



## **Augmented Digital Lives:** *Experiences in Mobility, Big Data, and Robotics*

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### Introduction

Our new issue of the *Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology* consists of four articles and six short ethnographic films. Reflecting the expanding diversity and variety of research fields in Digital Anthropology, these works present new research topics beyond what has previously been thought of as digitalization processes. Specifically, this journal contains the topics of religion, games and play, urban mobility, community development, online dating and big data.

Yun Ke's work (in this volume) reveals how the religious monastery life has evolved to be embrasive of new technologies. Today, nuns are producing digital animations and promoting a robot monk via the WeChat application. Conducted over 10 months in a Chinese Buddhist monastery, Yun Ke navigated the realm of religion, looking at new meanings for digitalization processes. By following the "life" and daily work of Xian'er the robot monk, Ke was able to participate and document the workings of the monastery's animation center that produces content for films, websites and applications.

The Anthropology of games and play has always been an important topic for Social and Cultural Anthropologists. Noticeably over the last few years there has been an enormous growth in the augmented reality (AR) industry, especially in the gaming sector. Henry Denyer-Simmons's (Australia) analysis of *Pokemon Go* reflects this, reporting on some of the positive side effects of augmented reality applications. Similarly, Valerie von Kittlitz's (Germany) film "Like Burnt Norton" documents an augmented reality application that enables users using a tablet-app to re-experience historical events. In one case there is the dramatic escape of DDR-citizens during the building of the Berlin wall in the year 1961.

Urban Mobility has also taken a front seat in Anthropological investigations of our digital age. This is resultant from the ubiquitous embracement of smartphone technology. As movement, whether by free will or force, has become highly enabled and advanced thanks to mobile technology. For instance, the smart-phone has become an essential tool for refugees from Syria during their long escape across several countries (film by Carmen Belaschk in this volume). Hitchhikers too (see Blake Kendall in this volume) have discovered digital online platforms as useful instruments for a "good ride". Even "pure" offline events are now being facilitated by online means. Such is described in Yoohna Kim's film about plans of re-populizing

abandoned villages using social media. Another example is the online platform / Taxi service 'Uber' in Egypt. Ahmed El Kady's film explores how this technology has enabled middle class woman to move safely through their city at night.

One of the oldest research fields in Digital Anthropology is online dating. One of the reasons is that there is a constant and rapid development of new platforms and applications, such as at the moment the popular Tinder app (see film by Anne Chahine in this volume).

One of the newest research fields in Anthropology is the field of Big Data. This new area of discussion is ripe with concern regarding privacy, security and ownership. Joanna Sleight's article in this volume is for sure an eye opener regarding this contested topic of digital tracks and questions how we can use data in a positive way.

#### Abstracts of the Articles and Films

Yun Ke's (China) article is set from within a Buddhist monastery in China where she follows and participates alongside Chinese Buddhist monks and volunteers. The monastery's ancient temple attracts thousands of visitors each year and maintains an outreach program involving manufacturing, animation production, and the endearing robot monk Xian'er.

Since ancient times, humans have sought refuge in religion to ease and address conflicts between the mind and the material world. Ke's study attempts to discover the links between modern technologies and Buddhism, specifically in China, which she finds has faced enormous mental crisis following recent economic and material success.

The essay draws on theoretical frameworks of historical Humanistic Buddhism that originated in China and Scientific Buddhism that developed in the West. As well, Ke draws upon the evolution of comics, a phenomenon spreading and teaching Buddhism from Eastern Asia. In addition to observing the affect of these efforts on those learning about Buddhism, she focuses on how the group integrates animations of Xian'er into the practice of Buddhist self-cultivation and how Buddhism genuinely adapts to post-modern society. This contests the view that Buddhism is superstitious and therefore antagonistic to a 'practical' lifestyle. Although the essay only gives an overview of one particular monastery's combination of Buddhism and artificial intelligence, through robot monk Xian'er, its treatment might reveal strategies to address similar spiritual crisis.

Examining another, perhaps more familiar device, Carmen Belaschk's (Germany) film "Connected" contextualizes the numerous benefits of one of the digital age's greatest inventions: the smartphone. Her question aims to determine the value of this device specifically for refugees fleeing war and persecution.

Communication, photography, navigation, news, social networking, shopping, gaming etc.; the smartphone embodies a useful companion by simplifying daily procedures and carrying the reputation of a luxury item, yet is an instrument taken for granted. Nevertheless, its

apparently dispensable advantages become essential for people in need.

