

The Space Between: Spatial Autopsies as an Approach for Analyzing Localities

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Abstract

Since localities are primarily relational and contextual, the higher degree of plasticity it holds over physical space inadvertently requires innovative methods to capture the dynamic relationships and intricate networks operating in localities, as well as implicit ones sustained across multiple sites. Existing literature consistently emphasizes geographical unevenness in the depth and breadth of ongoing neoliberal restructuring strategies, made discernible by their variegated implementation and impact on space. It is therefore on ground level, where the imposition of extra-local forces on the everyday lives of individuals is either embraced or resisted, can the various conditions supporting the constitution (or reconstitution) of a locality be particularized and scrutinized.

By adopting a context-led approach to frame a reading on localities, it becomes possible to plot each locality's unique relational matrix and the extent of its sphere of influence. Moving image, together with cinematically-derived methodologies formulated for advancing studies on space, have proven to be effective for exploring complex phenomena in almost aspects – political, social, economic, historical and cultural. Films can support a spatial approach to understanding localities on a qualitative level: embedded within mere functional information, there exists an additional dimension which, through proper excavation, offers a heuristic means for exploring the depth of lived experience.

To illustrate, an autopsy is performed on an establishing shot of an old coffee shop featured in the Singapore documentary film *Old Places* (2011) to reveal discernible layers of space that can be used to structure a reading on the properties of that locality.

Keywords: Localities, context-led approach, film, space, place, nodes.

Why Localities Matter

If we are to subscribe to the view that globalization is about the socio-spatial relations between individuals around the world, and that the ongoing neoliberal restructuring programme is widely accepted to be a subset of this larger project, then clearly the impact of the latter cannot really be evaluated without understanding the effects of embedded socio-ecological processes driving this political economy.¹ In globalization discourse, the naïve assumption that globalization leads to homogenization has proven to be a fallacy. What in fact transpires is an enrichment of the social fabric at the local level as a consequence of heterogenization due to the various ways globally circulated movements, flows and exchanges impact the local.² When external influences are introduced into existing societies, an osmosis at the grassroots level occurs, whereby extra-local influences are either absorbed into local practices or become indigenized in some form or another. The importance of human agency in this domain must not be underestimated. Increase in migration and travel following the integration of transport network systems worldwide and

¹ See David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 16; and Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

² See Arjun Appadurai, 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, p.32.

greater cross-border employment opportunities have largely improved people's motility; that is, the capacity to move socially and spatially. As a result, social relations across the world have been restructured globally and locally. Even countries hitherto classified as constituting homogenous populations such as Japan and South Korea have since the mid-2000s been officially recognized as multicultural, due in part to the influx of migrant workers in the domestic and healthcare sectors as well as the rise in marriages to foreign spouses.³

One could likewise venture that neoliberalism has engendered similarly heterogeneous conditions at the local level. Existing literature on this subject outlines the promotion of open competition and entrepreneurial spirit in the world market through liberalization and deregularization of market structures and cross-border economic exchanges; active privatization of state-owned enterprises and services; the rescaling of state power which includes decentralized governance by local authorities, and strategic creative destruction as the central tenets of neoliberal ideology.⁴ One of the ensuing consequences of neoliberal reforms is the unequal distribution of wealth which, together with economic inequality, inevitably creates social inequality and ergo a mass accumulation of dispossession. The other, being more spatially inscribed, concerns the uneven development and unstable landscape resulting from selective application and adaptation of neoliberal strategies. Such outcomes have deep and far-reaching impact on the lives of everyday people albeit in varying degrees depending on the individual. As such, the logical decision would be to review their effects 'on the ground' as

³Mike Douglass, "Global Householding and Social Reproduction: Migration Research, Dynamics and Public Policy in East and Southeast Asia," *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series* 188 (2012): 13-14.

⁴Bill Jessop, "Liberalism, Neoliberalism, and Urban Governance: A State-Theoretical Perspective" in *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe*, Neil Brenner and Nick Theodore (eds.) (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 107-108.

they unfold in the spaces of everyday life.

If the recent galvanization of a large proportion of civil society in a series of near consecutive public demonstrations and mass occupations in different parts of the world is anything to go by (with the Arab Spring uprising, Occupy Movement and Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong being the most widely documented), is the indisputable fact that spaces indeed matter. Organized and non-organized expressions of discontent are almost always conducted in public parks, squares and main streets because they are not seen to be under the dominant control of either the state or private ownership. As Mike Douglass et al posit, civic spaces such as these are dynamically sustained by interactions and frictions between the aforementioned parties and civil society.⁵

The accelerated speed with which local events can so quickly transform into a worldwide phenomenon is an outcome of ‘space-time distancing’. This view is concerned with the relations between local and distant social forms and events becoming ‘stretched’ due to globalization, now that modes of connections between social contexts or regions have become networked across the world. Anthony Giddens argues, “Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”⁶ This understanding keeps us mindful of the mutual influence the global and local have on each other: rather than the local simply serving as the site where global flows manifest, the global is where outcomes resulting from the localization of global processes are re-exported and diffused. In lieu of this, Ash Amin reprises the features of globalization as one of “heterogeneity, shifting identities and multi-

⁵ Mike Douglass et al, “Civic Spaces, Globalisation and Pacific Asia Cities,” *IDPR* 24(2), p.348.

⁶ Anthony Giddens, 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 64.

polarity” to support a revised understanding about the relationship between scales of operation and network. He sees the local, national and the global as no longer occupying separate spheres because their organizational structures and field of action are relationally held together in a matrix of multiple and asymmetrical interdependencies operating across local as well as larger territorial sites.⁷ As such, the emphasis should be on the dynamic aspects of connectivity itself, in how these relations are constantly being negotiated and exploited, yet never resisted or denied.

