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Between the ‘Media City’ and the ‘City as a Medium’

Takaaki Chikamori

The Media City: Media, Architecture and Urban Space
by Scott McQuire

Abstract

This article reviews Scott McQuire’s book, The Media City, which focuses on the historical formation of the media-architecture complex of the current urban environment. While the book provides rich insights into the ways various media technologies have become interconnected with urban architectural structures, the underlying concept of media in McQuire’s discussion could be criticized in three respects: (1) visual-centred, (2) technology-based and (3) real-time oriented. After considering these three points in the context of the theoretical ideas put forward by Henri Lefebvre, Friedrich Kittler and Walter Benjamin, particular attention is paid to Benjamin’s prominent figure of the flâneur. Through reconsidering the experience of the flâneur in terms of the technique of getting lost in the city, possibilities are suggested as to thinking differently about the ‘media city’. In other words, it is proposed that we should examine the theoretical possibilities concerning the modern urban experience between the ‘media city’ and the ‘city as a medium’.

Key words

Walter Benjamin ■ city ■ labyrinth ■ media ■ urban experience

MEDIA ARE no longer just devices for producing images of representation – they are increasingly interconnected with the architectural structures of cities. This rising formation of the media-architecture complex, which is dubbed the ‘media city’, has caused a decisive impact on our contemporary social and spatial experiences.

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Starting from this recognition, Scott McQuire attempts in this book to examine particular historical moments which have conditioned the present configuration of media platforms and urban terrains. By taking a historical approach, it is intended to avoid both simplified statements and linear understandings of historical processes, e.g. proclaiming the 'annihilation of time and space' as a critical tendency caused by the widespread use of digital media and computer technologies. As McQuire points out, this kind of rhetoric has been recapitulated as a reaction every time a new technology such as the steam-powered train was introduced. Instead of repeating such an idealistic proposition, McQuire focuses on distinct historical phenomena, where the two lines of the media and the city intersect. The topics and historical moments referred to in the book range from early urban photographs from the 1850s, the electric lighting of urban space since the 1880s, the city-symphony films and the avant-garde glass architecture of the 1920s, to the more current technological configurations of digital media and computers rearranging both public and private space. Underlying the selection of these historical moments is a strategic point of view. Following Walter Benjamin, McQuire aims at phenomena 'at the crossroads', which is a threshold or a transitional phase, where the potent powers and political possibilities of a certain technology are not yet fully revealed. In other words, this is an attempt to capture the ambivalences in these thresholds, without hastily reducing them to understandable elements.

The three chapters comprising part one, ‘Thresholds of the Media City’, demonstrate well the descriptive method of McQuire; therefore, in the following, I would first like to present his discussion in the three chapters in detail. One of the key insights McQuire develops through his case studies is a paradox of the media city: although pervasive innovations in media technology are often seen to cause a crisis of urban space, they are also employed as a means of response or a solution to such a crisis. An instance of this sort of response in the field of urban representation is Charles Marville’s project of photographic mapping of Paris in the 1850s. In his attempt to map the city under an immense process of reconstruction and regularization of urban space, the ‘Haussmannization’, Marville set out to produce the serial photography of Paris. The seriality of the photographs is essential here, since the meaning of the photographs in his mapping practice lies not in each image but at the level of a set or series. As a collection of fragmental images, Marville’s photographic mapping provided a means to respond to the emerging urban spectacles that consist of fleeting events and contingent encounters. An alternative technology to cope with the further upheaval of the urban street, which was filled with the shocks resulting from the busy traffic and the movements of crowds, was cinema. Above all, McQuire concentrates on the ‘city-symphony’ films of Walther Ruttmann and Dziga Vertov of the 1920s. McQuire captures the technique of multiple shots and montage as the formal principle of dynamism of the film image, which corresponds to the dynamism of street life. Importantly, films not only served as a device to produce an adequate representation of the city but
were also an integral part of the urban environment framing the fragmental perception and the fleeting social experience. The merging of films with the urban space was a step forward in shaping the complex of media technologies and the urban milieu.

