

Social Movements within Interfaces in Urban Environments: Flash Mobs as Kinaesthetic Marketing and Political Campaigns

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Abstract. The design of our physical and virtual environments highly rules how we act and interact in space and among other people. This paper focuses on analysing event-based campaigns and marketing, particularly, how they appeal to our kinaesthetic sense, concretely by moving our affective bodies. We introduce choreography as a theoretical concept to understand in depth the systems of social movements within devices in urban environments.

Keywords: Design, urban environment, social interaction, choreography, embodiment, sensorimotor experience.

1 Introduction

Technologically sophisticated digital interfaces are now available for designing interactive urban environments. Digital devices shrink continuously with the consequence that digital applications are no longer seen but they set invisible distributed processes. Thus, technology has become more and more an inseparable aspect of embodied experience such as bodily movements. The designers of interactive systems have increasingly come to understand that interaction is intimately connected with embodiment [1, p.19]. Wireless technologies provide unequalled opportunities to tactile-kinaesthetic interaction.

Our objective is to expand the analysis of tactile-kinaesthetic experience on the use of interactive applications by introducing choreography as a theoretical concept to understand in depth the systems of social movements within devices in urban environments. Outside theatre and dancing bodies, the notion of choreography encourages rethinking digital interfaces from the point of view of moving and moved bodies. The idea of making theoretical connections between digital interfaces and choreography has been encouraged by recent studies of devices and software design (e.g. [2, 3]). Robertson and his colleagues [2] use the term “applied choreography” to refer to technological applications in which designers use choreographic knowledge of designing movements patterns in everyday life situations outside theatre and without trained dancers.

In this study we assume that new campaign and marketing strategies have interest to appeal to our kinaesthetic sense by organising choreographies which generate new affective interactions with other people, things and surroundings through technological applications. This paper focuses on analysing event-based campaigns and marketing, particularly, how they appeal to our kinaesthetic sense, not just symbolically by visual moving images but concretely by moving our affective bodies [4]. One example of this type of kinaesthetic marketing is a flash mob [5]. Flash mobs refer to performative events organised by people with different motives and interests. The organisers of flash mobs induce people by emails or social media to assemble in a place and to perform seemingly unusual patterns of movements for a brief time and then disperse. The organisers' motives for flash mobs can be e.g. pure entertainment to astonish passers-by, product advertising, political demonstrations, strengthening political campaigns or artistic expression. The target is not necessarily instrumental only. By using here Manning's [6] term relationscape, moving together may also increase the intensity of movement and create an atmosphere which strengthens connections between people and their own motives to join the flash mob.

We present two case studies, one political campaign and one commercial advertisement, to analyse how they appeal kinaesthetically to people by creating affective movement experiences. The commercial advertising case study is the marketing campaign of T-Mobile Company at Liverpool Station in London in 2009¹. After eight weeks planning and rehearsing, 400 dancers performed a two-minute dance which was filmed by ten hidden cameras at the station. The political campaign case study is a protest campaign against nuclear electricity in Switzerland². This political initiative event was organised by a Swiss party which resisted new nuclear power plants. The party tried to convince citizens to vote against nuclear electricity by their campaign within flash mobs. The relevant questions, in analysing these case studies, are: What kind of relationships do kinaesthetic campaigns try to establish among citizens and consumers by their choreographies? What kinds of connections can be traced between the daily routines of people and the special moments of kinaesthetic campaigns? What kind of significance and impact do campaign choreographies have in the midst of their supporters or opponents?

2 The pre-choreographies of urban environments

To study interaction among moving bodies, the focus is not simply on the actual form of single gestures, and posture, or not even movement patterns, but the physical locations and settings, in which these events take places. It remains to be examined more closely what kind of role urban settings, architecture and infrastructure have in creating interaction among people in public events. We argue that most movements we are doing are pre-choreographed by the physical, cultural, social, political and technical environment in which we are embedded. The design of the physical and virtual objects of our environment offers a pre-choreography for our bodily movements, provid-

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ3d3KigPQM>

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0oe7k7M4IU>

ing or suppressing opportunities for social interaction with other people. For instance, the design of airport security is intended to limit and quite rigidly enforce the movement of its passengers. In this case instance power is disciplinary and resembles a form of domination. Pressures on security as well as the amount of passengers they process per hour are considerable; therefore, airports need passengers to be compliant in order to process them as quickly as possible [7, p.445].

What is the pre-choreography behind the T-Mobile event? By choosing to perform T-Mobile event at the hallway of the railway station, the designers make sure that passengers and passers-by cannot just pass the event without responding in a way or the other to moving bodies. The hallway offers the designers a pre-choreography which they utilise in planning interactions among people. They just did not create dance choreography to watch, but passers-by are seduced or enforced to respond kinaesthetically to movements or to join the dancing within the performers. Most passers-by seem to be kinaesthetically infected by dancing bodies and music. In the case of the flash mobs against nuclear power, e.g. a stairway provides one of the pre-choreographies. The interaction with passers-by is apparently strong due to density of people in limited space.

