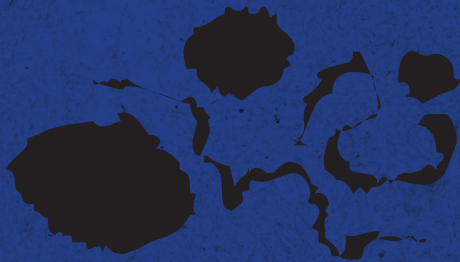


SPACE FOR DISORIENTATION

finding, creating and allowing other urban directions

ACT II

DISORIENTATION AS AN OCEAN



PART OF GRADUATION COMPENDIUM

BY JOEY LAGESCHAAAR

NOVEMBER 2025



*try to teach
what you cannot learn
find the strength
in an other*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The content of this research correlates to an attitude towards uncertainty, which goes beyond its spatial inclinations. Therefore, I found a companion in Peter Sloterdijk's writing, or rather the interpretation of it by René ten Bos as an amphibious anthropology.

When it comes to watery environments, we must say yes and no at the same time, as it were. Those who dive say yes and seek connection, participation and enthusiasm. Those who surface to breathe seek separation, criticism, perhaps even distance.

People are always stuck in this ambivalence.

As much as we can identify the need and importance for embracing uncertainty in more than one way, our human longing for points of grip remains. This ambivalence should therefore be respected. It is as much about challenging the limits as it is about caring and acknowledging (your) limits.

VOICES

<i>the soul</i>	the broken individual
the academic	the ones piecing it together (and breaking it again)
<i>the inspiration</i>	the imparaphrasable outing

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

p. 9 **SCENE ONE: FINDING, ALIGNING, EXTENDING** offers an introduction to phenomenological theory of orientation and a potential interpretation of its spatial effects.

p. 19 **SCENE TWO: WHAT WAS THAT?** underlines the importance of understanding disorientation as a multi-faceted phenomenon that stretches across disciplines.

p. 33 **SCENE THREE: A FORCE FIELD** links orientation to architectural precedents and personal experiences, a getting-a-feeling-for spatial applications.

p. 49 **SCENE FOUR: SMOOTH VIOLENCE** establishes a necessary framework of understanding the potent and dangerous nature of the (re)production of spatial orientations.

p. 63 **SCENE FIVE: WHAT FLEETS IN SPACE** connects previous scenes to portray spatialities of disorientation and their consequences.

SCENE ONE: FINDING, ALIGNING, EXTENDING

Where am I? I have woken up in this unfamiliar and unlit room. I extend my arm and wave it around until I touch something, a still object. I sense a wooden structure, and as I follow its curvature, I make up an armrest, a back support and four strong legs. It must be a chair. Considering the chair's orientation, I know what is up and what is down.

To repeat a quote from the first Act; “The ‘what’ that fleets is the very point of disorientation.”, meaning that we should not necessarily want to define what disorientation is in itself, but rather what it reveals in its wake. However, perhaps most for the sake of academic research, first we dive into the various approaches that have been taken towards understanding disorientation.

HEREAS HORIZON

Let us start with defining ‘orientation’, which signifies an actual starting point in phenomenological terms; the here of the body and the where of its dwelling¹, against which one can juxtapose events and experiences. Ahmed takes this definition, as she connects the phenomenology of orientation to sexual orientation, relating orientation to heterosexuality, and the orient- in orientalism. Her account of queer phenomenology aims to reveal how social relations are arranged spatially. For example, Ahmed does not consider straightness as a blank page, an all-encompassing origin. Rather, she paraphrases Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement on the fact that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman: one is not born, but becomes straight. Therefore, straightness is something that ‘becomes’ rather than simply ‘is’.

Orientations are about how we proceed from ‘here’. It can be understood as a zero point against which all actions and objects can be oriented, in more ways than one. After all, the world around us has already taken shape, in ways that are more or less familiar to us.

