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Waiting Places as Temporal Interstices and Agents of Change

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Abstract:

One of the main ways in which in-between time-spaces are organised and materialised in the urban environment is through waiting places. In this article we point to the transformative potential of waiting places, their role as actors in an urban web, and discuss briefly their societal role in recent historical changes. Public waiting places are today increasingly becoming pre-programmed: connected to other designed environments and integrated into a consumer context, thus losing part of their traditional role in the production of public domain as places for waiting. However, waiting is also to a great extent something experienced as a result of non-programmed events, something that can occur without warning, and has to be handled cognitively. In the article we use insights from the field of material semiotics as well as from attention theory, in order to suggest a model of waiting stages that describe the changing roles, and agencies, of these in-between time-spaces, situated as they are in the urban net of people's daily activities.

1. Introduction: Waiting as a space of agency

Waiting can be described as a possibility to act (for a time) without usual constraints, and as an opportunity to relieve a certain stress. One example of this could be seen when students enter a classroom. During the time in-between entering the classroom and the time when the teacher starts the lecture, there is short moment of freedom where voices can be raised, things might be tossed, etc. At times, such incidents can be used consciously to prolong the interstitial period even longer. Waiting can, however, also in itself be seen as something that creates tensions or anxiety. Waiting, such as waiting for the bus, the doctor or an oral exam can be quite frustrating, even unpleasant. Children in particular “at such in-between times often look around frantically for an activity, even an asocial one, to forget with, to cover up their anxiety like the soldier before the battle” (Bettelheim 1950:120). Typical for an unsettled in-between time is the experience that anything or nothing can happen. Sometimes the time is saturated by a reluctance of giving up an old activity, perhaps mixed with a certain anxiety of taking up a new activity that gives a situation certain inertia and a feeling of interstitiality or uncertainty (cf Bettelheim 1950; Hammad 2002). In-between time slots thus afford thoughts and activities that otherwise, in the pace of programmed, or busy, everyday behaviour never would develop. In that way, in-between time and duration may be seen as carrying agency in themselves. Time, or as we would rather like to frame it, time-space, gets as it were a role as an actor in the network of daily urban life: it could be a moment of release, the birth of a decision, or a strategic pause that forces or calls other actors into action.

2. The socio-semiotics of time, action and space

It has been stated that “any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or if it has no figuration yet, an actant” (Latour 2005:71). Latour thus, in a sociological interpretation of Greimasian semiotics, suggests that an “actor” is a heterogeneous entity that could include humans, artefacts, atmospheres, or, in principle, anything that makes a difference in a certain situation. In the quotation above, Latour also points to the difference between actor and actant in terms of abstraction. Taken generically, Latour’s theory of associations allows a broader set of actantial types than does traditional semiotic theory, because it unties the actants from authorization schemas derived from Proppian folk-tale analysis (Propp 1958; Greimas 1987). In this article we will primarily relate to the field of material semiotics that is influenced by Latour (1999) and Mol and Law (2001), in order to look at the actantial role of in-between time-spaces, and in a reflection about consciousness and attention in waiting situations. This will consequently end up in a semiotic view of waiting that takes sociological as well as psychological aspects into account.

The actantial modelling of time-space has been discussed in terms of segmentation, sequentially and duration by Hammad (2002, 1990), in an analysis that follows Greimas’s original actant theory. In the sociological discourse of material culture Latour (1997; 2005) has suggested the terms timing, spacing and acting in order to grasp the temporal (verbal) aspects of spatial and material influences on sociological space. Time-based agencies can, in accordance with both Hammad and Latour, be delegated by individuals as well as by institutional or juridical bodies. Actantial roles given to time (or duration) could thus for example be the case when planning authorities, by doing nothing but wait for a period of time, find strategic ways (periodisation), to postpone certain projects in order to prioritize others (Jessop 2006). Here could, for example, be mentioned a case in southern Sweden, where a vast coastal area was, for fifty years, characterised in detailed city plan documents as a recreation area with a park, including small harbours and beaches, but in reality remained a waste dump area instead, because of investments made by the local politicians in plants for the processing (incineration) of garbage (Sandin 2009, Qviström 2007). In the following we will however not so much regard the planning decisions as such, but more the effects that temporal architectonics have on the ways in which individuals and groups of people organise time-based niches in everyday life.