The other thing, which we want to focus on, is the intensity and quality of movements which performers have in moving bodies and how they draw the attention of people passing by. We mean by this quality of movement, i.e. kinaesthesia, a bodily felt sense of the direction of our movement, its speed, its range, its tension and so on [8, p. 55]. The term kinaesthesia is not interchangeable with the term proprioception [9], which mainly refers to interoceptive information of limb position, contributing to motor programming. Instead it involves exteroceptive information of moving and sensing the movements in space. Understanding movements in space more profoundly, we use the term kinaesthetic field [9, 10] which refers to the characteristic motion embedded in a certain place or location. What define the motion of the kinaesthetic fields are not simply their functional components but their expressive and affective qualities. These kinaesthetic fields ‘hold together’ or combine heterogeneous elements of the movements of people, animals and vehicles forming special kinaesthetic rhythms [11].

Considering the kinaesthetic field of the Liverpool Station hallway just before the event starts, we see people heading to their own directions by walking, waiting by leaning on the wall, checking timetables, etc. When the event starts, the whole kinaesthetic field is simultaneously transformed by people, who suddenly began to move differently they normally do at the station. In nuclear electricity flash mobs, the transformation of kinaesthetic fields are much more dramatic, since by-passers seem to be terrified in seeing other people falling down without understanding reasons for their behaviour.

3 Kinaesthetic Interaction within Devices

By choreography we do not refer to merely bodily movements in a space. We assume that flash mobs are not limited to a physical location in which bodily movements first

take place but are spread quickly as videos in the Internet and social media. Thus, devices such as smartphone cameras, which transmit these events, are an essential part of these choreographies. In fact, flash mobs would not exist without mobile technologies.

By smartphones, users can connect to the Internet anywhere and anytime. They can also use their devices to map their precise geographic coordinates – and access location-specific information like restaurant reviews, historical information, and locations of other people nearby. The proliferation of location-aware mobile technologies calls for a new understanding of how we move and dwell in public spaces, how we deal with locational privacy, and how social relations are developed [12]. The social interaction of flash mobs in public places frames their development within the context of smartphones, cameras and portable technologies. These technologies work as interfaces to public spaces. Not only they filter and provide information of these events, but they also reshape these choreographies by raising their kinaesthetic communication into a new level.

In the analysis of social movements, our interest is to understand the dynamics of kinaesthetic interaction among bodies reaching beyond our embodied limits. In our previous research [13, 14], we have distinguished three different scopes of analysis of choreography by using terms micro-, local and macro levels. In the micro-level analysis, we focus on e.g. a finger movement pushing a button when a passer-by takes a photo of the T-Mobile event. These are the movements which take place in our own kinespheres [15]. In local-level we analyse e.g. how dancing bodies create social interaction by their movements with passers-by who try to ignore them. The macro movements refer to a large-scale system that expands beyond the present situation and within its agents in social media. For instance, since 2009 the video in Youtube has been watched by over 37 million people who are all agents of this marketing choreography of the T-Mobile Company. All these different levels of movements are connected, and all of them offer different perspectives for contributing to interaction design. In the flash mobs for campaigning against nuclear electricity, besides the similar kind of dynamics as in the T-mobile case, a macro-level analysis contains the strong ethical statement against horrors of nuclear power.

We assume that kinaesthetic marketing as flash mobs are capable of appealing to customers that resist traditional marketing in print media [16]. McLuhan [17] classified media as either hot or cool. By hot media, he means a high-definition communication that demands little involvement from audience, whereas, cool media refers to media that demands active involvement from audience. By following here Birringer's [18] formulation of hot and cold interactivity, which turns upside down McLuhan's terminology of hot and cold media, Birringer [18] distinguishes cold interactivity from hot interactivity. By cold interactivity he means ubiquitous technology in our everyday life; when we use automated teller machine or hear recorded announcements in trains. This interactivity can be satisfying as well as frustrating. The operating system implies haptic, gestural and visual conventions we are supposed to know in advance or to learn by doing. Such cold interactivity entails purposive decision-making and effectiveness. The desired response is getting a result. Hot or complex interactivity draws on emotions, affections, desires and social interaction adding many layers

of human behaviour. Hot interactivity makes it difficult for one to "calm down" to analyse information properly, since it can be confusing and creating complex sensuous experiences [18, p. 238].

It seems that flash mobs and other performative acts bring hot interactivity into new level in urban environment. By digital technologies and social media, kinaesthetic marketing such as flash mobs is not limited to a physical location but spread quickly as images of social interactions in different media forms. The essence is in the affective and performative aspects of human movement and expression, focusing on recognition and simulation of the other bodies' movement.

4 Conclusions

Flash mobs in public places do not primarily appeal to citizens' or consumers' aural or visual sensations but they have capabilities of working through consumers' affective moving bodies. Kinaesthetic campaigns attempt to create interactions between ordinary people, authorities, products, vehicles, and online media. Most of those interactions carry power relations, including strict but invisible hierarchies, social conventions and cultural habits. Kinaesthetic marketing is tacit in the sense that people easily become themselves the agents of marketing, not just the targets of marketing. Spreading videos in the Internet, they also carry the messages of the political or commercial events. The Internet and social media have facilitated the inexpensive spread of information and opportunities to influence the interaction of kinaesthetic marketing. By analysing commercial advertisement and political campaigns together, we assume that commercial advertising has moved towards the methods of political campaigns, and vice versa, that political campaigns use the marketing strategies of commercial advertising. Kinesthetic marketing as flash mobs have dynamic, organising and strategic functions in our everyday world, thus, in the design of these events, outcomes are sometimes difficult to envisage.

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