It is filled by ‘objects’ which we orient ourselves towards, but are also oriented towards us. Copying Ahmed’s example of the table; on the one hand, we orient ourselves to the table for writing, dining, or simply sitting beside it. On the other hand, the table is oriented towards us, by having taken a shape that is complicit with certain behaviours, considering its sturdiness, its proportions, its materiality, its texture, et cetera. It creates and has been created as an orientation that is more-than-one-dimensional. Moreover, this is an orientation that seems fixed, but is of course developed over time, in other words: the table did not always look like you or I know it as today.

When we define this more broadly, we can consider orientations as actions, decisions, directions we take that put certain objects ‘within reach’ and others ‘out of reach’.

So, simultaneously, certain objects or other bodies have the ability to make certain situations (un)available by orienting you towards other situations, choices, directions. It determines the allowance or possibility for certain situations to emerge while we dwell, and the availability of reaching certain objects. When these relationalities between bodies, objects and others are developed over thousands of years, say, since the beginning of time, a rather complex and perpetually re-iterated network has been woven, in which certain actions between specific bodies/objects/others have become preferred over other actions. It has created a force field in which there is a hierarchy of bodies and objects and their potential of orienting one another.

THEATRE: SCRIPT, STAGE, PROPS

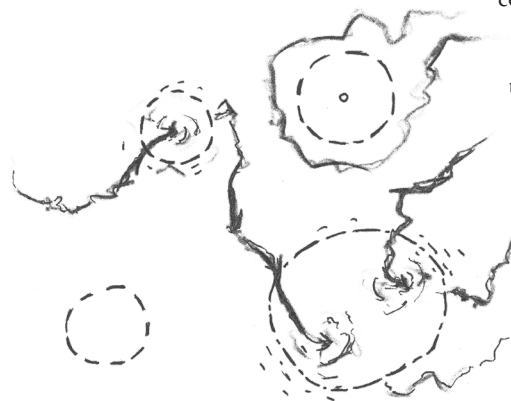
This hierarchy has been internalised; it stretches through mental, socio-cultural, and spatial ecologies. The 'becoming of a woman' is understood as

“... to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project.”²

This network of relationalities has become a *script*.

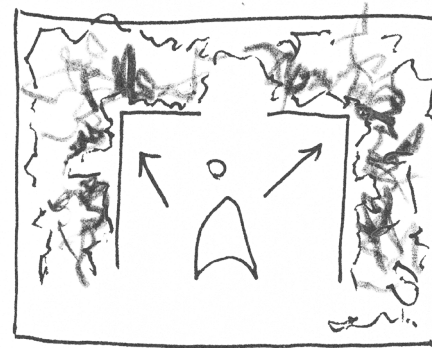
The entire world's our theatre, and the bodies and objects are the *actors* and *props*.³ It aligns us with the prescribed characteristics and actions of being in the world. Additionally, the script is not only made up of 'text', that which is prescribed, but it is also made up by way of 'interpretation'. The script, the theatre and the props are interpreted through a frame of reference, lending itself to various way of enacting the script.

However, just as theatrical plays are met with censorship or criticism from external parties, so are certain ways of playing the script more regularly confronted by the confinement of socio-cultural conventions. In connecting theatre and 'real life', the potential danger that lies within real life 'criticism' should be acknowledged, for example through understanding the difference between the reception of a male actor enacting a trans character in comparison to the real-life marginalisation of the transgender community denied spaces of care, democracy and even their existence.



These limits of the interpretation of the script are further intensified through various hegemonies, which include but are not limited to capitalist, colonialist and patriarchal project, which reproduce an oppressive and violent stance towards non-normative bodies/objects. Instead of seeing this script as something neutral, as something that has ‘always been this way’, it should be seen as situated knowledge.³ They are localised perspectives on how one should act that are then internalised within the bodies and objects; to dwell these situations often becomes a reproductive cycle. It emphasises the importance of prior lived experience and the role of repeated and habitual actions that shape our bodies and the world(s) around them.⁵

However, living beings are not robots following a script.⁶ For any queer body, the experience of going ‘off-script’ can be simultaneously exhilarating as well as outright dangerous. Moreover, the off-script is inherent to humanity; it constitutes failure, friction, discomfort, inconsistency and imperfection as inevitable parts of what makes humans human. Instead of complying with corrections, suppressions, threats or erasures as reactions to off-script acts, we should expose the limitations of the script.



