

**Preliminary Remarks:
Mobile Communication and the Loss of Place**

Media can free people from temporal and spatial attachments and present a seemingly paradoxical possibility: *to be in two places at once*. According to Joshua Meyrowitz, a drawback of this is that the “sense of place” is thereby negatively affected. He asserts that media have destroyed the traditional relationship between the physical and social realms, and consequently, people no longer know “their place in the world”,¹ because they have lost some of those behaviour patterns which previously provided an orientation with regard to that place. In a certain sense this also seems true in the case of mobile communication: The real place of the here and now recedes (at least temporarily) as the place of orientation. A person can be in two places at once, but they are both pushed back, if not removed, in favour of a third place – the virtual conversational space constituted by communication: “people talking on mobile phones seem wholly or partially unaware of their surroundings. The mobile phone seems to make us feel as if we are alone, even in public places where we are surrounded by many other people.”² People are in a situation of “absent presence”,³ meaning that they are both here and not here simultaneously.⁴ And the

¹ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. I am here quoting from the German edition: Joshua Meyrowitz, *Die Fernsehgesellschaft: Wirklichkeit und Identität im Medienzeitalter*, Weinheim – Basel: Beltz, 1987, p. 17.

² Anders Persson, “Intimacy Among Strangers: On Mobile Telephone Calls in Public Places”, *Journal of Mundane Behavior*, vol. 2, no. 3 (October 2001), www.mundanebehaviour.org/issues/v2n3/persson.htm.

³ Kenneth J. Gergen, “The Challenge of Absent Presence”, in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds.), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 227–241.

⁴ See also: Jukka-Pekka Puro, “Finland: A Mobile Culture”, in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds.), *Perpetual Contact*, pp. 19–29, cf. esp. p. 23.

lack of an orientation in space has not only social but also individual consequences. According to Edward T. Hall: “To be disoriented in space is to be psychotic.”⁵ But those using a mobile phone cannot afford to remove themselves from the here and now of a place – and in fact, they do not actually do this, at least not in all cases of mobile phone use. There is, in effect, a certain sense of place.

A Certain Sense of Place: The Mobile Telephone and Spatial Orientation

Having a sense of place means being able to orient oneself and move in space, keeping in mind that the spatial environment is also an aesthetic and behaviourally relevant environment at all times. However, orientation in space also means orientation in social space – an orientation towards the others in that space. Therefore, public space is also always a socially normed space. It follows that an orientation in space is thus a normative orientation. Or to put it in other words: “One must not pay an entrance fee or give proof that one possesses cultural knowledge for any of these places. But here as there one must follow the particular rules of use of that place.”⁶ People may be removed from the here and now of their environs by a mobile phone conversation. Yet this happens neither completely detached from the fact that each person can be differently involved, nor completely independent of the place from which they are phoning. People have a very good sense of the places where engaging in a mobile phone conversation is appropriate or inappropriate and whether it will be considered intrusive or not; its use in church is definitely different from the use on the street.⁷

Real references to place are determined first and foremost by how, where, and why the mobile phone is used. With this a question arises about the social and communicative arrangements that are necessary to prevent the permanent conflict of an “absent presence”. In which situations does a person actually use a mobile telephone? In order to be able to answer this question, it is first important to learn more about the given per-

⁵ Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, New York: Anchor Books, 1966, p. 105.

⁶ Perla Korosec-Serfaty, “Öffentliche Plätze und Freiräume”, in Lenelis Kruse, Carl-Friedrich Graumann and Ernst-Dieter Lantermann (eds.), *Ökologische Psychologie: Ein Handbuch in Schlüsselbegriffen*, Studienausgabe, Weinheim: Beltz Verlag, 1996, p. 532.

