

film/video & space

5 place recording exercises

Film/Video & Space was a course that introduced techniques for exploring and articulating the dynamic and ephemeral dimensions of architectural space to students of architecture and environmental design at M.I.T. and Southern California Institute of Architecture, 1980-1988. The homework assignments were published in *Wide Angle Film Journal*, Athens, OH, December 1993.

object lesson

A S S I G N M E N T O N E

Daily concerns assign to instruments a place which has nothing in common with pure geometric distances: my glasses . . . once they are on my nose, are much farther from me than the object which I see through them. *Jean-Paul Sartre, 1953*

Observe the space that is involved in an interaction between a person and an everyday object. Use the video camera to explore and articulate the characteristics of this space.

The object that you select should be inanimate. It has a center of gravity. It might be portable and/or kinetic. It probably produces sounds. Is it a piece of natural landscape or was it designed by somebody? Does it exist as a result of mass production?

Perhaps it is utilitarian, a tool or implement—fork, chair, garden hose, light bulb, kitchen sink, article of clothing, clothesline, paper bag, bath towel. Or an architectural feature—doorknob, tree, windowsill, column, handrail, curb, or flight of stairs.

Consider the size and shape and directions of the zone of interaction. What are the trajectories of gesture, the rhythms and cycles and the lapses of time? Does the character of the space defined by person and instrument change (over time, for different purposes, in the employ of different users, etc)? Experiment with a variety of camera locations, angles, and moves. Frame shots by moving the camera and your body; *do not use the zoom except for focusing and framing your shots!* What is the minimum set of views that will suffice for constructing the sense of this space? In addition to using your eyes, explore the acoustics of the space and repertoire of non-verbal sounds that characterize the action. What is the best position for the microphone?

instrumental space

acoustic movie

A S S I G N M E N T T W O

Sound makes the distance of the image possible, surrounding audients in the space of a world whose visible aspect is collapsed to projections on a flat screen. The sound is more continuous and more pervasive than that sequence of images which stop and start during the blink of your eyes. The chatter of the television persists after you turn your back, and it still pursues you walking out of the room.

how do you HEAR a place?

The simplest relationship between image and sound is synchronicity—when a visible movement or change is accompanied by an audible effect, the impression is more vivid. Sound can also constitute the subject, source or motive of visible action—it may not merely accompany the spectacle of a flock of birds taking off (commotion of flapping wings), but contain their cue (a sudden explosion) as well. Sounds are not confined within the boundaries of the screen—a sound emanating from outside the field of view might alert us to activity occurring elsewhere, or lead our gaze to a new vantage point. Sounds associated with one scene can overflow pictures of another to induce anticipation or suggest continuity. Because sounds assume the coloring of the particular space where they are produced, variations in timbre supply information about the features of the acoustical landscape. The same fly buzzing around sounds very different when we move it from a small crowded room to a large empty hall, or take it outside. Acoustic closeups, like directional microphones, allow us to tune in individual sounds that would otherwise be drowned in the general din.

Your second video assignment is an exercise in collecting the sounds of a place. The objective is to discern and amplify dimensions of ambient sound—those fundamental noises of a place which ordinary sense is so well practiced at tuning out—like the dripping faucet in my kitchen sink, the hum of the refrigerator next door, a lawn sprinkler going all night, the poplar branches creaking in a gentle breeze, the drone of traffic two blocks away . . .

The place might as well be anywhere in the vicinity of your two ears. Perhaps it is a place whose soundtrack unfolds during a passage of time, or it might be a sequential space you construct by moving from one earshot to the next. What are the sizes and shapes and directions of these particular sounds that waft and echo and dissipate about the location? Where do they come from? Where do they go?

how do you SEE a place when you LISTEN to it?

NOT RECOMMENDED PRACTICE

For this assignment your camera is your microphone.
What does it happen to see when you must use it to listen?

A microphone's logic of placement and movement, its distance and direction from the various sound sources, are frequently at cross-purposes with useful orientations of the videographer's lens. Yet if your smartphone or cheap camcorder offers no provision for plugging in an external microphone, or when there is no helper qualified to handle the external microphone, then for the sake of sound you must treat this camera as predominantly a listening tool rather than an imaging device. Whatever is the best position for the microphone in the scene you are capturing is where you must place the camera.

Always regard quality of sound recording as first priority.

point of view

A S S I G N M E N T T H R E E

Making a motion picture could be simply discovering a way in particular to test moving and how things move, through the process of exercising, exploring, and sharing the experience of having a point of view. Discover/invent/develop as many points of view as possible.

“Subjective” and “objective” views are explicit conventions in narrative cinema. What the camera “sees” is called objective, and what the character “sees” is called subjective, even without regard to what might be going on in a character’s mind. What’s more, “cutting on a look,” as Jean-Luc Godard has pointed out, “is almost the very definition of montage.” Keep in mind that perspectives are not disembodied; each vantage point wants to be attributed to some sentient entity that lives and breathes and assumes a presence in the scene.