When your lived experience is called into crisis more often than others, when your literal existence is seen as failing within a society, the script demarcates which acts are acceptable and which aren't. More often than not, the script does not recognise the very foundations on which it has been written and through which it has been reproduced. Ultimately, an orientation can therefore be understood as the alignment with normative uses and ways of representation in which the normative is “an effect of the repetition of bodily actions over time.”⁷

1 *Abmed, 2006a*

2 *Butler, 1988, p. 522*

3 *Butler, 1988*

4 *Haraway, 1988*

5 *Abmed, 2006a*

6 *Boer, 2023*

7 *Abmed, 2006b, p. 66*

*I stand up and sense further,
knowing that there could be a table
in front of the chair, in the way
my chair stands perpendicular to
the table's edge in my own home. I
feel out the geometry of the table's
corners. By touching the table, the
room takes shape within my mind.
I orient myself through the objects
in the room. I must be home.*

SCENE TWO: WHAT WAS THAT?

I am walking a corridor, rather small, in the university building at which I am studying. I am nearing a passageway, even smaller than the corridor. The passageway will only fit one person at a time to pass through it. Another person is nearing the passageway from the other side, another student, just like me. Although, I noticed that they have a generally masculine clothing style, finished with two pointy stripper-like heels. I notice I have never seen that before in this building. I see two people walking behind them that whisper and point at the heels. I let it be.

Before charging into the writer's room to re-write or abandon the script, we should first carefully consider what it entails to go or be off-script. When bringing this in relation to the theoretical concept orientation, we arrive back at 'disorientation'. "*When we experience disorientation, we might notice orientation as something we do not have.*"¹ Coming back to the metaphor of the table; this could be the moment where you are oriented towards to the table and the writing that happens in front of you, and suddenly you hear a voice behind you. You suddenly lose your orientation towards the table to orient yourself towards another object, perhaps behind you. You try to extend yourself out into the space – figuratively or literally – to re-orient yourself to the object that disoriented you. Rather than seeing this as a one-dimensional moment of temporary confusion, disorientation should be more generally understood as a transformative state that opens up, suspends and allows for moments beyond the often unseen structures of orientation.

To be able to grasp this perhaps unconventional approach to disorientation, we also consider other existing definitions of disorientation.

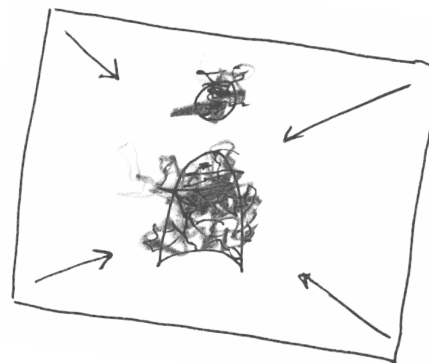
LOSING YOUR MIND

Disorientation can be understood as both a decreased feeling of direction and a distressful feeling characterised by a more or less sustained sense of loss of control, unfamiliarity and uncertainty (about oneself or one's future). An individual's thinking and behaving as usual turns partially unworkable to read, adapt and navigate the situation.² Its various – notably negative – associations or effects, are further substantiated through the valorisation of a disoriented subject. For example, the wandering Alzheimer's patient that aims to 'go home' through the act of 'leaving their home' is undeniably considered as having a disoriented perspective. Not at all should this behaviour be glamourised, yet it highlights another aspect of these kinds of situations. It is exactly in this subjectification of the disabled individual that we find a potential for re-evaluating the mode of disorientation. After all, to what extent is the wandering of the Alzheimer's patient different to the wandering of migrants that have had to leave their home because of terrors of war; i.e. those who have left home to find home elsewhere.³

Just as certain forms of mobility or immobility are created by the relationship between the body and enabling or disabling spaces, the disoriented subject is constructed as the person who fails to live according to the rules that make certain space-time environments 'safe'.⁴

These kind of scenarios can help us re-value disorientation not as a solely negative 'state-of-being' of a certain subject, one that needs to be taken care of. Rather, it should serve as an incentive to reconsider disorientation as a multi-dimensional experience which extends beyond the disoriented subject.