In cooperation with the private initiative *swisscross.help*, this documentary was filmed on the island of Lesbos across 6 days within refugee camps and among volunteers working on the beaches where refugees arrived. Belaschk was afforded the opportunity to understand a small part of the voyage these individuals were undertaking. She offers an insight into their situation on the flight to Europe with a simultaneous focus on the role of smartphones throughout the journey.

Interviews with the Syrians Rania Dghaim (on Lesbos) and Alaa Alewi, Mohamad Al Kashaam (in Germany) offer insights into their daily use of apps, GPS tracking and emergency calls.

They explain the importance of catching up with news and exchanging information, finding the best routes for escape, communicating with family, friends and supporters. Furthermore, her communications with volunteers stationed on Lesbos since September 2015, underscore the necessity of smartphone technology for both supporters and refugees alike. Her documentary "Connected" portrays this unique relationship between humans and technology amid the mass migratory movements of late.

Contributing to the enquiry of data transmission Joanna Sleight (Australia) enters the dynamic space of 'Big Data', which she describes as a communally produced layer of digital documentation that when analyzed and categorized often elicits a sense of '*overwhelmingness*'. Her paper focuses on the experience of accessing this data both as producer and analyst. She has approached this topic through participation in a trans-disciplinary workshop where artists, researchers, designers, architects, philosophers, engineers, physicists, and other thinkers from across the world gathered in the context of the our current era's unprecedented hyper-connection and data mining capabilities. Her research follows the groups projects to produce wearable technologies and a collaborative online platform, that represent the groups collaborative findings on the human reaction to the complicit and interconnected world of big-data.

The short documentary "*Looking for Mr. Right Now*", by Visual Anthropologist and filmmaker Anne Chahine (Germany) portrays the current phenomenon of virtual dating in form of mobile dating-apps such as Tinder. Communication through digital platforms have become an everyday activity, yet what impact does it have on the search for a partner? Chahine's film examines whether these apps are 'extending your hunting ground' as one participant vividly describes, or whether they can be compared to 'choosing your man from a catalogue' as another shares. Further her film offers an insight into the effect of this process on personal perception, and personal history and narrative in reference to the markedly different partner searching resources available to elders or parents of earlier eras.

Her film offers a diverse dialog with Berlin based men and women of different ages and social backgrounds, paired with filmic representations of uniquely vacant impressions of otherwise bustling places in the German capital of Berlin.

Offering further commentary on specific platforms, the practice-led-research and article: *Sharing the Road: The Post-Internet-Hitchhiker* by Embodied / #BlakePaulKendall (Australia) explores the relationship of hitchhikers using the platforms BlaBlaCar, Hitchwiki, Couch Surfing, TrustRoots and Hitch Gathering. Although the platforms vary in functionality, according to the author, they collectively inform tangible relationships on hitchhiking in a post-internet age. He offers that the very essence of the share economy is brought into question with research participants marking the distinction between aspects of profit revenue, means of exchange and the limits between the actual and virtual worlds. In so doing, this research bypasses the rhetoric of 'gift exchange' dominating literature of hitching, and explores the aspects of community building through the informed adoption of share economy rhetoric. The road, as employed as an example of a non-place, is redefined within the workings of intimate interplay between hitchhikers and drivers, hosting an alternate economy that is supported through the engagement with digital platforms. The research seeks to reveal how hitchhiking in a digital world has impacted on the behavior, exchange and community of hitchhikers within Germany and across Europe.

Within the choice of where and how to live, the fact remains that currently over half of the world's population (54%) reside in urban areas largely attributed to employment opportunities. Visual Anthropologist and filmmaker Yoonha Kim (Korea) sheds light on how digital technology suggests that this specific vocational benefit of city life is actually available worldwide in different formats with simply a stable Wi-Fi connection. Nine to five office jobs shift towards goal oriented remote jobs, Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) open access to high quality education, and social media offer the rapid exchange of ideas and information.

Yoonha Kim's film takes place within the context of 3.4 million abandoned, empty houses in Spain, primarily in rural and often picturesque areas. A group of individuals, able to reap the economic benefits of urban life from a remote area, seized the opportunity to build a new model of 'counterurbanization' in these abandoned villages. She has coined these modern-day pioneers, "Buillagers" – the village builders.