The point of view is where an individual is engaged at any moment in the fabric of the world. It amounts to a kind of periscope that can be positioned, aimed, focused, and filtered. The utility of any viewpoint is defined by the particular filter it imposes on our information receptors, enabling us to establish bearings in a world far too vast to apprehend all at once. Because any point of view is one of many and no single viewpoint can tell the whole story, it has the further value of reminding us that there is no preferred perspective on this place.

We think with our bodies as well as with our minds. The body is, in the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “our point of view on the world .” We apprehend the physical world in the direction of our moving eyes and bodies, as they make differences in this world by being part of it. We know more than we can tell.

We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A "corporeal or postural schema" gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible movements, or "motor projects," radiates from us to our environment. Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it without instruments as if by magic, since it is ours and because through it we have direct access to space. For us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1962

Your 3rd production assignment is

to portray a person and/or survey a place through a series of viewpoints that:

a) are not omniscient.

b) belong to a subject (“1st person”).

c) and/or belong to other sentient being(s) that inhabits the same environment as subject (“2nd person”).

Alternatively you might catalog some place with respect to a variety of viewpoints. No doubt this place would present a different shape if we were snails, butterflies, or paper airplanes.

map (of a place or process)

A S S I G N M E N T F O U R

A map invites attention alike synoptically and analytically. What kind of a road is marked; through what kind of country does it run? Its symbols are translated into images, and these are assembled in the mind's eye into meaningful associations of land and life. Carl Ortwin Sauer. "The Education of a Geographer" (1956)

Maps represent sets of spatial or temporal relationships. They provide an open-ended system for accumulating, storing, and retrieving geographic experience. Yet anything else that can be spatially or temporally conceived can be mapped as well. Moviemaking shares with cartography this proposition of expressing spatial and temporal relationships. Compared with conventional maps, cinema furthermore has the ability to portray actions and characters, to capture spontaneous observations, to frame multiple points of view.

Experiment with different verbs for experiencing a place, such as:

- **finding** the place
- **exploring** the place
- getting **lost** (becoming misplaced)
- **inhabiting** the place (placing oneself)
- **rearranging** the place (placing things)
- **departing** from the place
- **listening** to the place
- **recalling** what took place there (placing memory)

Consider formal conventions commonly employed by cartographers, eg:

- designation of size through scale.
- designation of orientation with respect to compass points.
- systematic vocabulary of graphic symbols, such as contour lines and color, or the attribution of different fonts to different categories of placenames.
- the legend.

and various functions that maps intend to serve:

- **measuring** the **distance** to a place.
- determining the **time** it takes to get there.
- **finding** where one is in a place (orientation/navigation).
- defining **relationships** among multiple places.
- forecasting and strategic planning (identification and analysis of **patterns**).
- recording and accumulation of **data** (the assessor's map, for example).

How do you avoid getting lost in a movie?

Make a video map. You might choose to map:

- a spatially contiguous place—a room in your apartment, backyard, parking lot, gas station, etc.
- the route that connects several familiar destinations that are remote from one another—on foot perhaps, or involving multiple modes of transport.
- a district or neighborhood, a stretch of time, a point of view. . .
- alternatively, a procedure, ritual or routine. How do you capture its algorithm and rhythm, while expressing essential relationships among parts in the sequence?

Consider whether this journey has a beginning, middle, and end. Not necessarily in that order. Consider establishing shots, connections, and landmarks along the way.

“ . . . wish you were here, ”

A S S I G N M E N T F I V E

*The mishaps and disappointments only lend relief to the splendours of the voyage.
Things should be left as they are, despite those sad autumn postcards.*

Lawrence Durrell, 1959

Consider the dimensions of a postcard:

- There is some picture of a place. . .
You may choose among landscape and built places. Your selection need not be limited to tourists' favorite believe it or not's, or the color enhanced sunsets, freeway wonders and portraits of model citizens engaged in "typical" activities, the annual zucchini festival, &c that are stocked in roadside postcard racks.
- It delivers news of the traveller "having a swell time" — perhaps a word on weather or bloodthirsty insects or something banal about the accommodations. Perhaps cryptic to baffle a postman.
- A personal sentiment is extended to the receiver— "**wish you were here.**"
- An address locates the recipient. . .
- The postage stamp is often another image of place. . .
- The cancellation identifies location and date of origin. . .
- The whole thing is small enough to lose all at once. . .
- There are two sides of it. . .

Record and edit a movie postcard, 3 1/2 minutes maximum duration.

Sync sound is mandatory.

Palm trees are optional.

Remember to include your signature.