This is beautifully exemplified in a reading of Rachid Boudjedra's novel *Topographie pour une agression caractérisée*. The novel takes disorientation not only in a literal, psycho-spatial sense, but rather produces a written testimony that transcends a superficiality of disorientation. Through the fictional experience of a lost migrant, it questions concepts of arrival, belonging and integration. Boudjedra sketches the Parisian metro as an endless suffering, without destination; the book prematurely hints at murder as the outcome if the protagonist exits the underground.



Boudjedra's writing style is cluttered, confusing, exhausting; it does not encourage the reader to keep going, but confuses, diffuses or distracts. The reader needs patience, determination or even coercion to finish the book and understand the protagonist's arrival.

Rather than conceptualising or sharing an experience of arrival, the reader is taught that the migrant never 'arrives'. This moment of arrival, in reality, is often met with forceful integration or well-intended accompaniment which both constitute a paradox that forces the migrant to continuously reflect on their arrival, or what it means to belong. It suggests we should consider the experience of migration as a permanent, and more important mutual, process of disorientation that is inherent to arrival.⁵

While these examples both subjectify a disoriented body, there are moments in which a body could actively pursue disorientation, perhaps even as a pleasurable mode, a queer urge to deviate from a certain orientation.

DE-AUTOMATING DEVICES

Instead of considering the way queer youth chooses to deviate from the interests of the family, we take a look at the 'chosen family' concept that is often an incredibly important part of many queer people's lives. Queer gatherings are sometimes even described as family gatherings, which in turn disorients the 'familiar' as well as the definition of 'family' to become strange. Especially lesbians and gay men try to find kinship in the absence of (parental) role models, which is often accompanied by both excitement and difficulty, alluding to the double-edged sword which is disorientation.⁶ In this example, the 'family-line' is considered the disorientation device, which means that we do not align with it to pledge allegiance, but rather to make the familiar strange, or to see if there are unrecognised possibilities to play with.⁷

As philosopher Miriam Rasch put it, the act of actively looking for such disorientation devices is the main priority of a *de-automaton*.⁸ It is a body that does not decline (technological) development but rather engages critically with its inner workings.

It is a lover of friction, so to speak, even if there ultimately is no answer to the questions it poses. We can see acts of activism in the same light; demanding discussion over decision-making.



Additionally, we could consider those who stand out even more vividly than deemed 'necessary', which is often the case for artists who perform in drag. They often choose to actively disorient what it means to be gendered, especially within a performative space. Making the 'male' and/or 'female' representation strange, gender and the representation thereof are deemed an act of becoming to the extent that it is even said that we are all born naked and the rest is drag.

This example clearly shows that the act of de-automating does not presuppose the intention to find an answer, or a new orientation; a generalised definition of gender (representation) is not to be found. Additionally, it alludes to the possibility of the body itself as a site charged with disorientational potential.

A SEA OF DISORIENTATION

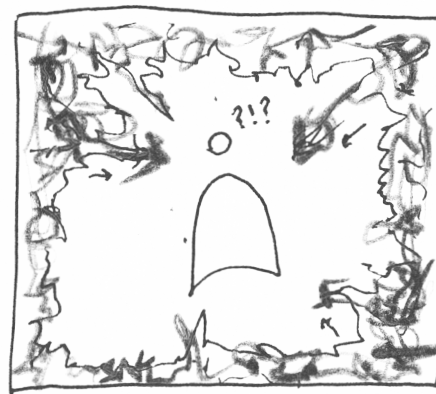
The active search for disorientation and its devices should not be confused with succumbing to disorientation.