Taking all the above into consideration, it is therefore essential to introduce an updated view on localities. Jones and Woods’ concept of ‘new localities’ proffers a convincing one. While it acknowledges the contribution of the pioneering research in locality studies undertaken in the United Kingdom during the 1980s which incorporated a regionalist perspective, this revised framework proposes a more open approach to ensure that the multifaceted and multidimensional features of localities are reflected in resultant findings.⁸ In summary, three considerations for advancing studies on this topic are outlined. The first continues to privilege locality as a spatial metaphor best suited for exploring socio-spatial relations. The second emphasizes the importance of addressing different scales of space, ranging from the global to the micro-level. Finally, localities are understood to possess both material and imagined coherence: while the material aspect lends itself to the making of place, the imagined component is responsible for constructing the identity of a particular place.

For this reason, I find localities to be *prismatic* by nature. By applying a suitable apparatus or methodology, a locality can be subjected to both

⁷ Ash Amin, “Placing Globalization,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 14(2) (1997): 129-130.

⁸ The authors attribute geographer Doreen Massey’s 1984 monograph *Spatial Division of Labour* as the catalyst for what was to become the locality debate. See Martin Jones and Michael Woods, “New Localities,” *Regional Studies* 47(1) (2013): 31-35.

macro and micro analyses to produce general and particular sets of findings respectively. When objectified, it serves as a refractive lens for illuminating a polyvalence of criss-crossing and coalescing flows of commodity, people and ideas as well as the multiple co-present spatial scales (which are in themselves continuously subjected to modifications). From this, we can derive general descriptions about the institutions, power dynamics and structure of networks operating in each locality. Conversely, the same locality can be subjected to further scrutiny in order to extract a qualitative reading of inherited socio-spatial relations. On the definition of socio-spatial relations, I concur with Martin Jones' description:

They are deeply processual and practical outcomes of strategic initiatives undertaken by a wide range of forces produced...through a mutually transformative evolution of inherited spatial structures and emergent spatial strategies within an actively differentiated, continually evolving grid of institutions, territories and regulatory activities.⁹

Lest we forget are the increasingly mobile and informed individual stakeholders who, in this age of global connectivity, not only possess greater awareness of their rights but are also more likely to exercise them. This is a particularly relevant development as their individual and collective agencies can be used to access the impact of neoliberalism on a human level if one is to accept the criticism that neoliberalism is ostensibly concerned with extending mass consumer freedom and choice for products, lifestyles, modes of expression and cultural practices.¹⁰ Studies adopting this approach can be used to decipher the nuances

⁹ Martin Jones, "Phase Space: Geography, Relational Thinking, and Beyond," *Progress in Human Geography* 33(4) (2009): 498.

¹⁰ See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p.42.

conveyed in the experiences and feelings of individual actors and implicit meanings contained in the exchanges, frictions and resistance arising out of such transactions in addition to social interactions.

For philosopher Jeff Malpas, localities are better understood with reference to certain relatable actions. He explains:

Particular actions establish a context within which specific features of the world, and specific features of the agent's own conceptual repertoire, come into play, thereby providing a focus, not only by means of which we can understand and orient ourselves, but by means of which specific attributions of content can be made.¹¹

Depending on the agent, these can range from processes embedded in institutional or organizational structures to people's inter-personal interactions. While Duncan and Savage are correct in declaring, "We do not have some privileged access to understanding patterns of human agency simply by studying 'localities',"¹² there is nonetheless merit in attempting to understand the motivations driving a particular action. Alan Warde (directly engaging Duncan and Savage's comments regarding contextual emphasis in the study of localities) highlights the importance of spatial context for understanding human sociability: "If locality...is to be part of the explanation of action it is because it constitutes a context, or configuration, which delimits action...Context does not determine action, but it delimits action."¹³ In lieu of the expansiveness of current day networks and connections producing potentially overwhelming scales of space and territorial cover, constrains offered by context is

¹¹ Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 98.

¹² Simon Duncan and Mike Savage, "Space, Scale and Locality," *Antipode* 21(3) (1989): 187.

¹³ Alan Warde, "Recipes for a Pudding: A Comment on Locality," *Antipode* 21(3) (1989): 279-280.

necessary. They allow us to focus on local configuration to identify the structures and processes that set them into a matrix of relations. Because actions also occur in time and over time, this feature needs to be addressed.¹⁴ Framing localities in an open manner obviates the imposition of finite boundaries; instead, the borders of localities are deemed to be porous. It does not seek to truncate the ‘coming-in’ or ‘going-out’ of action-inducing flows but constructs a discussion around context. As such, the fluidity of localities is assuredly preserved.

While localities are fundamentally contextual and relational, it by no means invalidates the significance of place. For all intents and purposes, localities are inherently tied to place in the spatial sense. In order to truly appreciate the endless blends of conditions that make each locality unique, place functions as the site for dissecting these intricate relationships and networks. I furthermore argue that place performs a vital role in disciplining localities spatially. As far as the field of human geography is concerned, place is acknowledged as *the* strategic concept for exploring embedded processes and structures spatially in theoretical discussions as well as empirical research.¹⁵ But what defines place is the realization of experience through it: place is not simply encountered in experience, it is integral to its very structure and the possibility of experience.¹⁶ As sentient beings, the meaning of our existence is grounded in place – thought, experience and agency are established in and through space. It operates as a reflective site for gauging the outcome of actions. Like localities, the structure of place is also an open and interconnected field, although it is more critically shaped by the people,

¹⁴ Malpas, *Place and Experience*, p.98.

¹⁵ The TPSN framework, conceptualized to systematically decipher the polymorphic nature of socio-spatial relations in a heuristic manner according to the dimensions of ‘Territory’, ‘Place’, ‘Scale’ and ‘Network’, similarly fixes localities as a configuration of place. See Figure 3 in Bill Jessop et al, 2008. “Theorizing Sociospatial Relations,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26, pp.395-396.

