



Mobile Interface Theory

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MOBILE INTERFACE THEORY: EMBODIED SPACE AND LOCATIVE MEDIA / Jason Farman. London: Routledge, 2012. Pp. 172; illus.; 6 × 9". ISBN 9780415878906 (cloth), £95; 9780415878913 (paper), £24.99. Available from <http://www.routledge.com/>.

Jason Farman's *Mobile Interface Theory* draws together some of the richest and most compelling empirical examples of digital art, social media, and locative gaming from the past 15 years. It attempts to underscore the raft of cultural shifts seen since Intel declared that "[c]omputing, not computers" (p. 1), would mark the coming technological age. Farman argues throughout that the theorization of the mobile interface should not end with the device itself; instead, it should be explored as the site of contemporary social, spatial, and bodily transformation. Personal anecdotes from living in Los Angeles, buying early smartphones, and teaching undergraduate students enliven this otherwise rote world of abstract relay between virtuality and reality, body and device.

A central pivot of the book is Farman's notion of the "sensory-inscribed body." Designed to combat a supposed flaw in existing understandings of everyday embodiment and performed space, this concept is a delicate bridging strategy across the two terrains of Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and Derridean post-structuralism, with cursory nods toward Henri Lefebvre. This strategy, however, is not without its perils.

This first approach enables Farman to explain the "embodied act of perception" (p. 26) and the workings of a Heideggerian being-in-the-world that puts the human body and its array of sensorial equipment at the very heart of any meaning about such worlds. The dance project *IntuiTweet* (2009, <http://medea.mah.se/2010/10/intuitweet/>) is taken as a production of embodied space, while geocaching is seen as a "confirmation" (p. 83) of individualized, locative presence. But Farman stops short of extending this perceptive capacity to non-humans. Despite a critical theorization of the reciprocal interface in chapter 3 and an interrogation of both co-presence and mediation in chapter 4, there is limited discussion of the algorithmic agency, data flow, or infrastructural necessity of digital technology. Christian Nold's *Biomapping* tool (launched 2004, <http://biomapping.net/>), Paul Notzold's *TXtual Healing* project (2006, <http://www.txtualhealing.com/>), and QR code applications such *Tales of Things* (2010, <http://www.talesofthings.com/>), and the now-defunct *Stickybits* (2010), all covered in the book, provide perfect scope for a thematic discussion that is not forthcoming.

The second approach is drawn from the signifying work of Jacques Derrida. Farman uses this "inscribed mode of embodiment" (p. 33) – an attempt to incorporate how bodies are interpreted, coded, and subjectified by others and turned back onto the body itself – to counter a lack in one-way phenomenological understandings that suppose all perception is conjured up from the body and

ejected out into the world-at-large. It is between these two understandings of embodiment that Farman develops his own concept of the sensory-inscribed body.

However, Farman's bridging between "body as sensory and body as sign system" (p. 33) does little to resolve the metaphysical incompatibility of maintaining the Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian standpoint on the body as the primary zone of sensory capacity and more textual approaches to classification and categorization as offered by post-structuralist thought. Farman actually relegates bodily being-in-the-world to a level below the Derridean inscription when he explores the wearable gestural interface *SixthSense* (2009, <http://www.pranavmistry.com/projects/sixthsense/>) or discusses a student from his undergraduate class who answers a mobile phone call mid-lecture (pp. 33–34). In both cases the body is "laid bare" as hollow and projectable – a theoretical mistake that the likes of Thrift (2000) and Gil (1998) suggested needed to be effaced even before the rise of mobile technology. Farman seems to understand the human body in similar ways, as unable to redress the images projected onto it, open to codification of all kinds, and at its "core ... socially inscribed" (p. 58).

Although Farman's metaphysics are arguably lacking, chapter 2, "Mapping and Representations of Space," is a sharp exploratory effort to cover the inappropriate conceptual opposition between "virtual" and "real" space. This is the second dynamic of *Mobile Interface Theory*, alongside bodily perception and inscription. Although the historical foundations of virtuality are in notions of force and power, contemporary usage is synonymous with the immaterial or non-physical. Concerns about the representational power of art, paper maps, and now the contemporary world of digital media have long been grounded in a fear of this supposed inability of the "real" (as material or physical) world to "coexist" with the representational one, as Farman suggests (p. 37).

His sensory-inscribed nature of virtuality does not bear out these common anxieties. Singular and separate worlds do not exist; mobile media do not have the capacity to supplant one with the other; there are multiplicities of affect, and multiple materialities. Life "is an experience of layering, and the constant interplay ... bond[ing] the virtual and actual together" (p. 38), and it is these multiplicities that induce such pleasure in the everyday – ostensibly real and digital worlds entwined and made possible together. Farman's analysis of the augmented reality app *Streetmuseum* (2010, <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Streetmuseum.htm>) is well suited to explicating the sensory, imaginative, and transformative dimension of mobile technologies.