Through interpreting Peter Sloterdijk's *amphibious anthropology*, we can understand that those who submerge without the ambition to sooner or later come back to the surface will inevitably lose themselves. In other words, one might have the desire to indulge in drugs, alcohol, food, sex, work, gambling or any other addictive substances to stray away from a prescribed path or externally implied goals.

People craving for the needle, the fridge, web porn, work, or slot machine "want to feel like water in water".⁹

On the other hand, this attitude is not entirely incomprehensible, as we increasingly start thinking of the self as something that can be designed.¹⁰ It seems it is always a choice, and therefore an effort, to stick to that path or those goals. It becomes a continuous struggle to ensure one's own body, health and productivity to be in optimal condition.¹¹

Disorientation, then, becomes some sort of 'maritime desire', to stay in Sloterdijk's terms, as it represents a rare gateway to presumed freedom from the superimposed orientation. To be torn apart by these states; diving, submerging, emerging, being carried away in the wake of; is indicative of being human.¹² We should therefore also not see a non-critical compliance with the orientation as a solution, as it erodes the ambiguity of the self. The smoothening the self, either from inside or outside, by yourself or by others, will leave not much more than a weak imitation of what it could have been, or an empty shell drifting with the currents of an ocean.



So what does it mean to *(dis)orient* or be *(dis)oriented*? Bodies 'in-line' with an orientation can easily find points of extension and hence extend in a space. In pursuing an 'oblique' use or representation, this orientational force field is disrupted, and therefore disoriented. Then, the pre-existing linearity has to find a new alignment, either by forcefully adjusting the oblique line towards the norm or having all the normative lines re-orient together with the oblique to a new field.

The difference between directive alignment or accommodating re-alignment can be recognised in the various moments of participation, involvement and connection which are not necessarily related to inter-human behaviour. It is characterised by many concepts that oppose the framework of a society under the spell of positivity; friction, ambiguity, discomfort, et cetera. Completely contrasting the Smooth City's prerogative, a disorientational mode heavily concerns unlearning what it means to be or become within an orientation. Moreover, it shows the potential of finding our way in strange or unfamiliar environments, a certain resilience.

Valuing such conventionally negatively associated experiences can become a tricky tightrope to walk. Luckily, there are already practitioners and researchers that have considered for example 'friction' as an important approach within ethics in the age of dataism¹³, 'discomfort' as an indicator of resilience and hardship¹⁴ or 'getting lost' as a productive mode of discovery¹⁵. Disorientation could be equally valuable as an explorative counter movement: opening, suspending and allowing beyond the orientation: lending possibilities for new connections.