¹⁶ Malpas, *Place and Experience*, pp.31-32.

things and spaces within it.¹⁷

As a consequence of globalization, places are also no longer the static entity they were once believed to be.¹⁸ With social relations now stretched globally across a multitude of spatial ranges, places are no longer bounded areas and have evolved into nodes where social relations intersect and activities take hold.¹⁹ Frictions will inevitably arise out of differences when global flows transect and the definition of place needs to reflect this infusion of dynamism. At the same time, the unique mix of relations that simultaneously configure and set them into wider relations with other places as part of the globalization phenomena are also what ensure the individuality of each place. Thus the stochastic and perpetually evolving nature of place at different points and stages of spatial flows is reaffirmed. By siting localities in place, this revised understanding about place aligns with what Jones and Woods recognize as the “relationality, contingency and impermanence” inhered in localities.²⁰ Taking into account the polarizing effects and uneven development stemming from global neoliberalism, as well as the varying degrees of state involvement in regulating neoliberal processes, effects on the ground are bound to be unique for each location and situation.²¹ In the case of East Asia and its Southeast counterpart, the exogenous origins of neoliberalism, compounded by

¹⁷ Ibid, p.36.

¹⁸ The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, writing in 1977, claimed that “(place) is essentially a static concept. If we see the world as a process, constantly changing, we should not be able to develop any sense of place.” His conviction that place is “a pause in movement” simultaneously reaffirms this position. See Tuan, 1977. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.179 and 138.

¹⁹ Doreen Massey, “The Conceptualization of Place” in *A Place in the World?* Doreen Massey and Pat Jess (eds.) (Oxford: The Open University Press, 1995), 60-61.

²⁰ See Jones and Woods, “New Localities,” p.36.

²¹ David Harvey notes how, in practice, divergences from the proposed template are necessary because they take into account existing conditions that vary according to place and time, and adjust them accordingly. See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p.70.

the region's complex colonial history and subsequent neo-colonial conditioning, have engendered a version of neoliberalism that is markedly distinct from the antecedent form heavily endorsed (and enforced) by the Reagan administration and Thatcher's government in the US and United Kingdom respectively in the early 1980s.²² Due to the respective member countries' political history, there also exists a myriad of variations of the model within the region.

Neoliberalism's impingement on everyday life is witnessed in processes of neoliberal localization which reveal themselves as place-specific forms and combinations as well as the specific interactions that are contextually constrained within local and other scales of operations.²³ With neoliberal restructuring (also known as second-stage neoliberalism) currently underway and showing no signs of abating, the trickle-down effects of neoliberalism in localities need to be accessed. A direct outcome of neoliberalism, which can be detected in the space of localities, is the unequal distribution of power and wealth – not only among everyday folks but also between localities themselves. Studies on its pervasive effects in real life spaces can support a spatial reading on localities on three levels: as a discrete space (place); relatively between localities (relative space); and as part of a wider network geography (relational space).²⁴ Films shot in actual locations have proven to be an effective means for exploring and communicating how people make sense of place, through the way they conduct themselves under different conditions in real life settings. As succinctly stated by architect-urbanist

²² See Richard Child Hill et al, "Introduction: Locating Neoliberalism in East Asia" in *Locating Neoliberalism in East Asia: Neoliberalizing Spaces in Developmental States*, Bae-Gyoon Park et al (eds.) (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 1-26.

²³ Neil Brenner and Nick Theodore, "Cities and the Geographies of 'Actually Existing Neoliberalism'" in *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe*, Neil Brenner and Nick Theodore (eds.) (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 21.

²⁴ See Jones and Woods, "New Localities," p.35.

Rem Koolhaas, film has the ability “to note space between (people).”²⁵ Place is essential to localities because it can support an intimate reading into the dimensions of localities. It offers a focus on context – one which simultaneously acknowledges the attributes of a site, the historical trajectories that helped shape its topological morphology and the primacy of experience. Through it, we can begin to grasp the structure of a locality by interpreting the meaning behind the situated exchanges of local actors which are to an extent either influenced by or a response to local and extra-local forces.

While the medium’s visual contribution to communicating aspects of space to an undifferentiated audience is universally acknowledged, it is in fact its ability to encode nuances *durationally* that makes it an invaluable resource for understanding the ways in which different neoliberal strategies are either accommodated or contested in real life. This is because cinematic recordings of human life contain dense layers of information which can be used for conducting spatial autopsies. By this, I mean to treat space as a live subject and suggest a flexible methodology which will enable us to meticulously dissect its components and study the processes operating in localities.

Cinematically-informed Methodologies for the Study of Space

In this age, films are increasingly employed for recording transformations around us since the speed of such changes are oftentimes difficult to digest in situ. This is particularly helpful for places that are constantly in a state of transition. Cinema’s specific contribution to image production lies in the ability of film to imprint a length of time.

²⁵ Rem Koolhaas, *Generic City* (Sassenheim: Sikkens Foundation, 1995), 19-20.

In Philip Rosen's words, "Cinema preserves a fragment of time that can be experienced as actual duration. Time itself seems captured".²⁶ This temporal feature of film means that it is capable of producing consistent if not continuous documentation over the *longue durée*. Even as the textures of space are mapped on film, real time is simultaneously imprinted, offering future viewers the opportunity to revisit them. Films therefore form an invaluable resource for learning about spaces that no longer exist or have undergone severe modifications. Even without direct access to the original locations, we can still learn a great deal about them. If we consider recorded spatial and temporal information to endure as a stable form, it becomes possible to treat the embedded data as valid resource to be employed for analysis. Provided that there is sufficient information captured in the audio-visual recordings, studies can be conducted remotely and still yield equally relevant findings.

In its material form, film is where sensory impressions are conveyed or stored. Being a photographic recording equipment entrusted with documenting movement, film is a temporal object susceptible to analysis proper to this project. Cinematic recordings on everyday life and practices are therefore prized for their anthropological and ethnographical contributions because they are able to capture the naturally-occurring rhythms of life generated by the unrehearsed activities of everyday folks. For onlookers, the medium offers glimpses into moments of socialization, whereby viewers are gradually given access to information on an individual or a group of people through their conduct and interactions. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, speaking from a phenomenological standpoint, explains why audio-visual observations of people are so arresting to watch: "They directly present to us that special way of being in the world,

²⁶ Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 29.

of dealing with things and other people”.²⁷ For this reason, the cinematic medium forms a suitable heuristic tool for communicating the qualitative aspect of lived spatiality and temporality. However, it remains the viewer’s prerogative to evaluate the felt impact of what is conveyed onscreen.

