

# The Presentness of the Unpredetermined

## Michael Glasmeier

We have images, literature, and explicit theories regarding the space that surrounds and defines us. To listen to these voices, the condition of space in our day, especially urban space, is steadily worsening. It isolates and alienates; it seems illegible, decaying, disintegrating at the speed of transportation and media—so goes the diagnosis.<sup>1</sup> At times distended, at times shrunken, its continual mutation and reorganization obeys the laws of the worldwide primacy of economics. It prefigures, as it were, an apocalyptic vision on earth, where we as malingerers idle over our paltry activities.<sup>2</sup>

This space—manifesting itself as sinister megalopolis, postmodernized city, desolate town—wants to be tamed and made livable, to be historicized and humanized, in order to avert an all too catastrophic future. For this, too, we have images, literature, and explicit theories,<sup>3</sup> but above all we have the concrete ideas and interventions of architects and urban planners, who lay down cultivated paths in the urban wilderness and stage a sense of orientation with splendid, emphatic buildings. Thus space remains in constant flux, yet without ever consolidating itself, as in the Paris of Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809–1891) or finding its rhythm as in the film *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*; 1927) by Walter Ruttmann (1887–1941). Instead, its functions, purposes, and conditions are dominated by a constant and apparently anarchistic process of redefinition. The old must accommodate itself unconditionally to the new, as well as to the zeitgeist of the global economy. Urban space as a “network of movable elements”<sup>4</sup> articulates itself discontinuously in a differentiated simultaneity of heterotopias,<sup>5</sup> “non-places,”<sup>6</sup> and palimpsests<sup>7</sup> in the superimposition of multiple functions.

This instability of the urban, with its marginalization even of dwelling itself, makes every aesthetic question a political one and every act of planning social. In this way both art and theory find it easy to identify wounds, scars, and inevitabilities through the mere act of showing, especially since an abstemious urbanism is rarely in view. Just as rock bands in the late 1960s routinely appeared atop garbage dumps in their television clips, the coincidence of the undefined continually and automatically provokes a new range of political symbols to embody complex perceptions. The flickering space produces its own images; and no matter in which direction the camera points, the result is political.

The same, of course, is true of Peter Bialobrzeski’s photographs, and especially of *Lost in Transition*,<sup>8</sup> which emphatically addresses and gives visible form to this diffusion of urban space. Yet Bialobrzeski goes a decisive step further: his photographs do not content themselves with the simple appearance of transitory spaces and the incidental capture of a transitory moment—a doubling that intensifies the effect of the indeterminate and improbable. Nor are they to be read primarily as traces, as an index of reality or aids to memory.<sup>9</sup> All these factors, inherent in the medium of photography, do play a role in the images; yet I experience Bialobrzeski’s photographs rather as assertions, intensifying the improbability of the real and driving it further in the direction of decision. These images don’t just talk; they say.

<sup>1</sup> For a helpful compilation of relevant texts from René Descartes to Paul Virilio, see Jörg Dünne and Stephan Günzel, eds., *Raumtheorie. Grundlagentexte aus Philosophie und Kulturwissenschaften* (Frankfurt am Main, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See especially the work of American science fiction writer Philip K. Dick (1928–1982) and the films based on his novels, *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), and *A Scanner Darkly* (Richard Linklater, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Marc Mer et al., *Translokation. Der ver-rückte Ort. Kunst zwischen Architektur* (Vienna, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Kunst des Handelns* (Berlin, 1988), p. 218.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, “Von anderen Räumen,” in *Dits et Ecrits. Schriften in vier Bänden*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), pp. 931–42.

<sup>6</sup> Marc Augé, *Orte und Nicht-Orte. Vorüberlegungen zu einer Ethnologie der Einsamkeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> The rhetorical concept of the palimpsest is particularly current in literary and cultural studies; for a more precise definition, see for example Gérard Genette, *Palimpseste. Die Literatur auf zweiter Stufe* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> The title makes obvious allusion to the film *Lost in Translation* (2003) by Sofia Coppola, which explores typical experiences of fundamentally untranslatable strangeness as two Americans in Tokyo (Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson) come together in a hotel for a certain period of time.

<sup>9</sup> Philippe Dubois, *Der fotografische Akt. Versuch über ein theoretisches Dispositiv* (Amsterdam and Dresden, 1998).