



Mediated Sense of Place?

Reflections on the Conflation of our Physical and Digital Perceptions of Place

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Research question and structure



**How is our sense of place shaped by digital media
(incl. virtual reality)?**

Structure:

1. Space, place and sense of place: Perspectives from Geography
2. Digitization and the perception of place
3. Results from a research project with migrant professionals in Singapore
4. Outlook: Virtual reality and our sense of place



Space, Place, Sense of Place: Perspectives from Geography



Space “has many uses and a complex history” (Elden 2009: 262)

Location: "an absolute point in space with a specific set of coordinates and measurable distances from other locations" (Cresswell 2009: 169)

Space: “a product of practices, relations, connections and disconnections“ (Massey 2012⁷: 89): it is multiple, specific, open and always political

Place: space that is "used and lived" (Cresswell 2009: 170) and acquires "a set of meanings and attachments" (Cresswell 2009: 169)

Sense of place: the "feelings and emotions place evokes“ (Cresswell 2009: 196)

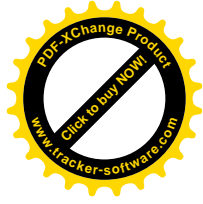


Space, Place, Sense of Place: Perspectives from Geography



Foci of works on sense of place (all focused on offline sense of place):

- **Sensuous perception of space** (e.g., Rodaway, 1994; Tuan, 1979; Tuan, 1977)
- **Identity of place** (e.g., Carter et al., 2007; Buttimer, 1980)
- **Meaning of place for subjective and social identities** (Liu, 2014; Qian and Zhu, 2014; Liu, 2015; Singh, 2015)
- **Belonging, attachment** (e.g., Pred, 1983; Buttimer, 1980; Qian and Zhu, 2014; Liu, 2014; Marcu, 2012)



Digitization and the perception of place

Technological determinism:

- Meyrowitz (1984): **Unification of knowledge and perception of space**, loss of the specificity of space and place
- Ogden (1994: 715): „**parallel universe**“, „**spaceless place**“

Co-existing or conflating digital and offline places:

- Kitchin (1998: 403): „cyberspaces **coexist** with geographic spaces providing **a new layer** of virtual sites superimposed over geographic spaces”
- Miller and Horst (2013: 12): “**new frame**” through which people experience the same world
- Massey (2012⁷: 91): „question which is raised by speed-up, by "the communications revolution" and by cyberspace, is not whether space will be annihilated but what **kinds of multiplicities (patternings of uniqueness) and relations will be co-constructed** with these new kinds of spatial configurations.”
- Bork-Hüffer & Yeoh (2017): “**cON/FFlating digital spaces and places**”



Digitization and the perception of space

Sensuous perception of space:

- Zook et al. (2004): **visual and arual perception of space**
- Kellermann (2006: 132): digital spaces „**do not permit the physical sensing of places**, nor do they provide for a third dimension of depth, natural movements, air breezes and winds, or smell and sunshine“
- Digital media permit an "**imaginative**" (Sheller and Urry 2006: 207) or "**cognitive/imaginary**" (Lemos 2008: 98) Mobilität



Research project and methods



Project: Migration, New Media and the City (funding: Alexander-von-Humboldt Stiftung; National University of Singapore; 2013-2016)

Methods: Combined interviews, repertory grid, cognitive maps, digital ethnography, expert interviews

Participants: 50 migrant professionals (from the PRC, Philippines, Germany)

- Bork-Hüffer, T. (2016): **Mediated sense of place: Effects of mediation and mobility on the place perception of German professionals in Singapore.** *New Media & Society*, 18 (10), pp. 2155-2170.
- Lim, S. S., Bork-Hüffer, T. & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2016): Editorial: **Mobility, migration and new media: Manoeuvring through physical, digital and liminal spaces.** *New Media & Society*, 18 (10), pp. 2147-2154.
- Bork-Hüffer, T. & Yeoh, B. (2017): **The geographies of difference in conflating digital and offline spaces of encounter: Migrant professionals' throwntogetherness in Singapore.** In: *Geoforum* 86, 93-102.