In-between times, such as the ones between home and work or arrival and departure, going to bed and falling to sleep, can be as important situations for social transgression, creativity, identity and innovation as the moments when we are explicitly and programmatically concentrated on a matter with a proper framing (Goffman 1974). The potential of unsettledness is illustrated by the experiments conducted by Hammad (1989; 2001) in a series of socio-spatial experiments concerning the access to, and privatisation of, architectural space. Hammad showed how time intervals, and institutional *segmentation* of time into repeated daily sequences – like: working, eating, working, leisure, working, eating, resting, sleeping, – could be used to conquer the silent rules (etiquette) of the institution itself, and thus make possible alterations of spatial ownership. The experiment concerned for instance how the tables of the dining room could be occupied, by taking advantage of the short period of time between end of work and start of dinner hours, causing a distortion of the otherwise hierarchical distribution of authorities in the room (Hammad 2001:26f. & 32f.).

If an unsettled spatio-temporal frame might be a main factor for interstitial ingenuity, it is not a necessary one. In situations of vital importance, like those of being prisoned or waiting for death, may produce extra-creative action. Apart from the overall societal habit of disciplining linked to imprisonment (Foucault 1977), one could go deeper into how detention sentences are actually coped with, and explicitly focus on what type of activities these types of enforced waiting may bring to the fore, i.e. ask what types of alternative actantial roles may be given to this in-between time-space. The book *Prisoners’ Inventions* (2005) is a testimony of how creative inventions appear as materialised consequences of coping with this particular type of duration.

Waiting situations, as a specific form of in-between time-spaces can, in short, be given a transformative role, i.e. it can have agency. The actorial role is not a question of intention but of effects. An action is as Latour has pointed out, always also an event in the sense that it put things into action that can not be predicted in advance (Latour 1999). This also means that any description of affects needs to have a great sensitivity to the things that take on an actantial role. In the case of waiting, this means that the material, spatial and temporal aspects can be seen as con-joined in the effect of environmental and cognitive temporal evolvement.

3. Urban types of waiting, and their recent historical transformation

Since “urbanity” today can be seen as no longer geographically restricted to life located within the narrow city borderline, but is part of a condition widely spread through the communicational fabric of transportation and through interactive means of telecommunication, the role of institutionalised waiting form a part also of the life of a more rural population as well as in the semi-private condition of being electronically tied to others (cf. Österberg 1999, Albrecht & Mandelbaum 2005). However, the large city facilities for waiting, such as train and bus stations, are those that have undergone the strongest transformations as concerns the content of their interior and surrounding environments. Waiting places used to be designed as a clearly demarcated place of its own in the modern building types of the industrial era. Waiting was sometimes seen as a “lack” of activity, a temporal niche for nothing more than reflection or an occasional chat, but it was also expected to be a time-slot for productive activity, and through the promotion of practices such as knitting, weaving, reading and writing, waiting was even rendered accountable and accumulative (Schweizer 2008:54). Libraries and archives during the late nineteenth century could be designed with a reading/waiting room as a building of its own, clearly detached from the building of library collection or the archive. The waiting room of railway stations used to be clearly territorialised in a specific room with physical facilities (openings in the wall) and services for tickets and time-tables.

From the 1990s and onwards these waiting rooms have been increasingly integrated into a commercial environment. Rather than rendering waiting productive, waiting places are increasingly thought of as an integrated part of a consumer landscape. Railway stations are a point in the case. In Sweden, the Central Station in Gothenburg is one of the earliest clear-cut examples. Rebuilt in the early 2000s, the waiting spaces are now integrated with the circulations spaces of the Central Station shopping mall. Victoria Station, London, is another example, with a centre space for eating and purchasing of fast food, and with a hard to spot facility for time and ticket service hidden amongst brighter commercial signposts, announcements and electronic displays. Waiting benches are few in number in this central space, but can be found randomly in corridors and leftover spaces along the paths to the rails and trains. The most clear cut example to date is, however, Hauptbahnhof Berlin that opened in 2008 with more that 60 % of its area reserved for retail facilities (Bakerson 2010).

Also hospital environments are increasingly becoming commercial spots of interest. Facilities like kiosks, cafés, hairdressers, etc., nowadays occupy the interior public spaces of hospitals. This is reminiscent of the case of large scale hotel interior aesthetics, as was pointed out by Jameson (1994) as containing all sorts of decorative and blank, but highly designed environments, where for instance the hotel reception is not easy to find, unless you are a regular customer. These types of spaces create new types of heterogeneous (and commercial) waiting facilities, and hinder, as it were, certain traditional spatial behaviour.

