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## EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA AND THE CITY: A ROUNDTABLE INTRODUCTION



i

[Ed. note: this post is part of a Roundtable discussion on “Experimental Media and the City.” For more background on the discussion and to view other posts in the series, see [here](http://wp.me/P6zYkX-No)(<http://wp.me/P6zYkX-No>).]

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I am grateful to Erica Stein and *Mediapolis* for the opportunity to participate in this roundtable on experimental media and the city. For the first round, Alison Wielgus, Aroussiak Gabrielian, and Holly Willis have each contributed posts that, taken together, produce on the one hand a multi-faceted glimpse of some ways in which our mediated relationship to cities and the built environment may be understood, and on the other, critical approaches toward theorizing these relationships.

Alison's writing on the experimental documentaries of the Black Audio Film Collective's work in the eighties and nineties, for instance, investigates the creation and sustenance of collectivity and community even as she looks at how the Collective engaged with urban space in Britain as a "site of contestation" between diasporic citizenship and the apparatus of the state. Experimental filmmaking here is more than a merely formal concern; it becomes a series of formal investigations that defines a politics of resistance but also of solidarity. Aroussiak's entry reads Google Street-View as a cinematic medium, exploring not just the ways in which Street View interprets the city according to different criteria and standards, but also how those standards actively produce different city-worlds (so to speak). Thus, her emphasis on the roles played by database narratives and interactive cinematic technologies in imagining and visualizing worlds—strategies that inform mapping platforms like Street View—attends not just to the question of *what* is represented, but also *how* and *by what means* representation itself unfolds. The city as experienced via Street View is not necessarily the city "as such." Finally, Holly's contribution discusses the architectural filmmaking of Liam Young. In his cinematic work, Young reimagines urban space and the built environment not along conventional lines of design but rather along the intersecting pathways of media, architecture, and lived space. Holly focuses in particular upon the use of LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) and its use in producing imagery. Within the context of city planning and architectural imaging, LIDAR produces images that are layered, images that do not correspond to ordinary human vision. This is an image that emphasizes *information* over *representation* in its classical sense: the question arises, then, what kind of city can such imagery produce?

What I find interesting about the contributions in this first stage of the roundtable is the clear movement they chart from the concrete to the abstract. Beginning with the very materially-grounded practice and formal strategies of the Black Audio Film Collective's cinematic work, we end up at the fringes of speculative representation, probing the very limits of imagery, representation, and the city re-imagined.

Recalling the tendency of early "city symphonies" to conceal the camera (and usually its operator), Alison looks at John Akomfrah's *Handsworth Songs* (1986) and Reece

Auguiste's *Twilight City* (1989) to ask what happens when "visibility rather than concealment" is foregrounded. Although recognizably operating in the mode of the city symphony, these are works that render visible the fact that a given city-space is not the same for all of its inhabitants in terms of lived experience. Akomfrah's work engages with the 1985 riots in Handsworth, a largely diasporic neighborhood in Birmingham, England. Alison's close analysis underscores the critical use of sound and archival footage, which complicates any possibility of neat narrative closure. If visual footage and techniques of editing drive home the fragmentary nature of city life, indeed if they argue the very condition of the city is that of fragmentation, it is the voiceover (also edited) that weaves historical fragments together into a greater fabric of the whole. Voiceover serves a similar purpose in Auguiste's *Twilight City*, which dwells on themes of migration, distance, and personal histories and how they relate to life in specific cities (here, between London and Dominica).

Aroussiak's brief study of Street View begins with the observation that it relies upon a kind of "guerilla mapping," which undermines any claim to neutral representation. Because of the complex process by which Street View projects its city-world, it neutralizes perspectival views as well as the perspectival frame, thus achieving a kind of view-at-a-remove that disavows its own origins. Relying on Michel de Certeau, Aroussiak looks at how Street View complicates issues of narrative space and time in ways that ordinary maps do not permit. Street View's images frequently freeze in place events in the process of unfolding, glimpsed momentarily by the Google-mobile. These are narratives that invite imaginative completion. And because Street View's ambition is to map the entire inhabited world, it is increasingly possible to begin such imaginary narratives in one city and extend it across nations, disregarding political and lived realities (the messy details of visas, borders, flight delays...). Likewise, Street View extends emergent notions of world-building across cinema and media studies, in that it makes available the intimately familiar yet oddly distanced stuff of our own world for potential use in developing narratives.

We seem to reach some sort of speculative limit-case in Holly's discussion of the architecturally-informed cinematic practices of the architect Liam Young. In her discussion of several of Young's short films, in which points-of-view and subjectivity are taken up by objects (driverless taxis, drones), several key points arise. First, of course, is the ambivalent relations that develop between these objects and the human bodies that variously interact with them. I am reminded here not just of Bill Brown's work on "thing theory" but also of various angles on posthumanism and cyborgian thought (e.g. Donna Haraway, but also Bernard Stiegler). Young's allusions to the "Internet of things" and the matter of cities developing "character"—of a sort, informed by pure accumulation of data—point toward these wider conversations that I'd love to see taken up as the conversation continues. Second (and this is what

Holly astutely concludes her entry with), Young's creative output puts pressure on existing conceptions of cinematic imagery, and indeed the cinematic assemblage as such. Specifically, and perhaps in line with recent acknowledgements of the waning of film studies' affinity for the rhetorics of indexicality, Holly's suggestion that the image-world relation is perhaps being reconfigured into one of "mutual producing and enfolding" holds intriguing prospects.

As this roundtable proceeds, I am interested in seeing how the distant and the proximate, the abstract and the concrete, begin to negotiate with each other's claims and stakes. Aroussiak's post raises fascinating questions that are extensions, I believe, of the grittier formalism Alison finds in the work of the Black Audio Film Collective in terms of how bodies and cities relate to each other. Does Street View flatten the world into an endless stream of images rather than a circumnavigable globe, or does it attenuate the world, channeling it into images oriented toward a particular (historically Euro-centric) viewpoint? And this relates back to Alison's study of Akomfrah's and Auguiste's films in which visual plenitude and visible evidence conceal or ignore as much as they reveal, films in which the visible *needs* to be disrupted, fragmented, undone in order to show what is concealed, but which is redeemed by voiceovers. In this practice, they recall one of the most ancient practices of historical record: that of the oral history. Which leads me to conclude with Holly: there is a noticeable absence of sound in her discussion of Young's work. Is there a role sound plays in the increasingly informational image regime she discerns via Young? If there is an ongoing remaking of the moving image's relation to the world, what of sound, carried on invisible waves that continue to suffuse our lived environment invisibly?