As both an architect and filmmaker, Patrick Keiller is convinced that films can provide significant input to architectural and urban discourse beyond simply depicting space. He says, “(F)ilm space can offer implicit critique on actual space, so that looking at and researching films can constitute a kind of architectural criticism”.²⁸ For example, films by the Italian neo-realist directors spanning the Second World War and French New Wave auteurs of the 1960s are of immense archival value to architectural theorists and urban historians because of their commitment to shooting in actual locations. Their desire to (re)present the city in all its unadulterated rawness offers viewers then and now insights into the urban socio-economic conditions of that period.²⁹ In the past, cinematographers typically adopted an impartial third-person’s perspective and filmed in a discreet manner. Considering how ubiquitous digital technology and portable audio-visual recording equipment have become, filming can now be carried out more inconspicuously than before. At the same time, we have become so accustomed to the presence of recording devices that what is transparently caught on camera or film are now simply our natural reactions. Joshua Meyrowitz rationalises, “For when the camera captures how you behave, then how you choose to act *for the camera* is also how you *really* behave in the situation, and

²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 58.

²⁸ Patrick Keiller, *The View from the Train: Cities and Other Landscapes* (London: Verso, 2013), 148.

²⁹ François Penz, “The Real City in the Reel City: Towards a Methodology through the Case of *Amélie*” in *The City and the Moving Image: Urban Projections*, Richard Koeck and Les Roberts (eds.) (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 236.

how you behave in the situation is how the camera captures you.”³⁰ These two conditions encourage a shift in the position occupied by the documenter: no longer seen as having to stand apart from the subjects being filmed, the cinematographer can easily be inserted into the milieu without fear of disrupting the natural flow of things.

The potential to build up an archive of audio-visual documentation over a period of time can be explored to help us understand how socio-spatial relations are constituted and continuously redefined. This can be done by treating the built environment as the backdrop since constructed landscapes constitute the material expression of a locality’s dominant political economy and where implied power structures are given physical form. The medium’s capacity to capture deeply felt changes in everyday spaces makes them a suitable tool for documentation and communication. The seminal study on the social functions of public spaces in main cities across America conducted by William H. Whyte and his colleagues at The Street Life Project from the 1970s serves as a classic example: by looking at how urban plazas, small parks and other outdoor gathering sites were used, the research group consolidated a list of key considerations that were found to be essential for creating successful public social environments. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980), an hour-long educational documentary, was produced to accompany the book publication and disseminate the team’s findings to a wider audience.³¹ One of the memorable segments features the use of time-lapse recordings to capture the choreography of people’s movements and occupation in the large plaza outside the Seagram building in New York throughout the day. For this, a camera was installed at high altitude over the square to obtain a birds-eye view. The resultant shots incontrovertibly proved Sharon Zukin’s point that public

³⁰ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 114 (original emphases).

³¹ The film can be viewed on <http://vimeo.com/111488563>.

spaces can function as “a window into a city’s soul,” seeing how they operate as physical sites of transactions, where city-dwellers interact on a daily basis and a city’s social life can be discerned on a human scale.³² Through it, we observe how individuals and groups seek to annex a space to support their everyday practices. François Penz explains, “When a camera is used on a street, it unwittingly captures a ‘phrase’ or a ‘paragraph’ of people’s spatial rhetoric, inscribed in their personal stories.”³³ In the documentary, film shots on people’s behaviour in public settings were accompanied by narrated explanations on how datasets could be derived from direct observation. Minute details of people’s interactions and gestures carry unspoken meanings and oftentimes produce unexpected insights into human psychology. From here, patterns of occupation by a group of people are plotted on drawing plans and the diversity of activities that take place are collated into graphs for comparison. Coincidences occurring across different sites are treated as empirical facts, allowing the research team to draw certain conclusions and subsequently make specific recommendations on ways to optimize sociability in various types of public spaces.

The increasing preference for cinema as the primary mode for universal communication is tied to the impetus behind innovations in film technology; that is, to intensify the power of sensorial apparatus. When the lens of the camera focuses on a particular subject, it becomes a “prosthesis for sight”.³⁴ By concentrating our attention on the immediate field-of-view, we either see better, see what we do not initially see or view things anew. In the same way that drawings have traditionally been utilized for conveying information in a spatial manner, the shift to the use

³² Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 259.

³³ François Penz, “Towards an Urban Narrative Layers Approach to Decipher the Language of City Films,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14(3) (2012): 5.

³⁴ See Giuliana Bruno, *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007), 141.

of film for the study of space is simply a natural progression as far as medium is concerned.

While films can directly contribute empirical evidence for the study of space, the results themselves may not necessarily be evident unless a visual-spatial critique is performed – either as a reading or analysis. This position parallels ethnographer Robert Gardner’s explanation on how films can be utilized for evaluating human behaviour. The anthropological model he proposes makes a distinction between realities and discoveries. In his opinion, realities are surface-level phenomena constituted by human behaviour but it is discoveries that reveal the underlying reasons behind a person’s actions.³⁵ The pursuit for insights underscored by Gardner can likewise be adopted to formulate a fresh approach to looking at localities – one that is spatially-derived and cinematically-informed. In so doing, it becomes possible to merge a realist approach to understanding space with an ideal one.³⁶ The former pertains to the material aspects of space – the hard facts as it were – that give rise to a tangible set of structures and processes, the ways in which these are related to one another and held together. The latter, being an abstract construct, crucially articulates the soft side of space derived through direct experience and personal recollections.

If film shots are seen to contain independent chunks of space-time, then transcribed within each one are complex spatial information that can be made explicitly visible. This is especially useful where locations are concerned because embedded within these shots are valuable material pertaining to the nature of spaces. By structuring a discussion on the

³⁵ Robert Gardner, “Anthropology and Film,” *Daedalus* 86(4) (1957): 346.

