ways: on the one hand it is an art of interlocality; on the other it is an art of the interface. Let us begin with interlocality. The use of geolocalization and tracing technologies by some groups of artists is all the more interesting, as its focus is not the concept of communication (or community) as a whole, but connection itself. Working on connections implies finding opportunities to link – rather than oppose – the local and the global, the practice of places and the formalization of space, the construction of situations, and the representation of urban form as a totality. As far as interface is concerned, the idea is to install distance communication technologies within a given context and, by the same token, to critically engage with the multilayered nature of spacetime, focusing on the superposition of 'real' space, the space of immediate co-presence, and of a virtual space that is the locus of interlocality and connection. In the end, the issue is to manage to link not only the local and the global, but also the real and the virtual, with a view to the process of urban form as such. This could be the common agenda for the very heterogeneous and unevenly

47 Social space, if we insist on resorting to this term, is nothing like an Euclidian, homogeneous and isotope space. Not only is it layered, laminated, 'reminiscent of flaky **mille-feuille** pastry,' as Lefebvre writes (in **The Production of Space**, 86), but it appears to be composed of several spaces interpenetrating one another. 'We are confronted not by **one** social space but by many – indeed, with an unlimited multiplicity of social spaces, the uncountable set of which we refer to generically as "social space".' (Ibid., revised translation).
48 Ibid., 93-4.
49 These are Lorentz's famous 'transformation equations.' Cf. Bruno Latour, 'A Relativistic Account of Einstein's Relativity,' **Social Studies of Science** 1 (1988): 3-44. About the new perspectives laid out by a relativist conception of urban spacetime, see 'The Compression of the World' and the more developed 'Invention du local, épuisement des lieux,' in **Airs de Paris**, eds. Christine Macel and Valérie Guillaume (Paris: Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 2007).
50 Cf. Crang, in Hassan and Purser, **24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society**, 49.

valid practices commonly coined 'locative media,' which include anything from technologically assisted, city-wide board games involving trackable *dérives*, to practices of spatial indexing and annotation, the streaming of performances on multiple screens or stages, or the cartography or mapping of territories, circulation and networks of all kinds (technical, social, relational, and so forth). The *pragmatic* stance that distinguishes these practices is apparent in the way they try to explore new possibilities for inserting individual and collective action within the urban fabric, by tuning distracted minds – fields of distributed attention – to the laminated or sheared spacetime of the city.

Two examples will suffice to understand what is at stake. They also illustrate, in their own way, two opposite orientations of 'locative media.' *Real Time Rome*, a project developed at MIT, aims at making tangible the pulse of urban life by combining multiple data received simultaneously and in real time from all over the city. The synchronous happening of a myriad of technical operations – if not the synchronization of the streams of consciousness themselves – can be traced in the spatiotemporal densification of the cell phones connections that punctuate a public event such as the soccer World Cup or a Madonna concert.[51] The value of this project does not lie so much in its rather frightening portrayal of the celebratory synchronization of consciousnesses, as in the *tota simul* reading it provides of the frenetic quality of distance contact. This frenetic quality brings us back to a plethora of local operations rather than to the scheduled organization of Spectacle. Yet, in the diagrams designed by the *Real Time Rome* collective, the seemingly 'instantaneous' connections take the shape of a warm plasma evolving before our eyes in real time, providing a spatiotemporal portrait of the city. Totally different in nature, *iSee*,[52] conducted by the Institute of Applied Autonomy, aims to localize on a Manhattan map all surveillance cameras to be found on the urban grid. The goal is not so much to create a paranoid map of control, but rather to encourage original circulation patterns by allowing users of the *iSee* interface to map paths of 'least surveillance' and move along them. These paths, by a smart use of the blind spots in the surveillance apparatus – the areas of the territory that are not 'covered' – strive to connect any spot in the city to any other while trying to come across the least number of surveillance cameras possible. Such a practice of constrained detour, which we assume operates in real time, can hardly be held for an avatar of the situationist *dérive*. Its explicit goal is to heighten the wanderer's attention, to call for his or her increased vigilance, and to suggest, at the same time, ways to circumvent the principles of good management one is expected to apply to spacetime capital. There is no doubt, indeed, that whoever follows such furtive itineraries and consequently takes their time will end up developing tactical skills that may count as modes of resistance against the power of 'control society.' Yet the principal value of this project is to have revealed, in a particularly efficient way, the porous nature of control spacetime by resorting to its zones of

relative disconnection. Given that surveillance space is full of vacuoles and blind spots, it is likely that time itself might eventually expand and allow for counter-rhythms generated by new circulation patterns within the very matrix of control.

Exploring disconnections, breaks in simultaneity, dislocated durations: such are some of the challenges facing today's experimenters of urban form. There is no denying that the examples we have just briefly discussed do not do much justice to the more general issue of coexistence within the urban form – a coexistence we might describe as 'loose.' If anything, they point out, still with much hesitation, paths toward the creative implementation of technological systems of distributed attention. Nevertheless, the orientation to take is clear. Strategies have become less frontal and less straightforward in their critical approach than those favored by hacker artists who wish to grip the engine. But they have already moved away from a festive approach to a ubiquity that more or less perpetuates the ordinary regime of distraction and entertainment.

51 See http://senseable.mit.edu/realtimerome/.
52 See http://www.appliedautonomy.com/isee.html.