4. The waiting place as a program and as a niche

In an experiment conducted at hospitals in southern Sweden 2009, a group of industrial design students were asked to transform ten different waiting rooms (Ståhl & Petersson 2010). The aim was to find out the needs and wishes of waiting persons and employees at the hospital, and then to make design proposals for transformations taking these wishes into account. Several solutions to this task involved the idea of “tidying up” the at times messy impression of the place, ridding it from notes, posters, old framed pictures and photos, left-over parts of medical equipment, and odd pieces of furniture. Two main tendencies were then detectable, the first one aiming at logistical and cognitive clarification, such as introducing larger and more visible room numbers, new sign-systems for directing visitors, and better wall-systems for a smoother streaming of people’s movements. The other tendency of solutions to the task, aimed more at an atmospheric kind of aesthetic, e.g. by introducing wall surfaces with a possible automatic colour alteration, or wall paper, furniture, etc., that may have a particular [derivative] or distracting effect on the people in the room.

These proposals, and the examples of waiting place commercialisation mentioned above, show a common tendency to construct waiting as a pre-programmed activity. In the hospital waiting room case, the waiting situation was designed as a functional and homogeneous goal oriented activity, where the more random

and multiple possibilities for distraction diminished for the waiting persons. In the commercial examples, distraction was called for, but in the same pre-programmed way as in the hospital waiting room. One could even state that one of the primary goals of the benches and seats placed with such care in the circulation spaces of mall-like facilities, is to catch the attention of the waiting person (drinking his coffee or whatever) in order to sell or create a desire for some commodity. The construction of visibilities is here of utmost importance (cf. Brighenti 2010).

Investigation of what these in-between time-spaces offer, can be done through the notion of “affordance” (Gibson 1977) covering the potential human perception of, and interaction with, space and matter. In anthropology, the “shared” affordances have sometimes been accentuated (Ingold 1988), which is of obvious importance for urban circumstances. Another differentiation is made in the semiotic theories of culture (Sonesson 2007) between direct and indirect affordance. In our urban context this would mean that body-related affordances (such as a concrete ramp at the base of a building that is fit for sitting) are distinguished from culturally produced cognitive offerings (such as a digital announcement that offers departure time, or a purchasing action). Applied to urban context – and the specific case of the waiting situation – the theory of affordance sheds light upon the temporality of things offered, and to whom they apply, by asking: What actions can be taken? The general trend in waiting room transformation seem to favour a reduction of the existing number, or rather, types, of possibilities in the waiting room, despite the aim of city planners and architects to facilitate a filling of the waiting “gap” with new activities or perceptions (and transforming waiting activities to any number of pre-programmed non-waiting activities). This means also that the possibility to construct a personal, or situational, “niche” in these environments, is affected, sometimes as leading to more possibilities for the waiting person, sometimes as constraining action during waiting.

“Niche” has been described as a set of affordances that makes up the ecology for a given species (Gibson 1979), or designating a useful set of distributed cognitive features of a situated mind (Sinha, 2010). Niches and affordances thus have an evolutionary impact. Here, we will confine ourselves first of all to culturally induced niches that allow – and sometimes call for – a certain style or way of acting. The waiting place could basically be seen as an example of niche construction, insofar as the waiting place is a niche that makes the socio-cultural and material agency of waiting possible. Certain spots are simply regarded as better spots for waiting than others. This niche of waiting could easily be detected, for example, around an office building: Where (in this setting) do people take a break, smoke a cigarette or just pause for a while without doing anything in particular? What spots at a certain place are most often singled out for waiting? It could, for example, be the place that allows you to wait with your back against a tree or a wall, and with good visual control of the surroundings. Sometimes planned and designed with benches, ashtrays, etc., these places must not always be formalised in order to attract spontaneous waiting or pausing. But even so, good waiting places often have some qualities in common, not necessarily with all other waiting places but with some: the good place for waiting for a friend, and for smoking a cigarette might for example not be the same. In this sense one could perhaps differentiate between sub-niches for different kinds of waiting. Waiting-for-the-bus and taking-a-break-to-catch one’s-breath are activities that relate to places of different affordances. In a perspective of socio-material evolution they have different genealogies.