³⁶ The realist relationists, as Martin Jones calls them, contend with empirical observations and abstracted readings on reality to uncover “*facts about material bodies* and the way they are related” in space while their idealist counterparts are invested in the normative, abstract and selective components of experience for they reveal “*facts about human minds* and/or patterns of sensory experience.” See Jones, “Limits to ‘Thinking Space Relationally,’” *International Journal of Law in Context* 6(3) (2010): 250.

properties of a real location, it becomes possible to review three intertwining conceptions of space – absolute, relative and relational space – and describe their respective features in relation to the site. What is known as absolute space is fundamentally a finite three-dimensional space and the relationships between elements contained within can be effectively described using precise measurements. While such absolute dimensions are not typically self-evident in films, it is still possible to discern and even approximate spatial vectors from visual descriptions supplied by the *mise-en-scène*. This approach views the setting as a stable spatial-temporal field hosting discrete entities comprising objects and people. An ‘object-space’ reading is set up to consider the space between entities. In it, the physical distance between things – relative space – can be seen as the outcome of a dynamic relationship. The documented movements of human agents are likewise important as they form an essential orientation reference for viewers to grasp the layout of a setting.

However, the relationships between elements captured on film, especially where real locations are concerned, suggest that no setting is ever a closed system. With film being a temporal medium, the socio-spatial relations within and beyond are expressed in relation to time and requires its continued involvement. Time, being a consequence of action, reveals itself through motion and this is in turn inferred from space. In film, narrativity weaves time, movement and space together and manages the correspondence between them. Much can be learned by treating film shots taken in real locations as text since contained within them are a wealth of unmined data. By outlining the following approach for conducting cinematically-informed spatial autopsies, the socio-spatial structures operating on multiple scales and spatial planes can be discerned using a space-based methodology. For an analysis of the sort proposed, I incorporate François Penz’s concept of ‘narrative layers’ to rearrange environmental information embedded in screen space into

spatially organized narratives.³⁷ To illustrate this, a dissection of a film shot taken from the documentary *Old Places* (2011) is performed to obtain a closer look at the locality of a shabby little coffee shop in Singapore.

A Spatial Autopsy on a Locality: *The kopitiam* on Clive Street

The film *Old Places* was conceived to commemorate and celebrate the quotidian spaces of Singapore; it showcases a wide variety of sites, most of which were in the process of disappearing or facing redevelopment.³⁸ The link between memory and place is established using two layers of narration – a visual documentation of the site in its current condition and an audio one based on a corresponding person’s recollections of it. With the lush cinematography operating as the optical field for contemplation, the emotional attachment contained in the respective narrator’s verbal delivery evokes the meaning and significance of a place to that individual. By means of voiceovers, disparate point-of-views introduce an additional layer of information. A short segment is dedicated to an iconic *kopitiam* (the Chinese-Hokkien argot for coffee shop), more fondly known by its moniker “the coffee shop on 40 Clive Street” in Little India, one of Singapore’s historic districts.³⁹ Following an establishing view of the shop’s exterior from the street, close-up shots of patrons partaking in leisurely activities – eating and drinking, talking (in groups or on the phone) and reading – and the elderly Chinese proprietor preparing their orders are interspersed with still life studies of old *kopitiam*-associated

³⁷ See Penz, “Towards an Urban Narrative Layers Approach,” p.2.

³⁸ Directed by Roystan Tan, Eva Tang and Victric Thng; the film’s synopsis can be found on http://www.objectifsfilms.com/product.php?id_product=19.

³⁹ Tay Suan Chiang, “Surprising Serangoon,” *The Straits Times* 18 July, 2009. p.111.

paraphernalia accumulated over the years. They serve as visual mnemonics to accompany two successive narrators' reminiscence of the "lively atmosphere" and "thick aroma of coffee" that are no longer found in coffee shops today.



Figure 1. Film still of the *kopitiam* on Clive Street from *Old Places* (2011). Courtesy of Chuan Pictures.

For the purpose of this analysis, the street view centred on the shop, taken from the junction of Clive Street and Upper Weld Road, forms the subject matter (Figure 1). A long shot such as this is preferred because they help viewers establish environmental intelligibility and allow them to orientate themselves within the space of film. As the view also features a deep depth of field, a significantly greater amount of diegetic information is incorporated. Urban elements such as local infrastructure and building blocks contribute to the perceived partitions that structure the shot's composition. From this, we can begin to visually discern a series of spatial planes organized along the depth of field. Even seemingly undifferentiated details, figures and objects that constitute the *mise-en-scène* can be individually traced to the respective planes they occupy. Depth cues are given by size change along the camera's axis,

arranging foreground, mid-ground and background in succession.⁴⁰ This perceptual mode of visual organization is instrumental for structuring a systematic reading.

