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The Sensuous City - Mapping emotions in motion

May 11, 2006

I just spent a wonderful couple of days visiting a friend in Montréal, a city i am falling in love with. Fortunately, the person i was visiting has a long term loving & intimate relationship to/with the city, knows its secrets, heart, pulse, its darkness, dangers, light and wondrousness. He and the city are intertwined, mutually constituted, in some ways inseparable, engaged in a dance of permanent motion and emotion. His engagement with Montreal's layered ecologies is deeply private, public, playful, affectionate, warm, and tender. Because of his respect for his city/home and his place within it, he engages with the space/place in a deeply reflexive fashion, shares its beauty publicly while also keeping elements away from the public gaze, sparingly sharing parts privately & selectively with some. He cautiously influences how he wants elements of the city's sub cultures to engage with it, subliminally consenting with the city & seeking its permission when doing so. He is sensuously part of the city's sights, sounds, scents, textures, flavours, people, cultures, structures, and infrastructures. Experiencing Montreal's wonders this way is a joy, blessing, and a privilege.

Each visit is coloured with a wide range of emotions - anticipation, fear, exhilaration, naivety, idealism, lovingness, trepidation, longing, loathing, confidence, anger, yielding, resolve, sadness … That of a young girl wearing red slippers & froo froo yellow dress with big red enbroidered apples innocently skipping to the candy store imagining a big red and white swirly round lollypop, or like a puppy jumping up and down wagging its tail knowing that something good is about to happen, a woman seeking refuge and a place to belong.

My experience coming into the city is mediated by the mode of transport i use (train or bus), the time i come in (morning, afternoon, night), the people i meet along the journey, the reason why i am visiting, my state of mind. My interactions with the city are enacted by my pal and his historical connection to the city. My return home is mediated by what i chose to remember, to reflect upon, what i saw, touched, ate, felt, scented, by a new range of emotions, how long i choose to sit with those, what i have learned and what i still need to examine. It is a very deep physical and psychological experience.

Because the experience is so rich i often cannot absorb all that i have learned, felt, emoted. Subliminally much is absorbed and the experience becomes integrated into my soul, heart and body. As time passes, day to day activities take over, the intensity slowly trickles away with parts re-enacted or recalled, by a word, scent, memory, an interaction, an unlabeled feeling, a tear or a smile.

I would love to find a way to retrace where i have been, re-narrate some of the discussions, re-feel what i felt, and re-live the sensuous experience, re-visit the places. Can a trace of subliminal data be gathered to help me re-call, re-embed, allow me to observe a moment in context, to analyze what my body was doing, sensing, feeling, what my pulse was doing at certain place and time, the pace of my breathing, the temperature of my skin, in association with the words, places, scents, tastes, time, sounds, sunlight and sights of a moment in time. The data are gathered along a journey, that culminate in an aggregated memory of an overall experience, but also can be used to to dive down and assess causation, reveal meaning… Would this private data enable me to gain knowledge about myself, my friend, the place, and to mediate and re-mediate the experiences individually, collectively to learn about me, him, the community, the city,…

For a little while i have been looking into sensuous geography, primarily culturally exploring olfaction, and mostly with the objective gaze of a social scientist, a geographer. This morning however, i came across BioMapping

> a research project which explores new ways that we as individuals can make use of the information we can gather about our own bodies. Instead of security technologies that are designed to control our behaviour, this project envisages new tools that allows people to

selectively share and interpret their own bio data.

The Bio Mapping tool allows the wearer to record their Galvanic Skin Response (GSR), which is a simple indicator of emotional arousal in conjunction with their geographical location. This can be used to plot a map that highlights point of high and low arousal. By sharing this data we can construct maps that visualise where we as a community feel stressed and excited.

Also I discovered the SENSEable City Laboratory which

uses location data to make real-time maps of how people move through space, gives insight into where people like to work and how traffic flows through the city — information that could help architects and city administration design better digital spaces (see Real-Time Maps Could Help Make Cities More Livable).