⁷ See also: Alexandra H. Weilenmann, “‘I can’t talk now, I’m in a fitting room’: Formulating Availability and Location in Mobile-Phone Conversations”, in Eric Laurier (ed.), *Environment and Planning A*, special issue on *Mobile Technologies and Space*, vol. 35, no. 9 (September 2003), pp. 1589–1605, cf. esp. p. 1603.

son's daily routine. For example, if someone never goes to the theatre, he or she will never have the problem of drawing negative attention to himself/herself with inappropriate use of a phone in the theatre. Such knowledge of location is also of concern for callers. If they can assume that the person being called will be in a particular place at this or that time, they can make a "localization calculation" in advance. The mobile phone has contributed to the development of a new – mobile – lifestyle, and it has made the shifts between private and public, professional and leisure easier or even possible. This does not necessarily imply that people using the mobile phone create new spaces where they otherwise would not have been present. Rather, they are reachable or can reach others in or from places where this formerly would not have been possible. At the same time, the mobile phone has mostly been studied as a medium of urban communication – in connection with an urban way of life and as an urban metabolism.⁸ Such an orientation is certainly of importance with regard to the social arrangements during the use of the mobile phone, because of the resulting area of conflict between private and public communication. The arrangements of nearness and distance are, in particular, phenomena of big-city life. Generally, this can be seen in the context of "*human activity patterns in the city*", which are in one sense temporal (frequency and expenditure in minutes per day, week, month), and in another, spatial (related to the place in the city in which certain activities are practised). Time budgeting research is dedicated to the first aspect, activity-space research to the second. The action space is, in turn, understood as the totality of the places frequented by an individual,⁹ and is connected to the questions: Who does what where, how, how often, and why? Usually the activity space does not include the entire city. People's whereabouts, and therefore the places where they use a mobile phone, are not accidentally chosen, and are not all equally conducive to mobile phone use.

This paper looks at the domain of the mobile telephone and its use in city squares. Squares belong to the interface of people's whereabouts: they are public spaces in which people come together. "Public city squares are collective territories in the open, with clearly defined borders (e.g. by buildings, gardens, streets) that are easy to access (e.g. from many streets, lanes, stairs or parks). In this sense, they are places which are both open and closed at the same time; they invite one to linger as well as to pass

⁸ Anthony M. Townsend, "Life in the Real-Time City: Mobile Telephones and Urban Metabolism", *Journal of Urban Technology*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2000), pp. 85–104.

⁹ Jürgen Friedrichs, "Aktivitätsmuster in der Stadt", in Lenelis Kruse, Carl-Friedrich Graumann and Ernst-Dieter Lantermann (eds.), *Ökologische Psychologie*, pp. 525–529.

through.”¹⁰ Every square has its dynamic and therefore its identity, which discloses it as a particular social space. Squares are spaces of communication, they are accessible to all and therefore create the possibility that interaction can take place between people with no previous common bond. These are places where, in contrast with other places, lingering is legitimate and where people signal approachability on principle. Yet this occurs within normed boundaries insofar as the square is a scene in which the distance between the actors is indicated with the help of looks and words; they demonstrate a polite availability to others, within the borders of anonymity marked by each person. In this context, the spectrum of interaction ranges, in Erving Goffman’s terminology, from the mere presence of others (*unfocused interaction*) to involvement with others (*focused interaction*).¹¹ But what happens when the mobile telephone appears in the square? How does it fit in with the social events of the square? Is it considerate of the square (of its social life)? And conversely: how does the social life of the square change?

Observations on the Piazza Matteotti

An Italian piazza will serve as the example to be examined in this study. What makes the piazza an attractive place to observe is the density of its communicative events. Such a density of events appears in connection with – or maybe simply because of – the use of the mobile telephone. This is not only because the mobile phone has become, in a very short time, an essential or even indispensable medium of everyday communication in Italy. Obviously, it also dominates public spaces as well. For researchers, this is a good opportunity to be able to observe users *in situ* without great effort. Specifically, the square where the communicative events were observed was the Piazza Giacomo Matteotti in Udine. This is a relatively enclosed square that is surrounded by rows of houses with porticos, cafés with outdoor seating, and the church San Giacomo (1398). Entry to the square is gained via two steps, which give the square the character of a stage. Not purely by chance was this metaphor used in the context of observations: the piazza as (front-) stage, with actors who

¹⁰ Perla Korosec-Serfaty, *op. cit.*, p. 534.