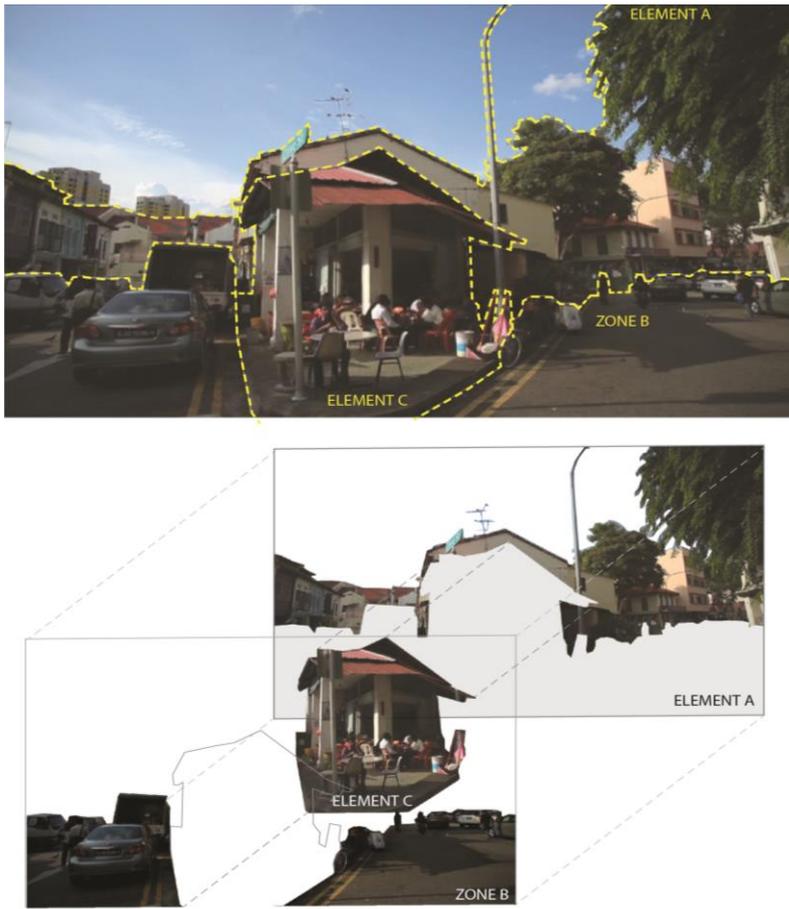


Figure 2. Disassembled visual planes of space ordered sequentially and labelled. Drawing by author (2015)

⁴⁰ Bruce Block, *The Visual Story: Creating the Visual Structure of Film, TV, and New Media* (Burlington: Focal Press, 2008), 52.

In Figure 2, three spatial planes are clearly evident and have been labelled 'A' to 'C' accordingly. As they appear to represent structures and fields, they can also be differentiated into 'elements' and 'zones' respectively. The narrative layers previously mentioned are comparable to these spatial planes. The first three of four narrative layers identified by F. Penz consider the wider urban context and original condition of film locations.⁴¹ Layer One, which relates to how people and objects are organized in space, especially in buildings, correlates with *Element C* in the dissected film shot. Its spatial boundaries are delimited by the shop's curtilage. Although the premises' official boundary is the extent of its building's façade, the shaded public walkway has been informally appropriated for the shop's use. As the subsequent shots imply, a distinctly slower pace of life is adopted here. Although it serves as a respite from the hustle and bustle of the street, the shop is first and foremost a site of economic exchange and consumption. The shot's inclusion of partial views into the coffee shop's interior helps to establish perceptual continuity between inside and outside. This visual permeability suggests an interpenetration of spaces. More crucially, it breaches the psychological divide separating public and private space which is so deeply ingrained in modern life discourses and its formative experience. By doing so, micro-level practices in the form of physical interactions between individuals that are typically conducted in private domain are now conjoined with the network of macro-level exchanges operating in the public realm.

What is categorized as Layers Two and Three by Penz address the site's planning history and its actors in the form of passers-by caught on film and are construed as being synonymous with *Element A* and *Zone B* respectively. While the *kopitiam* is foregrounded, these two layers crucially supply the context. As we know, shots of public spaces offer us

⁴¹ Penz, "Towards an Urban Narrative Layers Approach," pp.4-5.

insights into people's spatial rhetoric and the converging streets featured in *Zone B* fulfils this function. In this clearly defined field, the unchoreographed movements and actions of people who drift in and out of the camera's view supply an additional layer of information about the urban transactions of everyday folks who either pass through the site or purposely visit the shop and other local businesses in the vicinity. Their grounded actions, enacted in this locality, not only allow us to learn more about their normative behaviour and socio-cultural practices, they indirectly disclose the regulatory forces that constrain or enable the former.

Element A, on the other hand, is of interest for two reasons. For one, the environmental landscape of real film locations achieves coherence when the background is integrated into the shot. Tadahiko Higuchi's research on people's perception of their surroundings attests to the indispensability of background space as it offers a more complete sense of the environment. A landscape therefore functions as the ground from which cities, architecture and other lower-level structures forming parts of a spatial framework is to be comprehended.⁴² Secondly, its current morphology is a palimpsest of historical sedimentation. By tracing the historical trajectory of changes to the built environment, one can infer the processes of power construction via the planning policies and development projects that have shaped this locality over the years. In contrast to the generic public housing blocks in the far background, the shophouse rows forming the built landscape of this spatial plane have retained their vernacular features despite registering the passing of time. This is because these buildings, together with the free-standing *kopitiam*, sit squarely within the conservation area boundaries of Little India.⁴³

⁴² Tadahiko Higuchi, *The Visual and Spatial Structure of Landscapes* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), 189.

⁴³ For more on this and a map of its territorial boundaries, see the URA's official web entry at <https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/conservation/conservation-xml.aspx?id=LTIN#>

Named ethnic hubs such as this one are a legacy of colonial administration: the Raffles' Plan of 1822 restructured settlement patterns in Singapore to encourage concentrations according to racial or dialect groups (who also earned their living with specific skill sets or specialized in certain trades). This 'segregation by ethnicity' strategy was actively adopted by the British government because it served as an effective form of subjugation and control of the masses, eventually leading to the concretization of enclaves over time.

The historic district of Little India, acknowledged as an Indian enclave since colonial times, was officially gazetted for conservation in 1989 based on a master plan produced by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) in 1986.⁴⁴ In response to the previous year's economic downturn, the government activated efforts to concurrently recover the area's local heritage to establish historical continuity⁴⁵ and exploit its 'ethnic' features for commercial opportunities via tourism. This state-led decision drove the area's revival as a tourist destination and accommodation hub. While the scheme instrumentally protected the architectural landscape of the area, it has not been so for the businesses and residents installed here prior to the masterplan's launch.⁴⁶ Many small businesses were soon priced out although some have successfully diversified or capitalized on its place identity. Gone today is also the original community; in its place are visitors who patronize the food and beverage establishments and budget accommodation, as well as South Asian migrant workers who frequent the area on their days off. Much public criticism has been levied at the 'ethnicization' of historic districts into the distinct racial groups they supposedly 'represent,' i.e. Chinatown, Little India and Kampong

⁴⁴ Peggy Teo et al, *Changing Landscapes of Singapore* (Singapore: McGraw Hill, 2004), 111-113.

⁴⁵ In a bid to reinforce the district's historical links to India, the purpose-built Indian Heritage Centre, which was inaugurated in 2015, is located a stone's throw away from the *kopitiam*.