Kim's short documentary switches from online to offline, following different *Buillagers* connected by online communities. She begins with a London based team, *Finding Aldea*, who aim to repopulate an abandoned village using social media. Their lofty ambition which has garnered the support of the rural village mayor is utopian, yet remains significant in its suggestion of a new opportunity for living.

Henry Denyer-Simmons' (Australia) article and short film questions the perspective that technologies blending multiple realities are "enhancing" because people then proactively "make and share" rather than simply consume as users (Applin and Fischer 2011:1). His

visual research project explores the recent global phenomenon *Pokémon GO* as medium for augmenting reality. Some common themes of augmentation that surfaced through interviews and an online questionnaire included an enhanced appreciation for physical nature, an increased wellbeing through greater exercise, as well as an aesthetic appreciation for blended reality images.

In Simmons' experimental video accompanying the project – interview audio recordings are laid over images of the Bathurst (Australia) environs captured with a 360-degree Virtual Reality camera, illustrating the environment where his respondents used *Pokémon GO* to change and augment their realities.

Simmons' conclusions strongly suggests that technologies used in *Pokémon GO* can make substantive changes to both place and meaning of place, and that they can meet anthropologists Applin and Fischer's (2011) proactive criteria for enhancement, which is to make and share, not just consume. Importantly, this short project provides evidence that for some *Pokémon GO* can be a catalyst for positive physical and social. The project concludes with a model suggesting future design considerations regarding potential benefits of including bodily, social, and pro-activity elements in augmented reality experiences.

The findings contribute new evidence concerning the largely unexplored overlap between two anthropological fields - space and place research, and augmented reality – suggesting a value for focusing on the bodily and social in augmented reality research.

Valerie von Kittlitz (Germany) continues the examination of augmented reality technology at the Berlin Wall memorial, Bernauer Strasse in Berlin, Germany. The site commemorates what were often fatal attempts at fleeing the surveillance state of the former East Germany. Visitors to the site move amongst open-air monuments, signs, bits of the original Wall, and scattered visualizations of political dominance, stretched across 1.4 kilometers.

A layer of reality rendered through a privately funded, publicly available (i.e. downloadable) app entitled '*Time Traveler*,' which enables mobile device users to screen archival footage juxtaposed at the site of its origin. Through GPS, the app detects the position of its user, guiding them to that which the filmmaker would have taken at the moment of the film fragment's production. Optical tracking of the camera image enables the app to transmit said fragment onto it resulting in a threefold retinal amalgamation of 'reality'.

Von Kittlitz's film '*Like Burnt Norton*' is a reflection on the screen as a gateway to past, present and future, attempting a visual testimony to stillness, layering, and movement. As the founder of the app explains, motion is essential to augmented reality technology. Those susceptible to advancements in tech futures experience a notion of euphoria toward the elation of personal fantasy, as anonymized test persons reveal in semi-structured interviews at the site.

However, in actively engaging family in this 'investigation', aspects of the private and personal are revealed. This attempt at self-reflexivity points to inevitable considerations of the ethics implied in image creation and the alteration of personal relations. In this sense, it is not

only a commentary on critical issues of privacy, but information accumulation and dissemination at large. These are concerns central to anthropology, but also to a memorial dedicated to an education on freedom - and last but not least to the majority of augmented reality technologies themselves.

Ahmed El Kady's (Egypt) film "Let me walk: Ubering" reveals how a mobile app can affect social realities. Specifically, as the ability for women to safely travel by foot in Cairo has continued to diminish, Uber, the car order service app, has surfaced as a new tool enabling safe mobility across the city. Fueling its popularity are features allowing users to monitor the identify of their drivers and observe the route in real time. El Kady's film offers a glimpse into the world of Uber in Egypt. Prior to the app, one of the main modes of transportation Cairo was the often unreliable and unsafe taxi service. From heckling with the taxi drivers to charge a fair price and or use air conditioning in the extreme Egyptian heat, to the unpleasant experience of trying to stop a cab in the city as a female susceptible to harassment, the emergence of Uber (and of course the popularity of smart phones in Egypt), has improved the quality of life through transportation. Especially for middle to upper class women, who may dress in a more western and less traditional style, it has become easier to commute from one part of Cairo to the other by calling a car directly, forgoing having to wait in the street. This enables women with more freedom to move around, dress as they wish, and feel secure while doing so. This is particularly due to the features of having a driver registered in a central registry enabling the customer to monitor their movement via mobile map, and having access to the information of the driver (name, license plate number etc.). Customers are thus given a higher sense of security when ordering a car through Uber.