The niche could also be described as a spatial actor in itself: it influences ways of acting in a larger context and thus ‘modifies a state of affairs’. Niche-construction can thus be seen in terms of actor-network stabilisation (Latour 1992), or as a spatial modality (Hammad 1990/2001). Constructed as a network of relations between certain actions or abilities, and the socio-spatial situations where these take place, the niche can be seen as dependent upon not only its constructing affordances, or links to other types of functions, but also on its resemblance with other similar niches. It could in other words also be described as a fluid stability (Mol & Law 2001), and thus include the evolution of a certain family resemblance between different kinds of actors. Contrary to the type of network stabilisation that locks a set of actantial positions between each other, a fluid type of stabilisation remains intact (in terms of effect), even when the stabilising actors are substituted, as long as the new ones are associable with the same sort of niche. A specific time-space situation – like the waiting-for-a-bus – might thus be associated with other sorts of related time-spaces, and consequently stabilised through this act of recognition (cf. Kärrholm 2008 on the concepts of “sort” and “fluidity”). Two kinds of waiting places could thus (at least in theory) be part of the same niche construction without containing a single constituting actor in common, as long as there is a series of other examples of the same sort having actors in common with both. Without here entering deeply into the semiotics of what constitutes similarity, it serves here to say that this type of analogy – recognition of resemblance between actors – can also be discussed in terms of iconic relationship based a common

ground of recognition (Peirce 1931-1958: 2:228; Sonesson 1999). A common ground, or “abstract” is then the case when for instance “Americanness” is said to be the property of two distinct persons not otherwise (visually or spatially) related (Peirce 1931-1958: 1.293; Sandin 2005).

These acts of recognition imply that our analysis of waiting situations could benefit from taking into account also cognitive theories of what it means to attend to something, or expect something, to occur in a specific context, and furthermore what then happens when the context shifts.

5. Field of attention in a waiting situation

The development of contemporary waiting places, and their integration into a consumer context, as described above, disturbs or transforms the niche of waiting. In order to strengthen the analysis, and emphasise the cognitive part of material semiotics, we need to make a detour into the theory of attention. More specifically, we will address the issue of keeping a thematic focus in a certain context, and then discuss an alteration of that context, as in the historical and socio-spatial cases mentioned hitherto. This will in the end lead us to a model that describes how waiting, from the perspective of a situated individual, can be seen as modes of being in control of forthcoming events.

Psychological attention may, in reference to the phenomenology of Aaron Gurwitsch (1964), be described as a subjective focusing on a “theme” which is surrounded and influenced by a “context”, which in its turn is surrounded by a non-thematic, more indirectly influencing, “marginal” (Arvidson 2006). Arvidson discusses various types of alteration of the context that appears in everyday situations as well as in specifically conducted problem-solving situations. Arvidson exemplifies (2006) such a notion of shift-of-context with “waiting for a bus”. In Arvidson’s example, a waiting person discovers that the wrong bus arrives, i.e. the waiting context is altered, even if the main attentive theme “waiting for a bus” is still maintained. The total field of attention is altered, according to Arvidson, from having to do with “the queue to board the bus, the place where the bus will actually halt, etc., to how it [i.e. in what manner the wrong bus] is blocking my way, paths around it, or when it will move” (Arvidson 2006: 67). Arvidson’s example shows the impact of a shift of surrounding attention caused by an event uncontrolled by the experiencing person.

In his article “Attentional Capture and Attentional Character” (2008), Arvidson points at salience as a better way of describing shift of attention than through the concept of intention. In this, he follows the tradition of Gurwitsch and gestalt psychology, that mostly gives priority to a stimulus-driven factor and how they capture the attention. It also corresponds with the notion of affordance, belong to environment as well as individual, but presented by the environment. This perspective can be seen in contrast to the view where the expectations of the observer are regarded to play the most important part in attendance selection, as for example advocated by William James (Arvidson 2008). Arvidson’s view goes well in line with the actor/actant perspective, where the aspect of intentionality traditionally has been seen as less interesting, and only important to the induction of change if translated into activities (Latour 1998). Arvidson’s main argument is that goal directed selectivity cannot, as saliency can, account for the stabilisation of “formative constituents of gestalts” (Arvidson 2008:544). For us, this could perhaps be more properly formulated as ‘selectivity cannot account for actant production’ since this would mean that the actor would indeed lose its character as a “mediator” that makes a difference (i.e. its performative ability to transform a situation) and become instead a transparent signification, a passive (but still) node in a network, i.e. an “intermediary” (Latour 1998). Instead, materialities always work as actors in any given situation. From a perspective of material semiotics, the shift-of-context is always co-produced by material actors, and this is also why the transformation and commercialisation of our everyday environment have everything to do with the on-going construction of waiting as a niche.