In this manner, McQuire elaborately traces the hidden trajectories towards the organization of the media city. These historical routes are, however, not described as forming an inevitable linear process into the present regime. Instead, the focus goes back and forth on the chronological axis, so that the past and the present converge and illuminate each other in terms of their conditions. This technique of historical superposition is manifested in the way the chapter dealing with the relationship between architecture and digital technologies is placed adjacent to the previous chapters on urban photography and films. In this way, McQuire tries to illustrate how the cinema-city coupling in the 1920s transformed into the contemporary set of the computer-city. By examining a range of architectural projects including Constant’s ‘New Babylon’ project and Archigram’s urban designs (plug-in city, computer city, instant city), as well as the use of digital technology in the field of architectural design and film-making, McQuire points out a significant tendency in which the urban environment is increasingly planned and designed to be soft, flexible and adaptable. The city has been losing its solid contour and transforming into a ‘liquid city’. When considering the application of computer technologies in the field of architecture and city planning, however, another important shift is singled out: although once there was an orientation towards constructing user-configured environments through flexible technologies, it was displaced as more emphasis was placed on the instrumental mastery of the designer over the digital image. Thus, here is a version of the well-known ambivalence of computer and digital technologies: they can be either a means for creation, participation and freedom, or an instrument of repression, control and surveillance.

As a whole, the book contains substantial historical material, which is successfully composed into an articulated configuration such that the trajectories that have formed the contemporary regime of the media city are convincingly illuminated. In this sense, this work is a good example of a research in which the productive tension between the theoretical perspective and historical description is maintained throughout, providing rich and informative insights. However, when focusing on a particular theoretical point, some critical comments could be made. Here I would like to question the concept of media or the medium in McQuire’s discussion. First, the typical technologies McQuire assumes when referring to media are photography and films on the one hand, and digital image technologies on the other hand. At the same time, a series of topics covered in the discussion including postcards, city-symphony films, architectural projects, digital cinema, urban lighting, public screens, glass architectures, transparency, overexposures, surveillance, webcams, etc., are all concerned with the domain of visuality. Hence, in this book, it can be pointed out that
the concept of media is thought of as (1) visual-centred, (2) technology-based and (3) real-time oriented. But is not this sort of conception a very narrow view of media? Is there not a more fundamental dimension of media, the examination of which would propose other effective approaches to the problem of the media city? In the following, I would like to present three critical points based on discussions by Henri Lefebvre, Friedrich Kittler and Walter Benjamin. As a matter of fact, these are among the names mentioned by McQuire as the writers who have inspired him in the planning of this book. Therefore, in a sense, the following reading could be seen as a practice of deconstructing or, hopefully, widening the theoretical range of this book.

First, the visual-centred conception of media can be criticized in terms of the Lefebvrian theory of ‘production of space’. Lefebvre proclaims that while modern capitalism has produced abstract spaces as the very condition of reproducing its inherent social relations, the domain of vision has increasingly taken a dominant position in the society, repressing ‘the lived’ or other human senses. ‘The rise of the visual realm entails a series of substitutions and displacements by means of which it overwhelms the whole body and usurps its role’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 286). And this process is not separated from the rise of the modern image technologies, commodification of space and spectaculization of the city. Here, the predomination of images and the visual, despite their attractive appearance, can be regarded as forming a suffocating sphere in which differences, or moments of resistance, are replaced by images of differences.

The world of images and signs exercises a fascination, skirts or submerges problems, and diverts attention from the ‘real’, i.e. from the possible. While occupying space, it also signifies space, substituting a mental and therefore abstract space for spatial practice – without, however, doing anything really to unify those spaces that it seems to combine in the abstraction of signs and images. Differences are replaced by differential signs, so that produced differences are supplanted in advance by differences which are induced – and reduced to signs. (Lefebvre, 1991: 389)

Consequently, it would not be enough just to pursue the historical processes resulting in the interconnection of city space and visual media technologies: it should be supplemented by the enquiry of what has happened outside the regime of the visual.