¹¹ As he puts it: „Unfocused interaction has to do largely with the management of sheer and mere copresence”, while focused interaction is “the kind of interaction that occurs when persons gather close together and openly cooperate to sustain a single focus of attention, typically by taking turns at talking” (Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gathering*, New York: Free Press, 1963, p. 24).

climb the two stairs to hang out in or cross the square, and the “spectators” who stand around the stage or sit at one of the outdoor tables of the cafés surrounding the piazza. The spectator metaphor is also justified by the arrangement of the chairs, which are mostly set up facing the “stage”. The central point of orientation is a fountain in the middle of the piazza, dating from 1543, that serves as a meeting point and place of rest in the urban lives of the people.

With the mobile phone, telephoning has gone from the home into the out-of-doors. This opens up a methodical approach that would not have been so easy to realize in the case of the household landline telephone: an observational study. There are already a number of inspiring studies, such as Rich Ling’s research about the use of the mobile phone in restaurants¹² and in public spaces,¹³ the ethnographical studies by Ito and Okabe about Japanese youths’ use of the mobile telephone,¹⁴ as well as those by Fortunati¹⁵ and Murtagh¹⁶ about the use of the mobile phone during train travel. This study understands itself as a part of the above-mentioned research, albeit one trying to achieve a more profound articulation of the observed phenomena. Therefore, the first step of this explorative study was to create an initial observational scheme. On this basis, the uses and the actions that go along with mobile communication (here: mainly non-verbal cues) were recorded, including the measurable degree of the temporal length of the conversation. The movements on the piazza (including their direction and speed) were also recorded on a separate sketch. The first observation period was March 24–29, 2003. In this first phase of observation, 126 observations were made in total (36 female and 90 male users).

¹² Rich Ling, “‘One can talk about common manners!’ The Use of Mobile Telephones in Inappropriate Situations”, *Teletronikk* 94 (1998), pp. 65–76.

¹³ Rich Ling, “The Social Juxtaposition of Mobile Telephone Conversations and Public Spaces”, in *The Social and Cultural Impact/Meaning of Mobile Communication*, Chunchon Conference on Mobile Communication, July 13–14, 2002, pp. 59–86.

¹⁴ Mizuko Ito and Okabe Daisuke, “Mobile Phones, Japanese Youth, and the Re-Placement of Social Contact”, paper given at the conference *Front Stage – Back Stage: Mobile Communication and the Renegotiation of the Social Sphere*, Grimstad, Norway, June 22–24, 2003, <http://www.itofisher.com/PEOPLE/mito/mobileyouth.pdf>.

¹⁵ Leopoldina Fortunati, “The Mobile Phone and Self-Presentation”, paper given at the conference *Front Stage – Back Stage*.

¹⁶ Ged M. Murtagh, “Seeing the ‘Rules’: Preliminary Observations of Action, Interaction and Mobile Phone Use”, in Barry Brown, Nicola Green and Richard Harper (eds.), *Wireless World: Social and Interactional Aspects of the Mobile Age*, London: Springer, 2002, pp. 81–91.

A preliminary approach to the observation of the use of the mobile telephone on the piazza opens with a look at Goffman's work, and in particular his book *Relations in the Public*, in which he distinguishes between the individual as a "vehicular unit" and the individual as a "participation unit".¹⁷ The first appears so trivial that one could easily overlook this aspect. What it refers to are the requirements of navigating in space, particularly the practices of pedestrians that regulate the direction of movement and prevent collisions with others. This is especially relevant when one thinks of the techniques drivers use to avoid collisions and the negative influence a mobile phone call has on them. Without a doubt, it is easier for pedestrians: they can turn, duck, bend, or suddenly change direction and therefore (in contrast to drivers) they can count on being able to avoid a collision at the very last second.¹⁸ In doing so, individuals make their intentions clear to others. Goffman calls this "externalization" or "body gloss", meaning "the process whereby an individual pointedly uses over-all body gesture to make otherwise unavailable facts about his situation gleanable. Thus, in driving and walking the individual conducts himself – or rates his vehicular shell – so that the direction, rate and resoluteness of his proposed course will be readable. In ethological terms, he provides an 'intention play'."¹⁹ In addition, pedestrians attempt to keep an eye on where people around them are heading and thereby they constantly have a scan- and control-area range in sight. This sort of scanning is mutual.²⁰ The movements of the individual do not merely have an "intervehicular character". Individuals-in-motion also monitor the ground immediately in front of themselves, so that they can (as necessary) avoid obstacles or dirt. Eventually there is a voluntary co-ordination of actions with a completely reciprocal character, on the basis of which rule-based conventions can develop: "Voluntary co-ordination of action is achieved in which each of two parties has a conception of how matters ought to be handled between them, the two conceptions agree, each party believes this agreement exists, and each appreciates that this knowledge about the agreement is possessed by the other. In brief, the structural prerequisites for rule by convention are found. Avoidance of collision is one ex-