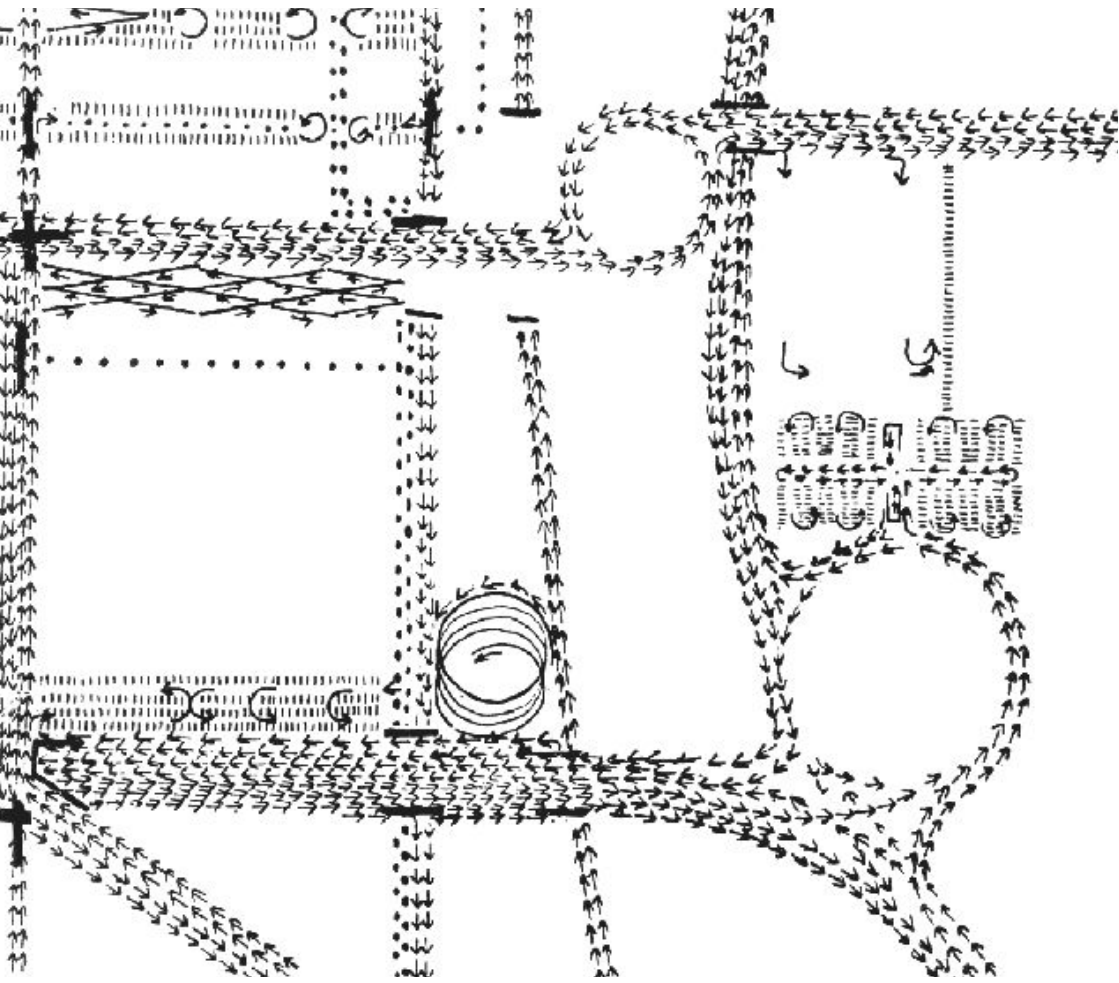
Disorientation is therefore defined here as the condition of becoming aware of an existing orientation due to the loss or new imposition thereof, albeit temporarily. Using disorientation as a reproducible concept, however, means to also navigate the various pitfalls, e.g. discomforts, frictions, ambiguities, it creates. Additionally, it should be aware of the existing connotation that disorientation carries, namely its association with being or feeling lost in multifaceted ways, aspects that cannot be seen separately from emotional weight and a desire for physical groundedness.

1	<i>Abmed, 2006b, pp. 5–6</i>	8	<i>Rasch, 2021</i>
2	<i>Cabanas, 2024</i>	9	<i>Ten Bos, 2009, p. 78</i>
3	<i>Martin & Rosello, 2016</i>	10	<i>Groys, 2018</i>
4	<i>Martin & Rosello, 2016, p. 4</i>	11	<i>Boer, 2023</i>
5	<i>Rosello, 2016</i>	12	<i>Ten Bos, 2009</i>
6	<i>Weston, 1997</i>	13	<i>Rasch, 2021</i>
7	<i>Abmed, 2006a</i>	14	<i>Harrington, 2024</i>
		15	<i>Solnit, 2017</i>

<i>the moment when you</i>	<i>approach a narrow passageway</i>
<i>the moment when you</i>	<i>look up from your phone</i>
<i>the moment when a stranger</i>	<i>approaches and you want to avoid them</i>
<i>the moment when you</i>	<i>despise the designer of the narrow passageway</i>
<i>the moment</i>	<i>the passage feels like a wall</i>
<i>the moment when you</i>	<i>notice the other also hesitates, approaches anyway</i>
<i>the moment when you</i>	<i>go through the same door with one person anyway</i>
<i>the moment when you</i>	<i>accidentally bump into the other person</i>
<i>the moment when you</i>	<i>break through the discomfort with a simple apology</i>
<i>the moment when you</i>	<i>laugh about the collision together</i>
<i>the moment when you</i>	<i>become familiar with the unknown</i>
<i>the moment when you</i>	<i>have already forgotten about the earlier collision</i>
<i>the moment</i>	<i>the passage suddenly seems wide enough</i>