Second, the technology-based thinking of media would be objected to by Kittler’s distinctive view developed in ‘The City is a Medium’. In McQuire’s account, media are basically presented as modern image technologies, whereas the city is thought of as a built environment, or a configuration of architectural structures. The radicalness of Kittler as a media theorist resides in his proposition that, instead of viewing the city as being connected to media technologies, the city is originally a medium. Here, media are not considered at the level of a series of specific established
technologies like photography, cinema and computing, but are conceptualized at the most fundamental level: ‘Media record, transmit and process information – this is the most elementary definition of media. Media can include old-fashioned things like books, familiar things like the city and newer inventions like the computer’ (Kittler, 1996: 722). From this view of Kittler, there is an inversion of reasoning in McQuire’s account, for explaining that the urban terrain and media platforms have come to be combined for the first time in the modern period entails a proposition that they were separated originally, so that in the course of the explanation the substantial nature of the city as a medium is hidden or made invisible. The media city, in spite of the apparent similarities, can be regarded as an inverted form of the city as a medium.

Lastly, the real-time oriented view of media is to be questioned from the standpoint of Benjamin in his urban writings. McQuire describes the situation in which more and more mobile and ubiquitous digital media have pervaded the city, causing the acceleration of ‘real time’ feedback, in contrast to the previous technologies aimed at recording of past events. But for Benjamin, according to Graeme Gilloch, the author of a comprehensive study of Benjamin’s work on metropolis, the city is primarily a medium of remembrance: ‘The city itself becomes the medium for Benjamin’s urban recollections’ (Gilloch, 1996: 67–8). At stake is not the flow of information, which appears and disappears instantaneously, but the traces of the past which will continue to remain in the urban space. This way of thinking is more obvious in the Berlin writings, where Benjamin depicts many images of recollection from his childhood in Berlin, employing the technique of Proustian mémoire involontaire, than in the ‘Arcades Project’. ‘The Berlin texts were theoretical and methodological experiments for the “Arcades Project”, models of historical analysis and writing which sought to explore the relationships between metropolitan environment, individual memory and collective history’ (Gilloch, 1996: 59–60). A particular term comes to the fore when considering the relation between the city and memory in Benjamin’s thought: the labyrinth.

In Benjamin’s writings on Berlin, the labyrinth of the modern city and that of the work of memory are inscribed in the formal properties of the texts themselves. He presents a labyrinth (the city) within a labyrinth (memory) within yet another labyrinth (the text). To remember the city and to write about it, one must lose oneself in mazes that correspond to the very structure of the metropolis itself. (Gilloch, 1996: 68)

Although McQuire himself indicates ‘the technological uncanny’ in the sense that the home is becoming more and more unsettled because of the undermining effects of electronic and digital media technologies, one of the things lacking in McQuire’s description could be this labyrinthine dimension of the city.

If the concept of media presumed in McQuire’s discussion can be criticized as visual-centred, technology-based and real-time oriented, then
what kind of urban experience should be focused on in order to think differently about the ‘media city’? What could be a typical experience which goes beyond the realm of the visual, reaches the level of the city as a medium, and contacts the labyrinthine dimension of the city? The experience of the flâneur, to which McQuire himself refers several times in the book, would be a key to this question. While Benjamin’s prominent figure of the flâneur has been mentioned in many literatures on urban modernity, the understanding of the figure seems to have been relatively limited. Usually, the flâneur is described as an aimless stroller who enjoys a panoramic view of urban space, or as a detective who holds behind his apparently indifferent attitude a keen attention to the details of people on the street. In each case, a certain position seems to be assigned to the flâneur: a position as a privileged observer who is somewhat detached from the bustling street life. However, when considering Benjamin’s original urban writings, the flâneur sometimes appears as the one who falls out of this assumed detached position. Instead of being aloof on the street, the flâneur can get lost, intoxicated like a hashish-eater, seized by some kind of attractive object and dragged around for a long time almost unconsciously.

An intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next street-corner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name. (Benjamin, 1999: 417)

The practice of flânerie can, then, be seen as a unique technique for getting lost in the city. But the important thing is that to lose oneself in the city, in the case of flânerie, does not simply mean a situation such as one’s sense of direction getting temporarily confused, or the configuration of streets being too complicated to comprehend. It rather refers to a situation in which one’s system of perception, or the whole system of subjectivity, undergoes a radical transformation.

Not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboard and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest. (Benjamin, 1978: 8–9)

To understand this subtle difference between ‘not to find one’s way’ and ‘to lose oneself’, one should take into account the underlying theoretical context. It is the theory of mimesis, which Benjamin studied intensively in the early 1930s while simultaneously working on the Berlin writings. In ‘On the Mimetic Faculty’, Benjamin thinks of the mimetic faculty as the basis of all the higher faculties of human beings, and points out that the faculty has declined in the course of time both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. For children as well as ancient people who have a vivid sense
of mimesis, the world is perceived as full of similarities, correspondences and analogies, while surrounding things keep whispering secret messages to them. Just like these children and ancient people, the *flâneur*, with his long-forgotten faculty of mimesis recovered, induced by magical messages that cannot be decoded easily, strolls around for a long time and loses himself in the forest-like city. The practice of *flânerie* is therefore not just about the visual experience, but about the transformation of the whole perception system which is the very condition of the visual experience. Instead of standing as a self-confident subject opposing things and people in urban settings as objective reality, the *flâneur* begins to lose his distinctive contours and dissolves into the other kind of reality of the city.

As Benjamin mentions the ‘anamnestic intoxication in which the *flâneur* goes about the city’ (Benjamin, 1999: 417), the practice of strolling in the city is closely connected with the practice of remembering. ‘The street conducts the *flâneur* into a vanished time’ (Benjamin, 1999: 416). In the remembering, importantly, the *flâneur*’s private memory intersects with the collective memory which is retained in the form of numerous traces in urban space. ‘It [the street] leads downward – if not to the mythical Mothers, then into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private. Nevertheless, it always remains the time of a childhood’ (Benjamin, 1999: 416). Urban memory traces cannot be read by a detached observer, but for an intoxicated *flâneur*, with his recovered mimetic faculty, the traces can be read as meaningful indexes of the past. On the level where individual memories and the collective memory permeate each other, the city reveals its hidden face. This is when the *flâneur*’s experience goes out of the domain of visuality, connects to the level of the city as a medium, and comes into its labyrinthine dimension. And making this experience of the *flâneur* who loses himself on the street as a starting point, which would unfold another kind of urban reality, we might be able to think differently about the ‘media city’. In other words, we should turn to examining the theoretical possibilities concerning the modern urban experience between the ‘media city’ and the ‘city as a medium’.

These critical comments above are, however, not so much intended to impair the value of McQuire’s meticulous historical and analytical study, as to open its immanent possibilities to broader theoretical contexts. As a matter of fact, one of the most impressive qualities of this book is the richness of episodes and instances, which are weaved together into a logically consistent, but by no means monolithic nor homogeneous, description of the process forming the contemporary media-architecture complex. In reading this book, to follow the way McQuire presents one episode after another in an unexpected order, drawing a range of theoretical insights from them, can be associated with the experience of the media city, which McQuire himself tries to approach. In other words, it can be said that the very object of McQuire’s work, the experience of the media city, is performatively shown in the descriptive method of his work. Gilloch has pointed out that there are similarities between the characteristics of Benjamin’s texts.
on the city and that of the modern metropolis: the urban texts of Benjamin come mimetically close to the cityscapes of modernity. ‘His writings come to take on precisely those features which he identifies as characteristic of the modern metropolis’ (Gilloch, 1996: 181). The same thing can be said about this book: the work of McQuire itself comes mimetically close to a media city, or a city as a medium in its original sense, in which one can expect numerous unexpected encounters.

References

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