Mobile Interface Theory has an abundance of empirical cases to bring Farman's sensory-inscribed theory to life. It is no coincidence that the rise of mobile media technologies has brought about a new understanding of how virtuality and reality, and body and device, routinely

collide, but the stark absence of pre-digital forms of virtuality and “becoming” prevents this book from crafting a greater landscape. For readers of *Mobile Interface Theory*, ostensibly those new to the interdisciplinary nature of digital media and embodiment, this is a notable absence, likely to mire their conceptions of the digital age in an ahistorical narrative of technological essentialism. The question of how digital media have changed the long-standing relationship between virtuality and reality, body and device, is pertinent. On this note, Farman has perhaps missed a post-phenomenological trick that would have made his intervention more impressive.

References

Gil, J. 1998. *Metamorphoses of the Body*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Thrift, N. 2000. “Still Life in Nearly Present Time: The Object of Nature.” *Body & Society* 6 (3–4): 34–57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1357034X00006003003>

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CITIES WITHOUT GROUND: A HONG KONG GUIDE-BOOK / Adam Frampton, Jonathan D. Solomon, and Clara Wong. Singapore: Oro Editions, 2012. Pp. 128; full colour; index; 8 × 5½". ISBN 9781935935322 (paper), \$19.95. Available from <http://www.oroeditions.com/>

All too often, maps in urban guidebooks focus on flat interpretations of the cityscape, in which topography is lost and verticality ignored. But *Cities Without Ground: A Hong Kong Guidebook* is not a guidebook in the traditional sense but, rather, a manifesto that reconceptualizes the notion of “ground” in contemporary urbanism as a surface across which daily activities and vast circulatory networks occur. Hong Kong provides the perfect backdrop for such a reading, as a vertical city of skyscrapers, huddled between steep mountains and reclaimed foreshores, where “ground” makes no sense physically or culturally.

The authors delicately combine topological maps, photographs, and text, held together by the common purpose of trying to make sense of Hong Kong’s design and urban form. The authors have an architectural background, and although the book is cartographic in form, its maps are highly experimental, a guide to the everyday rhythms and materialities of a Hong Kong real and imagined, its past, present, and future.

Cities Without Ground is organized thematically into six chapters. “Ground” discusses the verticality, the networks of multi-level pedestrian footbridges, and the surrounding mountains that characterize Hong Kong. “Solids” explores how the built urban form behaves as a casing, “a continuous, urban-scaled interior” (p. 17) within which the city’s

circulatory network operates, and “Connectivity” examines the interchange between various multi-level systems of transport. “Activity,” the only non-cartographic section, addresses the occupation of space, portrayed through a series of photographs; and “Atmosphere” offers a series of temperature maps between humid outdoors and air-conditioned shopping malls, a central part of any South-east Asian experience.

The “Guidebook” itself appears between the two final chapters, and consists of 32 double-page colour maps depicting different parts of Hong Kong. The maps address the themes, giving an unusually visual sense of fluidity. Three-dimensionality is crucial: the authors present a stylized bird’s-eye view of the city, in which roads are absent and overpasses transparent, marked by a procession of floating vehicles, and the usual preoccupation with the built form is purposefully ignored. Building walls are treated like the roads, and paths are colour-coded to distinguish between publicly and privately accessible spaces without interrupting flow. Connections between levels – elevator shafts, escalators, stairways, and moving walkways – are also included. Construction machinery and typical transport are carefully delineated – from hot-air balloons to backhoes and trams – as are sounds and smells. Local activity is noted: “Housewives haggle over preserved sausages” (p. 36); “Louis Vuitton” and “Fake Louis Vuitton” (p. 41); “English tutor with bad grammar” (p. 67). All these elements give a sense of complexity and contradiction in what is, perhaps, an inherently paradoxical city.

Some maps also sit between real and imagined – one proposes a spiralling, not-yet-existent shopping centre atop Central Market, complete with indoor swimming pools and ski slopes. This is reminiscent of a typically Hong Kongese approach: psycho-geographic films like *Chungking Express* (Wong 1994) and books like *HK Lab* (Gutierrez, Portefaix, and Manzini 2002) and *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City* (Dung and others 2012) have already addressed the relationship between maps, visuality, experience, memory, and urban imaginaries in the city. However, rather than detracting from the significance of *Cities Without Ground*, the use of the imagined in these maps is fortified by a body of highly experimental works that seek a different understanding of Asian post-colonial urbanism.

The written text, however, too often falls into the jargon of architects and designers, without establishing terms of reference – so much so that it often come across as superficial or superfluous, and suggests that the authors themselves are unable to express the complexity inherent in their maps. But for readers of *Cartographica*, it is the maps that will speak most proudly – both as the results of an impressive body of empirical research and by seamlessly presenting a highly innovative and important theoretical argument about the meaning of “ground” in cartography, urban theory, and design.