⁴⁶ Teo et al, *Changing Landscapes of Singapore*, 121-122.

Glam for the Malays, seen as perpetuating the racially divisive classificatory system introduced by the British, as well as the ‘thematic’ development of these quarters primarily to promote heritage tourism.⁴⁷ But for the aforementioned transient migrant user group, Little India evokes a sense of familiarity and functions as a surrogate site during their time away from their home country. As the physical construct representing the material aspect of space, the cosmetic conservation of this neighbourhood’s architectural facades conveys the hard facts and the social reality of this locality.

The clusters of high-rise public housing blocks on Klang Lane in the far background serve as an ironic visual reminder of the government’s interventionist approach to deter any possibility of ethnic concentrations forming in Singapore’s new towns following the country’s independence (Figure 3). This is managed through regulatory measures tied to the purchasing of flats delivered by the Housing Development Block (HDB) and subsequent community-building initiatives to foster racial integration in these public housing estates. In the former, the Home Ownership Scheme ensured a proportionally balanced distribution of ethnic groups during the allocation of new units while the Neighbourhood Racial Limits policy fulfils the same function in the resale of HDB properties.⁴⁸ Multi-racial grassroots organisations in Singapore include residents’ committees with direct links to their respective government representatives; housed in HDB estates, they are tasked with organizing activities that promote harmonious inter-ethnic relationships in their own

⁴⁷ Singapore’s multiracialism is built on the understanding of “4 ‘separate’ but ‘equal’ races in a nation of ‘one people’,” with the four races being the Chinese, Malay, Indian and ‘Others’, collectively referred to as CMIO. See Brenda Yeoh and Lily Kong, “Singapore Chinatown: Nation Building and Heritage Tourism in a Multiracial City,” *Localities 2* (2012): 145. See also their discussion on Singapore Chinatown’s legitimacy as a representative site of Chinese identity in Yeoh and Kong, “Singapore Chinatown,” p.146.

⁴⁸ Loo Lee Sim et al, “Public Housing and Ethnic Integration in Singapore”, *Habitat International 27* (2003): 296-297.

communities.⁴⁹ Read in contradistinction to the overt promotion of Little India as a historic ethnic enclave, the densities produced by the layers of spatial planes in the mise-en-scène support the coexistence of multiple narratives that reveal the structure of socio-spatial relations of the location featured on film. Even what occurs off-screen can be meaningfully inferred.



Figure 3. Klang Lane HDB flats behind buildings under conservation protection on Serangoon Road. Photograph by author (2015)

The remaining narrative layer in Penz's framework, Layer Four, addresses the directorial narratives which form the remit of the filmmaker.⁵⁰ In this instance, it pertains to why a shot is framed a certain way and the purpose for doing so. By elaborating on a locality's specific attributes in this descriptive manner, viewers inadvertently interpret what is conveyed onscreen subjectively. What may not be evident to some of the viewers is the visual contents' indirect (and perhaps, unintentional) reference to current immigrant policies adopted by the Singapore

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.305.

⁵⁰ Penz, "Towards an Urban Narrative Layers Approach," p.6.

government. Most, if not all, of the patrons who appear in this scene are South Asian migrant workers who have arrived more recently to live on limited stay work permits. The high proportion of foreign-born labour force, who currently make up one-third of Singapore's total population, is necessary to address human resource scarcity in this small country, particularly in low-skilled jobs.⁵¹ In the construction sector, the dominance of foreign workers from India and Bangladesh testifies to the formation of migration policies in response to immediate economic criteria of supply and demand and subsequent foreign labour management via the work pass system by the Ministry of Manpower.⁵² As a protection measure against undesired permanent settlement of unskilled to less skilled migrants, work permit holders remain as a transient workforce in Singapore due to imposed restrictions, tied to their employers and the job description stipulated on their permits. With no recourse to long-term residency or citizenship, their only option is to practice self-reliance and aspire towards individual success. Such ethos is therefore completely aligned with the precepts of neoliberalism; in Singapore's case, it would be more accurate to describe it as a neoliberal-developmental state governed by a "neoliberal political rationality."⁵³ Regardless of the variant forms of neoliberalism practiced or neoliberal

⁵¹ Singapore's dependence on migrant workers to fulfil the labour gap in the domestic help and construction sectors as well as the service, manufacturing and marine industries is reflected in the 870,000 new arrivals in the first decade of this century alone. See Brenda Yeoh and Lin Weiqiang, "Rapid Growth in Singapore's Immigrant Population Brings Policy Challenges," *Migration Information Source* (April 3, 2012) accessed July 7, 2016.

⁵² Through the Work Pass system, incoming foreign employees are issued with either a Work Pass (with restrictions), S-Pass or Employment Pass and these are determined by the nature of work to be undertaken, the applicant's level of education and agreed monthly salary.

⁵³ Eugene Liow views the neoliberal policies adopted by the Singapore government as an extension of the developmental strategies that drove the country's political agenda since its independence in 1965, with the former devised to further efficiency in the process of capital accumulation. See Liow, "The Neoliberal-Developmental State: Singapore as Case-Study," *Critical Sociology* 38(2) (2011): 243-244 and 255.

restructuring strategies adopted, the repercussions stemming from them have deep and far-reaching impact on the lives of everyday folks and they vary according to individuals.

Despite the dominant presence of the locality featured here, its area is only territorially approximated and because it is understood to possess porous boundaries, it can be treated as a node within a network. The complex web of networks generated from intersecting global flows is conceptualized to connect places endowed with well-defined social, cultural, physical and functional characteristics, such as the traditional *kopitiam*.⁵⁴ At the same time, the arrangement of any network structure is intrinsically non-permanent and its links can be reorganized to adjust to modifications within the framework, to respond to the local conditions of discrete places. In that regard, it takes into account the fluctuating nature of localities – even seemingly isolated localities are bound up in this larger system. Rather than a hierarchical order, it is the degree of intensity each locality impinges on others within the network that is crucial. Sangbong Lee equates the local as a unit of node since it forms the ground where network relationships are constituted. He sees each node as “a major active space for actors in the era of globalization (that) hovers between the global scale and the local scales, (with) connectivity and relational topology (having) greater significance than the geographical proximity of space.”⁵⁵

The decision to frame localities in this manner enables us to appreciate the richness of space registered within the interpellation of narrative layers – from the ‘abstract geographies’ of the public and private realms, the ‘local geography’ of everyday life that unfold in named locations or recognisable architectural morphologies to the ‘micro-divisions of space’

⁵⁴ See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 443.