6. Four different modes of waiting

In relation to our interest in environments or situations that construct waiting as a niche, we want to discuss the stabilisation of waiting places, i.e. the in-between time space as a place for losing or gaining control. This could be done by departing from two analytical perspectives. First, it could be seen as if the waiting place takes on agency of its own (out of our own control), i.e. when the hidden impact and transformative

role of a certain actor is suddenly revealed and experienced as increased (i.e. it goes from “intermediary” to “mediator” in Latour’s (1998) vocabulary). Here, the waiting situation causes resistance, brings gravel into our plans, i.e. waiting itself becomes an actor that needs to be dealt with. Second, the other – and opposite – perspective would be to see the time-space becoming an actor without resistance, with a clearly defined, smooth and accepted output. In this case, the time-space has been inscribed with a well-defined role and become a stable, or unquestioned, actor in a certain program. In the first example, the “going mediator” case, we experience a shift-of-context to the immanent qualities of time-space itself, sometimes due to a problem where something stops fulfilling the expected obligations. Suddenly the time-space demands attention, new meanings to be inscribed, and new actions to be taken. In the second example (the “going intermediary” case in Latour’s terminology), the time-space actor becomes well stabilised and used as a means to shift the context of waiting smoothly on to something else. A quotidian example, that show these two aspects, could be the new spatial strategy of cafeterias at malls and department stores in Sweden (and other Western styled countries). Pre-1990, restaurants and cafeterias often had their own floor at the department stores (the top floor). Taking a coffee involved a clear spatial movement and a definite break from the shopping activities. From the 1990s and onwards cafeterias and restaurants are increasingly situated in the circulation spaces (especially on ground floor) of the mall itself. This involves the exposition of goods and shopping possibilities to the coffee drinker (as well as an exposure of food and drinks to the shopping person). This kind of situation could be described as a spatially conducted or pre-programmed shift-of-context. The shopping person is transformed into a coffee-drinker and vice versa through the salience of the adjacent context.

In the following formalised modalisation, we propose four clearly distinguishable modes of time-space agency, ordered according to diminishing degree of stabilisation. Since increased stabilisation is also experienced as affording more predictability as concerns the control of the situation, such as when it will end, the four modes describe also four degrees of being in control. We label these times-spaces (or time-space agencies of a larger network) *settled*, *pre-settled*, *unsettled*, and *non-settled*.

Settled	Stable, or high degree of stabilisation, where the endpoint is experienced to be within the control of waiting subject
Pre-settled	Temporal endpoint is rule-governed, but above individual control
Unsettled	Spatio-temporal extension is unsettled but is expected to settle
Non-settled	Unstable, or low degree of stabilisation, conditions completely out of control

Different modes of waiting based on stability, and degree of control of the situation

6.1. Settled

First, we have a type of pre-programmed (strategic, intentional) break, such as having a cup of coffee, a cigarette or a sit-down just to catch one’s breath. This is a time-space in control of the waiting subject. The waiting as time-space has here been given a strategic actantial role as affording rest, intentional distraction, etc. Pausing – waiting for nothing special, apart for the waiting effect in itself. This is an in-between time given primary *agency by the waiting person him/herself*, who thus conjoins the actantial roles of “authorizer” and temporary “owner” of the waiting place (cf Hammad 2002). This kind of waiting is often consciously induced in a consumer society, thus also causing a division between “authorizer” and “owner”. In retail areas, cafés, benches and seating opportunities appear as material actors to produce or trigger a staged type of waiting. As such it is often co-dependent of design amenities (from architectural design to communication devices). As an urban agency, it could be labelled “staged” or “settled” in-betweenness, aiming at the introduction of a relaxing atmosphere, or retreat.

