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Lund Hansen, Anders

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

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Walking through a Liquid Forest of Symbols

Anders Lund Hansen

> *Urban territory becomes the battlefield of continuous space war, sometimes erupting into the public spectacle of inner-city riots, […] but waged daily just beneath the surface of the public (publicized), official version of the routine urban order. (Bauman, 22)*

Demolition of spaces of "the other" and construction of borders to control coming and going have been common practice among city builders for millennia. Walls and weapons of force remain essential aspects of space wars. However, space wars can play out in ways that move beyond physical destruction, fortification, and military hardware. Economic and semiotic space wars are driving forces behind contemporary production of urban space (Fairclough et. al.). Urban transformation processes are largely the outcome of space wars in that deliberate and systematic creative destruction is part of the logic behind current capitalist space economy. These spatial struggles have often been staged in city streets.

Walking the streets of big cities is a mind-blowing experience, especially in New York City. This center of the "American Empire"

Anders Lund Hansen made the film *SPACE WARS: A street level odyssey through the center of the American empire — New York City* (7 min.), published in this issue of Liminalities, for which this essay is a supplementary text.
Author notes: It was the Argentinean music project Gotan Project, and the tune with the title: "El Capitalismo Foraneo" that inspired me to launch this video project. The rhythm of the music and the title and refrain of the tune provides an excellent foundation for the story I want to tell. I want to thank Eric Clark for his support at Lund University and Neil Smith for his generous hospitality when I was a Visiting Research Scholar at Center for Place Culture and Politics, The Graduate Center of the University of New York (CUNY), in the fall terms of 2002 and 2004. I also want to thank Daniel Makagon and an anonymous referee.

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is a great laboratory for studying urban change. Walking through the streets of the city, a cacophony of signs, impulses, and rhythms of modern society are played out. Streets are more than just pathways from which to get from one place to the next. Instead, they are the materialized topographies of different modes of time-space production, as well as sites of social interaction and political protest. Many urban scholars have been drawn to the streets in search of meaning, "botanizing the asphalt," by reading the city's street-level performances. Getting lost in the urban labyrinth is one method of gaining insight into modern society: "The city is the realization of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth. It is this reality to which the flâneur, without knowing it devotes himself" (Benjamin 429-30). Walter Benjamin did this brilliantly in his *Arcades Project*. Through the study of a particular spatial form (the arcades) he showed how our imaginations, our dreams, our conceptions, and our representations are mediated through urban materiality, and he emphasized that we do not merely live in a material world. Through the rhythms of walking (de Certeau) one can observe and study myriad rhythms of modern society and the multiplicity of "footprints" that provide convergent and divergent spatiotemporal histories.

Reading the city from the perspective of the walker is not as simple a task as it may seem upon first sight. The successful reflexive wanderer, in my view, manages to be tuned in to the daily rhythms of the city and its material manifestations while linking the impressions to more abstract knowledge of the city. From this perspective the street can be seen as a medium through which particular cultural forms are expressed (Keith). Together, everyday urban rhythms (e.g. morning and evening routines) and rhythms of greater wave-length (e.g. investment cycles in the built environment) constantly transform urban space.

Another method to observe the rhythms of the street is to observe regularly from a fixed point. Lefebvre suggests an elevated closed window as an ideal position to carry out rhythm analysis. This kind of position provides an opportunity to observe from a distance the flows and the fixity of the city. An example of another kind of fixed observation is photography. The camera is a powerful

tool to capture situations in urban space. Paul Auster describes an interesting urban photo project in *Auggie Wren's Christmas Story* (the scene is also in the film *Smoke*). Auggie works behind the counter in a cigar store on Court Street in Downtown Brooklyn. Every morning at the exact same time he takes a picture of the same street corner. Auster describes the project when he examines it for the first time:

> Eventually I was able to detect subtle differences in the traffic flow, to anticipate the rhythm of the different days (the commotion of workday mornings, the relative stillness of weekends, the contrast between Saturdays and Sundays). And then, little by little, I began to recognize the faces of the people in the background, the passersby on their way to work, the same people in the same spot every morning, living an instant of their lives in the field of Auggie's camera. (6-8)

In the spring of 2004 one could view Lisa Autogena and Joshua Portway's art installation *Black Shoals Stock Market Planetarium* in central Copenhagen.[1] The installation showed a live representation of the world's stock markets.[2] Stock market data from Reuters are represented as stars in the night sky and, like a planetarium, presented as a hemispherical dome in a dark room. The stars and star formations "react" to the trading that goes on around the globe. The installation was interesting since it gives a rare representation of the rhythms of global money. As Barney Warf notes, flowing "at the speed of light, as nothing but assemblages of zeros and ones, global money dances through the world's fiber optic networks in astonishing volumes" (34). I have been interested in showing how these rhythms of global money relate to urban life. One of the aims, thus, has been to document how the "rhythmic flux and flow of capital investment and disinvestment in the built

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[1] Earlier, in a different composition, the installation has been shown at Tate Britain in London.

[2] Frankfurter Wertpapierbörse, Eurex, Milan Stock Exchange, London Stock Exchange, New York Stock Exchange, NASDAQ, Toronto Stock Exchange, Tokyo Stock Exchange, Singapore Stock Exchange, Hong Kong Stock Exchange, Copenhagen Stock Exchange, Oslo Stock Exchange, Stockholm Stock Exchange, HEX (Helsinki Stock Exchange).

environment" is manifested in urban space (Clark 147). Forces of capital destruction in the space economy give rise to struggles over space resembling what David Harvey calls a "frenetic game of musical chairs" (393).

Flows of capital and people in the built environment generate urban change. The classification by finance capital of particular areas as good or bad investments ("redlining") is a crucial political economic mechanism behind these flows and operates at different scales: ghettoization is more than a neighborhood phenomenon — it is inflicted upon regions and nations as well. The actors engaged in redlining are therefore especially powerful combatants in (urban) space wars. Investors, financiers, real estate agents, developers, local politicians, the state and local social groups are all powerful combatants in struggles over urban space. Processes of specific battles among specific actors over concrete places and times lead to specific urban "topographies" (Katz). However particular and unique, these socio-material topographies are heavily influenced by the structural characteristics of the capitalist space economy (Sheppard & Barnes 1990). As Harvey shows us, space constitutes the *Limits to Capital* in its constant search for "spatial fixes." This search entails the making and taking of "rent gaps" (Clark & Gullberg; Smith), struggles over which generate gentrification and related processes of urban change.

The city, however, is more than these abstract rhythms. People inhabit the city; they are not passive bodies:

> It is not possible to reduce the body or the practico-sensory realm to abstract space. The body takes its revenge — or at least calls for revenge — for example in leisure space. It seeks to make itself known, to gain recognition as "generative," thus appropriating or shaping urban space through everyday life, struggle (Lefebvre) or tactics (de Certeau). (Simonsen, 51)

In the *Space Wars* film we meet diverse characters who populate the streets: an African-American school guard, anarchist activists, the homeless flute player, Latino policemen, Chinese market-stand dealers, panhandlers, hustlers, street people, artists, laughing children and many more. We travel through areas like Wall Street,

DUMBO, Midtown, the Lower East Side, Time Square, Ground Zero, Harlem and China Town. In this way, the film may also be seen as a humanist odyssey, through a "forest of symbols," where we witness how "all that is solid melts into air" (Berman; Marx & Engels). Here space wars are expressed through class, ethnic, and gender tensions, revealing how urban space is constituted by many different kinds of boundaries, mobilities, and transnational flows of capital, people, and information. The city's streets offer opportunities to explore and feel a variety of idiosyncratic urban transformations.

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