¹⁷ Erving Goffman, *Relations in the Public: Micro-Studies of the Public Order*, New York: Harper, 1971, p. 5.

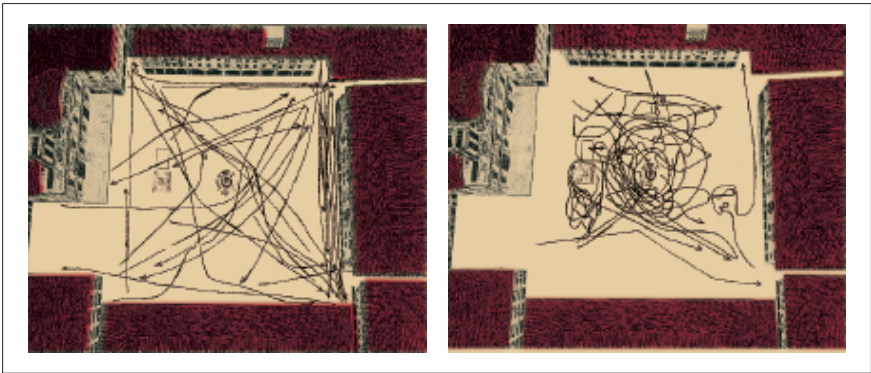
¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁰ Or, as Goffman writes: "Note that even as the individual is checking out those who are just coming into range, so they will be checking him out, which means that oncomers will be eyeing each other at something of the same moment and that this moment will be similarly located in the course of both; yet this act is almost entirely out of awareness" (*ibid.*, p. 12).

ample of the consequence.”²¹

Now the mobile telephone comes on the scene provoking the existing order, but as it were it does not operate without a functioning “intervehicular arrangement”. After all, a person is not just a being in motion – he or she always stands in relations to others. Understood as such, he or she is a participation or interaction unit, and therefore a fundamental unit of public life. People are either alone or in the company of others, they appear in public as “single” or in a “with”. While the aforementioned research about activity spaces deals with the physical whereabouts of the (urban) person, now the social side comes into the picture. According to Goffman, participation units say something about how people spend their day (whether alone or with others): “Participation units – singles and withs – tell us about the individual’s condition as he moves about during the day. ... It is against the background of an individual’s daily round that we can plot the course of the single or with which contains him and the junctures where his participation status changes.”²² When a person is moving in the square, he is a vehicular as well as a participation unit, on the move alone or with others.



People with mobile phones crossing the piazza (left) and lingering on the piazza (right) in the afternoon

Basically, two types (of people) can be distinguished – both stay on the stage but adapt in two different ways. First, there are those who swim through the social flow and cross the square efficiently while telephoning (left diagram), and then there are those who (at least temporarily) walk