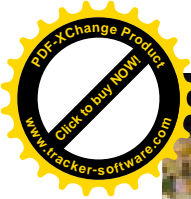
Results: Mediated Sense of Place?

Example 1: “Geeting a feel for place”

- Ulrich, 45, since 5 years in Singapore
- Google Street View: impressions/aura/character of places and their surrounding, tests if they would appeal to him: “ich mache gerne so einen Spaziergang am Strand, um zu sehen, ob es wirklich so nett ist”
- Gets acquainted with places he has never seen offline but still remembers
- Tests recommendations from friends (offline) via digital “journeys”, then decides whether he visits them offline

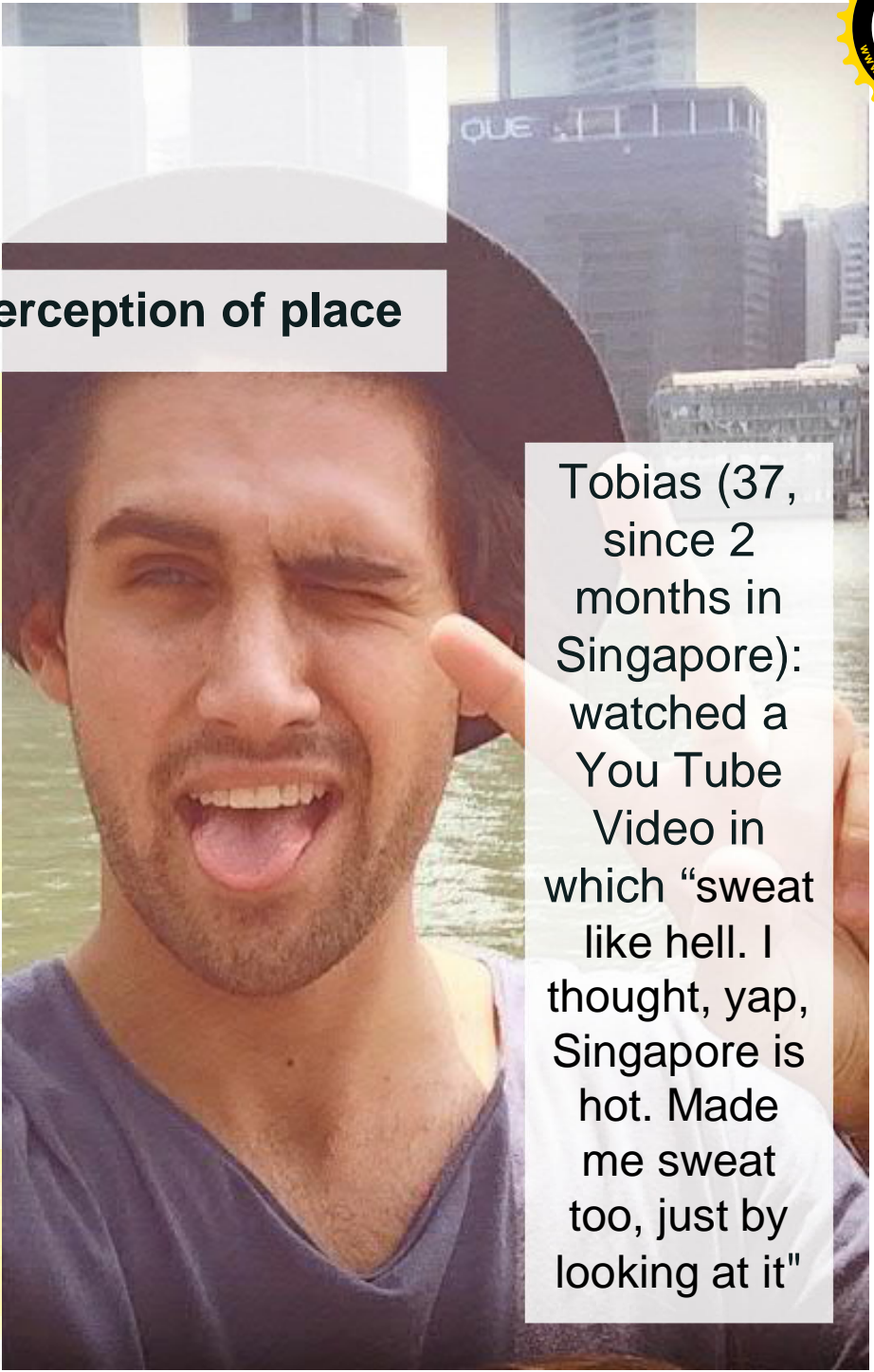
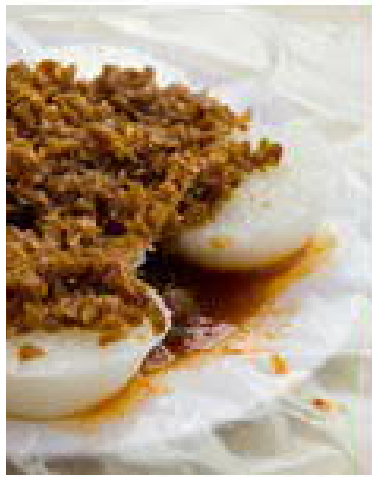
Google Streetview image, Sentosa Island, Singapore