6.2. Pre-settled

The second type of waiting is the waiting for a specific pre-scheduled moment, a bus, a doctor, a friend, or a scheduled event. This often involves a kind of partial control of the current circumstances, but not of the moment waited for. The time-space can be given an agency (that could be planned) but it is subordinated to an activity of higher authorial order, such as catching the bus. Time is here given as an interval affording

certain delimited types of actions, like reading or observing/contacting others in the same position. The sociality produced during these kinds of events could be based on the fact that no definite outcomes can be given – thus a certain type of uneasiness can be present due to the fact that other determining actors are out of control. It is a sociality of a possible break, where the threat of a sudden halt in communication saturates the situation (imposed e.g. by a train departure, the clearing of a traffic jam, or just by the fact that the game is over). What seems like an interlude at the time, could be the unprecedented start of new events. This is a partially settled, or externally controlled, type of waiting, circumstantial, and strategically or tactically handled while it lasts. When the object waited for is at hand, the waiting is over. In this sense it is an objective waiting. Although these spaces could be, and are, pinpointed by commercial interests, the attention of the subject is first of all directed towards waiting, meaning a subordination to the (uncontrollable) endpoint. Airport shopping is a type of activity that adjusts to a pre-settled waiting, where the shopping environment is designed in order for customers to be able to beat a hasty retreat (Freathy & O'Connell 1998).

6.3. Unsettled

The third type of waiting is the waiting for the solution of an unintentional circumstance imposed upon the waiting person. One is not waiting for time to pass, but for a certain situation or action to take place. It could be simply a waiting for the end of waiting, i.e. with no other specific objective, such as when stuck in a traffic jam or on a train that suddenly has stopped without any information on when to start again. The unsettledness could often lead to disappointment, or even aggression, but also to new interactions and inventions of new plans and routes. An illustrative example of this is given in the short story “The Highway of the South”, where the Argentinean author Julio Cortázar describes a traffic jam on a highway south of Paris (Cortázar 1986). The waiting time is unsettling and seems to go on forever. Over the hours and days of waiting new couples, friendships and routines are formed, matters of life and death are handled, etc. However, when the waiting time is over they all get their cars and just drive on. Although Cortázar's story is exaggerated, the phenomenon he describes is actually one of everyday life. The situation produced during these kinds of unsettling circumstances could be both stable and transient at the same time, and typical of an unsettled in-between situation where anything or nothing (or both, as in Cortázar's story) can happen.

6.4. Non-settled

The fourth mode is not experienced in what we ordinarily think of as every day urban life, but existentially rather stands for the opposite, i.e. the extra-ordinary event, when the ordinary becomes the out-of-the-ordinary. The fourth mode of waiting is thus waiting as part of an uncontrolled series of events without any pre-programmed or even spontaneous action in sight at all. Such events, including abrupt shifts-of-context, could for example include riots, revolutions and natural disasters.

7. The relation between different modes of waiting

The relationship between the four modalities are in real life situations constantly negotiated and changed. In the most controlled mode, the in-between time-space can be used as a means for shifting context to other things. For example, the time-space can, as we have noted, become an actor mobilised for the purpose of consumption. In the least stabilised modes, predictability decreases towards zero, and the time-space requires, or opens up for, the potential and even need for new and not yet defined agencies. One sort of physical place, such as a bus stop, could be the arena for all four kinds of waiting time-spaces. So even if the relationships between these four different bus stops to some extent remain related (for instance by means of a fluid stabilisation making them recognisable as bus stops) they can work in very different ways, thus representing great differences in terms of network stability (and on the axis of intermediary-mediator). It could thus also be noted that these four hypothetical bus stops would also differ a lot when it comes to the actions that they afford, i.e. they differ greatly as niches for waiting, and perhaps even more importantly in the ways that they make it possible for people to effect a certain situation and place.

A waiting situation could include exchanges between these different modes of waiting. The Arvidson example above, when “wrong bus arrives”, may be seen as a waiting situation going from mode 2 (pre-settled), to mode 3 (unsettled), but after a short moment of lost orientation, there is a return to the pre-settled mode (2), i.e. a more, but not fully, controlled “waiting for”- situation. The common view is to regard these modes as stages, with an ambition to reduce the uncertainty of stage three into the more stable stage two and perhaps further on to the safe stage one (although we could of course also imagine a

personal weakness for uncertainty situations, or a wished for destabilising effect of drugs, or an inter-subjective influence causing a will to stay a bit longer in a chaotic mode, etc). This aiming-for-a-more-stable-stage could be seen as the action of solving the problem of losing control, a strategy where one tries to get rid of a waiting situation by camouflaging it as a non-waiting activity.

Today, technology (mobile phones, visualisations, maps, apps, etc.) makes certain trans-contextualisation easy, like going between the unsettled mode (3) to pre-settled mode (2), or even to the settled mode (1). This transformation is further facilitated by the commercialisation of our public domain that has followed in the wake of the consumer society. Food, for instance, is never far away.