SCENE THREE: A FORCE FIELD

Now, if we both keep approaching the passageway at the same speed, we will unavoidably bump into one another. The informal etiquette of such a situation is that one or both slow down and gesture, either with hands or bodily motions, who can pass through first. The other student chooses to slow down, which I take as a note to keep pacing the same speed. I shall pass through first. Then, I decide to stand perfectly still right there in the passageway. I stand there, until the other student and the two people behind them look at me confusingly. They excuse themselves and motion to pass by. I stay still.



Movement diagram from
Philadelphia Planning Study.
Kahn, 1956.

Although we could consider many different (more-than-human) bodies and objects through an approach of disorientation, this research will consider primarily the human body as a subject for exploring theoretical limits and practical possibilities. How do we relate orientation to spatial theory and how does orientation bridge theory and practice? To do so, this research turns to Lefebvre's ideas on the social production of space¹ as a starting point.

Starting with spatial practice, orientation can be related quite directly to movement. Louis Kahn's *Philadelphia Planning Study* shows orientation as an alignment to the flows of traffic. A base level orientation is needed to create a safe, navigable and productive movement network. You can easily imagine how one ghost rider could mess up various flows within this rigid outline of superimposed directions, and therefore orientation is deemed necessary for the traffic to flow carefully.

DESIRE PATHS

For perceived space is a product of daily routines or repeated activities, it can be explicated through the spatial example of the desire path. The desire path lies at the intersection of lived and perceived space, but always stand in relation to the conceived space.



a network of paths is composed...



...to take you straight to your destination.

SCENE THREE: A FORCE FIELD

37

*"a network of paths is
composed..."*

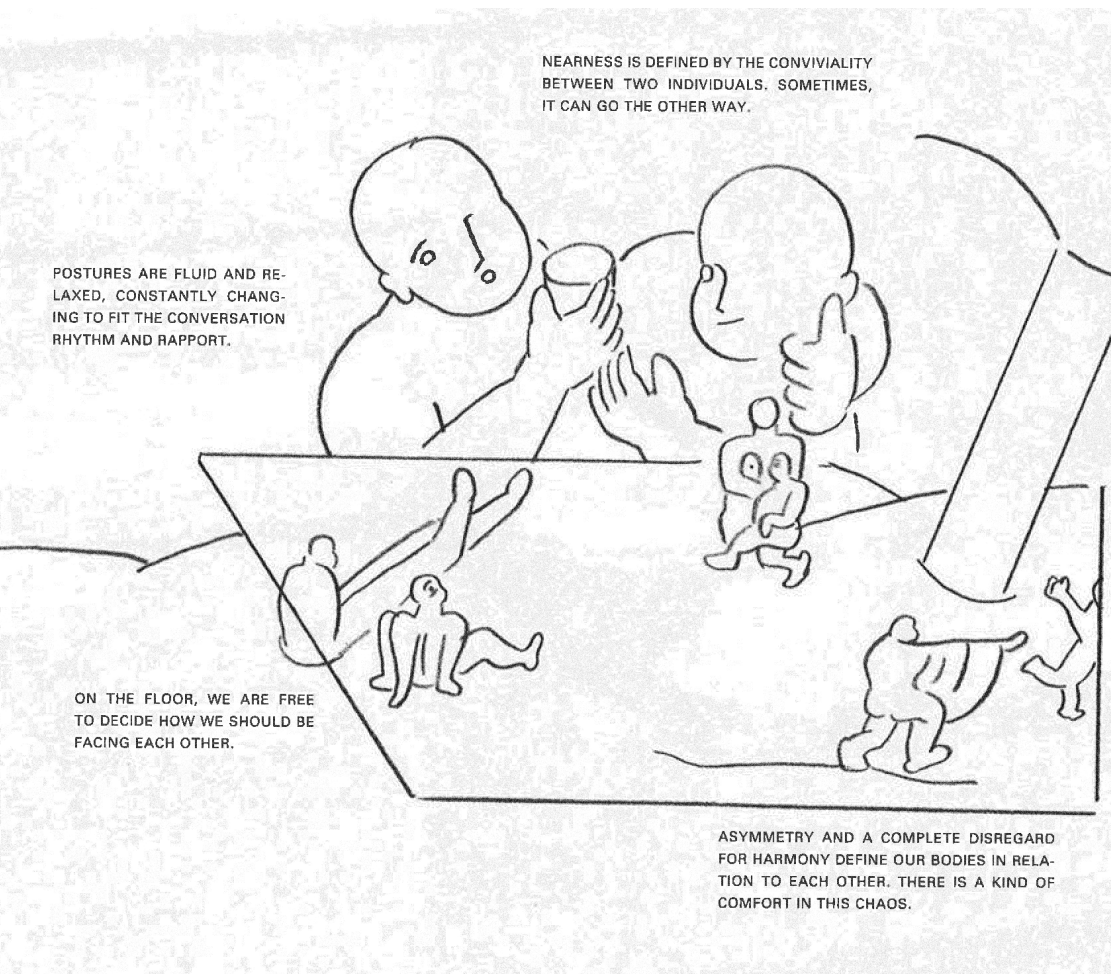
*... to take you straight to your
destination."*