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

slowly around in circles or S-patterns while on the phone (right diagram).²³

The two diagrams show the piazza, viewed from above (the church San Giacomo on the left and the fountain in the middle), and the movements of people using their mobile phones on the piazza in the afternoon. The situation in the morning was different. There was always a morning market, concentrated on the south side but reaching the middle of the square, with a variety of offerings that changed daily. In the diagram on the left, we can see the paths of those who effectively use the square as a shortcut, crossing efficiently and not really letting themselves be slowed down by the telephone call. In the second diagram we can see those who linger while phoning. The orientation towards central localities is noticeable – especially with the fountain. This reflects the importance the fountain has always had as a meeting-point and place of gathering – and now as a communicative island for mobile phone users. Women deposit their children in the (empty) fountain basin, in order to be able to telephone knowing their children are safe; men sit on the edge of the fountain, for instance to be able to telephone away from the happenings of the market place. Even just looking at the walking patterns, one can see an area of conflict between what the use of the mobile telephone brings to the previous patterns (as shown by the traversers) and the new patterns it brings with it: namely the circling and S-pattern movements on the square (this behaviour is similar to that expected of people who are waiting). There absolutely is a certain sense of place shown by the importance of central orientation points, as here in the case of the fountain – whether it be as a meeting-place or communicative island.

Movement describes only one aspect of mobile telephone use. Another aspect is the use of accompanying non-verbal communication. By this, I am not referring to the phenomenon in situations where even though the calling parties cannot see each other, gestures and mimicry are nevertheless part of the conversation. Rather in this case I mean that a person shows others in non-verbal ways that he/she is briefly turning to a telephone conversation, without wanting to endanger the fundamental order of communicative events. At the same time, a temporary demarcation is established between the caller, the called, and any present third-parties. In this regard, Rich Ling observes: “The use of the mobile phone means that one needs to develop a repertoire of gestures that will make the boundary between themselves and other co-present individuals obvi-

²³ The diagrams are based on the actual sketches within the scope of the observation on the piazza. For each of the observed subjects, their course of movement during the mobile phone conversation was plotted as well as the length of their conversation.

ous. In a sense, they owe it to the others who are present to make their status as a telephonist clear. This is done in order to avoid undue embarrassment to either party.”²⁴ Telephonists create a “protective shield” from the outside world with their posture and a lowered gaze, and as necessary, by a slowed walking around: “The non-verbal performance of mobile phone usage is commonplace: the mobile phone user turns his or her back toward other people and then talks and either stares at the floor or walks slowly around. The purpose of these actions is to indicate that the mobile phone user has moved into his or her own private place and that he or she is concentrating on the phone call.”²⁵ Such behaviour demonstrates a certain isolation, perhaps even a sort of autistic public behaviour.²⁶

The individual releases himself/herself from co-operation with others to the point that he/she (temporarily) ignores their presence.²⁷ Yet, after the telephone call, the individual has to find his/her way back into the here and now of his/her real surroundings. As our observations show, the end of a telephone conversation is often accompanied by gestures of re-entry that signal that the individual is now also mentally back in the space of physical presence. This is indicated by a change in body language (from closed to open), looking up, or by returning to the person or group from which the person had withdrawn during the telephone call.

Final Remarks

The mobile telephone has become a true fixture of communication in public space. It emerges as a factor of disturbance because it interferes with the public communicative order. Yet, to some extent, people have come to terms with it. At least this is implied by the results of the observation study on the Piazza Matteotti. This is also reflected in the fact that the mobile phone has found a place in the communicative events in the Piazza. Furthermore, it is clear that the mobile phone is changing these events as well. “Users adapt to the role of the place, through daily actions or routine. But it is exactly these actions that change the meaning of this

²⁴ Ling, “The Social Juxtaposition...”, p. 64.

²⁵ Puro, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

²⁶ See also Puro, *ibid.*

²⁷ In the course of our observations, almost no secondary activities such as scanning window-displays or adjusting clothing were observed. However, there were also moments when the environment had not been blocked out – there was even one demonstrative mobile phone use: the mobile telephone user as an actor on the piazza, treading back and forth across the stage, completely aware of his audience around the edge of the piazza.

place little by little.”²⁸ Critically, one could say that here we encounter people with quasi-autistic behavioural patterns, who – holding a mobile phone to their ear – do not want to know anything of the world around them. Meanwhile, this is only one side. The other side, which should be pointed out here, is that at the same time a certain “sense of place” exists. This is evidenced in one way as orientation in space – as in the instance of the fountain as meeting place and island – but also in the (non-verbal) cues telephonists use to show that they are only temporarily stepping out of the here and now of the immediate environment and will be available again after the telephone call.

²⁸ Korosec-Serfaty, *op. cit.*, p. 534.