⁵⁵ Sangbong Lee, “Six Theses of Understanding the Agenda ‘Localities and Humanities’,” *Localities* 4 (2014): 243.

which expresses a body's position in relation to something else and its orientation in space.⁵⁶ It implicitly cuts across different spatial scales to address the relational aspects of the locality being analyzed. Moreover, it can be applied to reveal the links between localities regardless of the geographical distance between them. In order to differentiate the network of relations within a locality from the network of relations between localities, I differentiate them into what I term 'engagements in nodes' and 'nodes of influence.' Engagements in nodes refer to the exchanges of commodities, ideas and people that are enacted in the space of place and give a locality its meaning and structure. Nodes of influence, meanwhile, relate to the importation of extra-local influences and pressures, oftentimes experienced as the ripple effect resulting from events in other localities. These constitute the relations that can be inferred off-screen. However, the degree of their impact once again varies.



Figure 4. One-storey corner building on the junction of Clive Street and Upper Weld Road. Photograph by author (2015).

⁵⁶ These categories of descriptive 'geographies' are outlined in greater detail by Fran Tonkiss in Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005): 97.

A recent visit to the site confirmed that the *kopitiam* is no longer there. In fact, the shop has changed tenants twice since the documentary was made; first, as a local eatery serving fusion East Asian dishes and currently as a Muslim-Indian restaurant more befitting the culinary palette of the observed passers-by and the area's place identity (Figure 4). While the height and envelope control imposed by the URA has allowed the free-standing structure to retain its unique characteristics, it has not guaranteed the continued survival of the *kopitiam* despite its reputation as the "only single-storey corner coffee shop in Singapore."⁵⁷ The convergence of heritage conservation in this climate of economic competitiveness has issued challenges to local proprietors as they attempt to balance a viable level of commercial sustainability while promoting the consumption of nostalgia to attract both tourists and locals alike. However, there is evidence of a variety of businesses catering to different markets: small-scale warehousing companies and Indian sundry shops can be seen coexisting alongside licensed drinking establishments.

The main discovery arising from this study is not so much about the constitution of locality but the forcible conservation of an already existing one. The unexpectedly numerous changes over this a short span of time suggest that an updating exercise is necessary to re-evaluate previously established networks of relationships pertaining to this locality. As can be deduced from this study, spatial autopsies are best performed on civic spaces as they are seen to be inclusive and accessible to civil society regardless of whether they are located on public or private land.⁵⁸ The fact that they do not appear to be under the jurisdiction of one particular group invites them to be openly claimed by its user. Although there is room for more discussion, the purpose of this analysis is to illustrate how the moving image medium can be instructive for engaging an enquiry on the features of a locality. By accepting that the attributes of

⁵⁷ Tay, "Surprising Serangoon."

⁵⁸ Douglass et al, "Civic Spaces, Globalisation and Pacific Asia Cities," 347.

a locality can be captured on film, it follows that a suitable spatial methodology can also be devised to extract information embedded in the space of film.

This visual-perceptual mode of exposure fulfils the criteria set out in the framework for studying localities in a new way. To reiterate Jones and Woods, “whilst locality research can be spatially focused, it should not be spatially constrained, and needs to be prepared to follow networks and relations across scales and spaces in order to reveal the full panoply of forces and actors engaged in the constitution of locality.”⁵⁹ Focusing our examination on local configuration can yield plausible explanations as to why and how one locality is different from another.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, localities are structured relationally and grounded in context. Methods for studying localities need to adopt an open and flexible approach to take into account the instability of the field as well as the fluid, multiscalar and multidimensional matrix of unequal relations that characterize localities. Place contributes to this endeavour by operating as a strategic concept for identifying, disentangling and deciphering the socio-spatial structure and constitutive processes of localities.

The particularizing of context alongside relations within and beyond a site simultaneous to the non-privileging of any hierarchical structure or spatial scale is requisite for three reasons. First, it consciously avoids flattening relationships into one dimension and assesses them as part of a highly complex web of connections in an open and fluctuating system. Secondly, it accepts that power inequalities inevitably exist in

⁵⁹ Jones and Woods, “New Localities,” 39.

relationships and this becomes particularly evident in localities. Finally, it acknowledges the presence of multiple socio-spatial agents, from global organizations, the state, local government to concern groups and individuals who are constantly negotiating or defending their own interests and space. The empirical properties of all entities and structures remain unaltered; all that has transpired is what Neil Smith terms as the ‘kaleidoscope effect’, whereby any deliberate change in perspective generates a new pattern of relations.⁶⁰ It acknowledges the rich heterogeneity contained within this nexus of connections and observes a keen awareness of the fluctuating asymmetrical relations between them.

Audio-visual documentations of real spaces can reveal how space and time are socialized and localized in the probable narratives of everyday people, or what Arjun Appadurai calls the “spatial production of locality”.⁶¹ Embedded within mere functional information is an additional dimension which, through proper excavation using the approach outlined, can be employed to heuristically explore the depth of lived experience grounded topologically in place. Furthermore, the medium has consistently demonstrated its potential for universal application and adaptation for analytical use. The proposed methodology pursues a bottom-up approach for conducting spatial autopsies: it addresses empirical facts pertaining to a particular locality alongside the qualitative features of its corresponding place. Although the manner of execution seem simple and direct, it enables us to delve into the richness of the milieu to better grasp the relations, meanings and tensions contained in the spaces between – some of which are yet to be articulated.

⁶⁰ Neil Smith, “Dangers of the Empirical Turn: Some Comments on the CURS Initiative,” *Antipode* 19(1) (1987): 64.

⁶¹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p.180.

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