The SENSEsable City projects help us learn more about our cities, and the BioMapping projects help us learn about ourselves while researchers & artists are coming to their senses with installations such as Sensations Urbaines to expose

la ville nocturne, la ville saisonnière, les sons de la ville, surfaces urbaines et l'air de la ville.

and discuss the city from an olfactory, gustatory, sonified, lit, cultural, historical and textured perspective or mediated by fear, hardware, sound and seasons. Sensuous geographers, fragrance and flavour industries, experience economy advocates & critics, marketers, designers and artist help us understand, critique, persuade, manipulate, experience, sell, analyze, feel and realize how we sensuously and/or emotionally and/or bodily interact with the city/place/product. Also new media device designers immerse us in 3 - 4 D digital environments, such as flight simulators, engage us in multisensory multiplayer multimodal digital and geolocative games, create shared experiential moments via the usage of aromatic devices for olfactory output or device mediated drinking moments and etc. In fact there is no shortage of multisensory research and gadgets.

Why this proliferation of sensory art, research, and gadgets? Dunno! This will require more research on my part, and for the moment i speculate that we are trying to recreate the extraordinary, the magical, dreamtime (aborigines), immortality, multiple personas, to feel and be felt, emote, sense, connect, and in many ways extend our bodies. More nefariously, perhaps, we are being sensorialy manipulated into consuming these devices and made to believe that it is important to archive these experiences, perhaps we are forgetting to live in the moment, we are egotistically attached/trapped in the past, perhaps we want to be more than what we are. Or perhaps we are disconnected, alienated, afraid, shy and can only mediate with our environments and those we love in this way. Perhaps we are evolving socially and psychologically and are inventing technologies to increase emotional intelligence in time, in our environments, personally and collectively.

I am not sure if i would be willing to share my GSR data publicly as those engaged in BioMapping projects do, but i would love to use these data in tandem with SENSEable City type projects, as well as other environmental data such as air quality, temperature, weather, etc. Then assess & study these data with my personal knowledge and knowledge gleaned from psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, artists and loved ones. I would also love to gather other types of data, such as body heat, heart rate, textures, the pace of motion, narration, smells, sounds, sights, scale, which, would be georeferenced to location and time. A number of devices such as data gloves, electronic noses, microphones, cameras, gsr, gps, watches, pace counters, and etc. enable this, but they are all invasive, clunky, obvious, lack integration and are not interoperable. I worked with a number of industrial design students recently who created a number of interesting devices that aim to collect sensory data, but they remain obvious and conscious data collection devices designed for a particular activity - tourism, extreme sports, classroom learning, or deep sea diving. I think something wearable, that is not gear laden, that becomes second nature, whereby the wearer and others are unaware of the device, where habituation accustoms the wearer to forget about the data collecting elements of the artifact which would facilitate i think a more honest/unconscious interaction with both physical, social and sensory reality (if this is ever possible!) thus avoiding a staged data gathering activity and subliminal collection. But why would i or other want to do this?

Soo many questions remain:

1. Would re-enacting my Montreal experiences with multisensory data help me learn from it? Assist with labeling emotions? Understand how i was feeling at certain places and times and provide clues as to why? Was it the company, the granaries of old Montreal, the wonderful dinner, the walk and the dust?
2. Would correlating emotion with physical manifestations of those emotions and objectively (if that is ever possible!) analyzing those data turn the experience into a mere object, artifact or event?
3. Could this information help me learn about myself, others, the city? And more importantly help me change my understanding, behaviour and modify choices and thus consequences? Could this be used to collectively modify places and spaces laden with negative emotion?
4. Does collecting / archiving / re-mediation emotion and sensuous interactions mean forgetting to live in the present? Or is that what story tellers, artists etc. have been doing for ever? And are contemporary technologies are just emulating that in a different way?
5. If such an integrated wearable data collection device is worn and used, would i need to consent with those i interact with? Would it be sneaky if i did not? Would it make intimate and personal interaction simply a data gathering activity? Is trust, relationship building, interactions with others and the environment always a data gathering activity?
6. Why is there so much attention given to this type of research?
7. Where will these devices lead us? me?
8. and so on…

As the train was departing from Montreal, I was overcome with emotion - embodied, snugly and firmly integrated into my soul, derived from personal interaction and intimately connected with places, spaces and moments in the city - all sensorially mediated one way or another. I did not want to leave the sensations, my friend nor the city behind. Nor do i want to recreate it all since that would exteriorise and disembody something significant, deeply meaningful, special that was both time & context contingent.

I would however love the ability to return - much later and see what those data would mean to me in the future.

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