

Interactive comment on ““You have reached your destination!” Position, positioning and superpositioning of space through car navigation systems” by T. Thielmann

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In his article on “Position, positioning and superpositioning of space through car navigation systems” Tristan Thielmann discusses a very important aspect of recent “space technologies”: the car navigation system, which nowadays is the predominant form of an “augmented reality”. – Based on GPS, which was developed for military purposes at first hand, it became a basic tool of everyday life. It is the intention of the author’s contribution to investigate this constellation and to emphasise the paradigmatic role of that machinery as something that changes our ways of perceiving space and of acting in space. To this end Thielmann follows three theoretical pathways: The first is the con-

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cept of imagination (the map as a topographical image), the second is concerned with theories of the spatial turn and, finally, the third is media theory in general. Geography is considered by the author to be the outstanding scientific realm in which the topic can be equally accessed by all of the three approaches. Nevertheless, in order to connect them, Thielmann presents the material first of all in an historical manner: from fore-running projects like the “Aspen Movie Map” (1978) at MIT Media Laboratory via early commercial car systems, e. g. by Philips (1985), to recent navigation systems and related phenomena like the implementation on home computers (*Google Earth*). In doing so he not only explains the commercial and technological backgrounds, but also provides additional material (pictures and stills) to illustrate the issue. Furthermore, the extensive list of references provides the reader with a valuable overview on the different aspects of the issue. – Hence, without doubt is Thielmann’s investigation a pioneer work that deals with a central question of mediated spatial practice in a comprehensive way.

However, this is not only the benefit of the project, but also its dilemma: Considering there is not yet a discourse on navigation systems established in the cultural studies, which theory shall form the basis of the description to transcend the pure technical matter? In order to compensate that lack of an existing framework it seems that the author wants to address not only the different strands, but within them all the various approaches that are concerned with mapping, hybrid spaces, acceleration, and related issues: He refers to Edward Soja’s model of (a) “Thirdspace” just as to Michel de Certeau’s hermeneutic of acting through or within cartographic representations and as well to Paul Virilio’s idea of vanishing (real-)space and Michel Foucault’s thinking of hybrid places as heterotopias. The general but nevertheless indifferent conclusion therefore is: “Such a complex understanding of space opens up new spaces.” (p 30)

In total it would be advisable in a journal article to consider at first hand which theory is useful for treating the research objective and which usually is circumscribed by the headline. – At this point the comprehensiveness of the investigation becomes virulent:

The only passage that is concerned with the main subject of “positioning” is Chapter 5. But here Thielmann rather talks about the problem of disorientation and the impreciseness of navigation systems, instead of developing a (positive) concept of positioning that brings together the technological invention and, for instance, de Certeau’s appraisal of conventional mapping. Apart from one preliminary remark in the final chapter the reader at no point can find a definition of what should be understood by the term “superpositioning”. Moreover, it is striking that Thielmann virtually ignores the phenomenological theory that last but not least is fundamental (in a positive as well as in a negative sense) for many of his main references. This is the more irritating, since the phenomenological approach intuitively appears to be the prior and most decent one to raise the issue of orientation and positioning. This approach dates back to early considerations in Immanuel Kant’s later work and was unfolded subsequently in the 20th century by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. Within phenomenology one could not only find concepts of positioning in space, but also the first comprehensive piece of work on the non technological consequences of GPS on life-world: Manfred Sommer’s “Suchen und Finden” (*Search and Find*, published by Suhrkamp in 2002). This book cannot be left aside when talking about car navigation systems from a cultural, social, or humanistic point of view. Here one can especially find descriptions of the subject “sitting in the car” (p 42) that might be complementary to Thielmann’s findings concerning the “new spaces”.

In this respect I recommend to rework the contribution by mainly focussing on the question of positioning right from the beginning and then subordinate the different and in themselves excellent chapters to that question. – So far, they are somewhat “stand-alone” paragraphs. (Incidentally, even the final remark on the dialectic of two spaces in Chapter 9 could be used as a starting point, for this statement is less a conclusion, but rather a hypothesis that should be discussed in the paper.) It would also be worthwhile for the author to take into account (here or as a further step) the pictorial status of the maps displayed on the (wind-)screen (as it is touches in Chapter 4): If there is a difference between pictorial and non-pictorial media, wouldn’t it lie in the fact that

pictures first of all *present* something to an observer before they can be considered to be *representations* of reality or even virtuality? (In this sense, it is misleading to call the original impression of the landscape on the windscreen a “representation” [p 41].) Such a viewpoint also affects the statement made in the beginning of Chapter 8 that the “reading” of a place by a subject changes the “meaning” of that particular place. This may apply to real world places that gain meaning by the reading of historical sources engaged with those places. It is problematic, though, in concern with pictorial simulations, for they have *no meaning* in the first place as they are pictures that are *seen* and not texts that are *read*. – To cut a long story short: If the very status of topographical images in navigation systems is considered as one of the important aspects of that technology, the concept of *pictorial* simulation should be examined more deeply. Additionally, one crucial point for improving the paper is a decision that should be made right in the “starting position” (29), where Thielmann is suggesting that the navigation system is not only a medium to mediate space – there is no doubt about that –, but also that space itself is a medium. Here the author should make clear which “space” he is referring to (present/practical space, represented space or representational space). Otherwise the attribution is indistinct.

Finally it is advisable to be careful in using terms like “archaeology” and “genealogy” like in “archaeology of media” (29) and the “genealogy” (39) of acceleration. (There is also a spelling mistake: it has to read “genealogy” instead of “geneology”.) Both imply a form of historical description that assigns itself not to the chronology of events but rather to synchronicities and contingencies. An archaeology (according to Foucault) focuses on the broader context and a genealogy (according to Nietzsche) traces back actual conditions to its hidden origins (“Herkunft”). To conceive of Virilio’s “dromology” as a genealogy is in itself an interpretation of Virilio that is not necessary in the argumentation and introduces another “strong” concept. (Taking into account that the author already introduced many other “strong” concepts related to the question of space.) Rather more important is a (quite common) misuse of the term “archaeology” by calling media history an “archaeology of media” only because the latter also deals

with aspects of the development of the hardware: An archaeological description not only implies a non-teological exposition, but has also to comprehend general mental and technological conditions. (In addition is not right to speak of archaeology as the past “of something”. – Archaeology is a method and not an equivalent to “history” in the sense of a time span. Therefore one cannot “look back on the archaeology” but rather “on the prehistory”.)

However, what Thielmann provides in his text is still a history of the car navigation system – and that is well done and quite enough for the purpose.

(Last remark: As the author in his list of references takes into account the original publication dates, also the French edition of Buci-Glucksmann’s work should be mentioned.)

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