Results: Mediated Sense of Place?

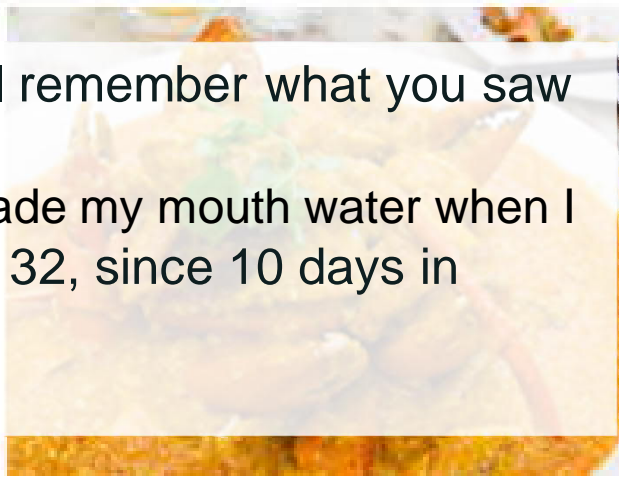
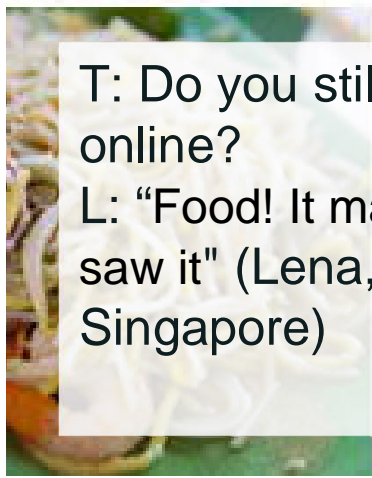
Example 2: The imaginary sensuous perception of place



Tobias (37, since 2 months in Singapore): watched a You Tube Video in which "sweat like hell. I thought, yap, Singapore is hot. Made me sweat too, just by looking at it"

T: Do you still remember what you saw online?

L: "Food! It made my mouth water when I saw it" (Lena, 32, since 10 days in Singapore)



Results: Summary



- Impressions of places that go beyond their visual appearance: **Character, aura of place**
- **Imaginary** haptic, olfactory and gustatory **sensing of place**
- Different frame through which the same world is perceived: different experiences that conflate with offline experiences: „**cON/FFlating**“ **senses of place**
- Increase in the **complexity** of sense of place

Outlook: Sense of Place and VR

Project: VR Healing

Research question: Can the positive effects of healing places be replicated with VR?

Cooperation partners: Uni-Reha and Institute of Health Economics, University of Cologne

Methods: Participative VR scenario development, standardized quantitative instruments and medical measurements, qualitative interviews

Participants: Adolescents with impaired mobility