In a recent example from the harbour of Gothenburg where queuing lorry drivers usually have to wait up to three hours in order to get on the ferry we can see a spatial transformation of the waiting place, going from an object-aimed pre-settled mode (2) of waiting to a settled (1) one. Traditionally, the drivers have to stay in line in their vehicles, with motors running (or constantly starting-stopping). Recently a queue number system has replaced that physical line of cars, so drivers can instead get their number, then park their vehicle a bit on the side, and spend the waiting time sleeping, eating or otherwise make things outside of the lorry. However, as soon as this new facility was opened, the City of Gothenburg also instantly searched in announcements for entrepreneurs of food etc, to make this environmental change in the harbour more profitable. (Göteborgs Stad, 2008). Another example of this is the increasingly common possibility to skip telephone queues by registering your number and waiting for them to call you. Although all these new approaches to waiting might have their advantages, the tendency of always turning one waiting mode to another might in the end be problematic. Pre-programmed facilities for shift-of-context through ever more complex and salient presence of cell phones, the shopping environment with its space for advertising, electronic text messages, iPhones and music, all becomes means by which “non-programmed” or “blank” time-space is constantly re-negotiated as a waiting of mode two or mode one. Waiting as an open in-between time-space is stabilised, thus disarming the potential of an interstitial production.

Moving from bottom to top in the waiting modality matrix, we recognize from our reasoning above the kind of actor stabilisation that shows the transformation from the waiting place (or time-space) as a mediator to a seemingly frictionless intermediary. The commercial spaces as well as the hospital waiting rooms mentioned above showed, despite different types of function and spatial integration, a common pattern of strategies for pre-programmed waiting. Open-ended waiting places were in both instances replaced by stable ones and more restricted and predictable waiting situations. This again indicates a strategic stabilisation of these in-between time-spaces as actants in a program.

In the words of Serres (1991) and Hetherington (1997, 1999, 2000) one could say that the waiting place is not, in what we have here regarded as a general tendency to stabilise or programme the urban waiting conditions, allowed to work as a “blank figure”. Semiotically, the concept of blank figure can for instance denote a stranger, a scapegoat or a joker in a deck of cards, i.e. a person or artefact that could be inscribed in a social context with almost any kind of agency or signification. The blank figure is in Hetherington's words:

the open possibility of a heterogeneous multiplicity in which the dance of all things can occur without prescription (Serres, 1991). The text has yet to be written in this space. What matters is not so much the multiplicity of interpretations that follow what is written on that blankness, rather it is the effect of that blankness as a form of agency that is of interest. (Hetherington 1998:126).

The presence of a blank figure suggests an absence that needs to be filled, a figure that appears as a white sheet of paper, yet “has agency written all over it”, as Hetherington (1999:69) comments (the proliferating interpretation and art historical impact of) Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. It is precisely this form of agency – blankness – that seems to be the threatened part of this niche ecology of waiting places. Blankness is not just a quality of a material or spatial condition (as exemplified by Hetherington) but also a temporal one. The strategic disarming (in spatial planning) of blank spaces, a pre-programming of all kinds of spaces from urban zones and streets to domestic spaces, is today supplemented with the temporal architectonics, largely induced and implemented as a result of the commercialisation of public space and to some extent enhanced by the possibilities of new media and technology.

8. Concluding remarks

Time-spaces in general, and waiting places in particular, have in this text been regarded in an actantial perspective, allowing us to see waiting and waiting places both as networks of actors, and as actors in themselves, involving material circumstances as well as the taking control of the time-space (waiting) situations. This approach also led us to see waiting places as niche constructions, producing places and associations that afford certain activities and block others. The role of material design in these niche constructions thus seems to be an important issue of further investigations. A differentiation of waiting as a time-space agency was proposed, as four modes ordered according to diminishing degree of stabilisation: settled, pre-settled, unsettled and chaotic. The interstitial production of waiting situations should be acknowledged, and the viewing of waiting places as niche construction, in combination with the four modes of waiting should be seen, we propose, as a first step to frame this question more seriously as an issue for a semiotics that regards as significant both material and human activity. The conceptualisation has also enabled us to form the hypothesis that a lot of waiting situations today move towards a higher degree of stabilisation. Recent changes of commercialisation and urban design could be seen as linked to the diminishing role of “open” waiting (and perhaps even of “open” everyday life) as part of the production of a public domain.

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