Stills from video
presentation of Mekel Park.
Mecanoo.

Major university campus grounds often have large patches of grass, and there are always roads or paths connecting the buildings 'to take you straight to your destination'. However, it often happens that, over time, desire paths are created, driven by the desire to get from A to B in a different or simply more direct manner, resulting in pedestrians going 'off-road'. The more that this happens, the more visible, and therefore 'possible', another path becomes.

An orientation can therefore shift from 'going from A to B one way because the path is prescribed that way' to 'going from A to B another way because there is a desire to script your own path', for which a moment of disorientation is needed. This can be found in (thinking of) going off-road for the first time, for example after seeing another person going off-road.

As if the dancer had been carving space out of a pliable substance; or the reverse, shaping continuous volumes, as if a whole movement had been literally solidified, 'frozen' into a permanent and massive vector.²



SCENE THREE: A FORCE FIELD

39

Atmosphere defined by the form and position of our bodies in space.
Atelier HOKO, 2024.

This 'carving' out goes beyond the freedom of movement and the repetition of acts. It is also based off of a feeling for what is 'appropriate behaviour' within a space, the representational space. What does a space and the bodies/objects within *allow for*?

SHIFTING, ROOTING

An orientation is often shaped by the architecture of the space, in which even the body can be considered as (a tool of) architecture. The simple yet telling drawings of atelier HOKO visualise the way that the positioning of bodies towards one another on a mostly empty floor can be provocative, comforting, unsettling or socially (un)acceptable. These feelings are based on personal considerations and influenced by power structures, individual experiences and emotions.

Additionally, objects in space can have this orientational power; an empty beach invites different behaviour than a similar beach to which beach volleyball nets and field lines are added. Stretching the definition of 'objects', we can also consider the space's materiality as indicative of a certain behaviour: a park would not be ideal for picnicking if there is not a patch of lush grass.


These considerations can also shift; after seeing certain spaces and objects being used in a non-normative manner, we can imagine different approaches and uses of that same space. After having first used my own window sill as storage for my plants, I found out that it could also be used as a place for sleeping and resting, using the ledge as a place to rest my pillow on. These orientations are always in a process of becoming, which means that they can be opened and suspended through imagination and experimentation. Sometimes the only threshold is to question if we want to follow the felt orientation or to unlearn it and consider alternative orientations that allow otherwise.

The existence of an orientation therefore depends both on the prior existence of a space, e.g. the pavement, streets or square, as well as the collective actions to animate the space itself, the 'gathering' of the pavement, street, square and the organisation of the architecture.³

However, there are moments in which the limits of the orientation are carefully laid out for us through the conceived space by way of rules and regulations, a considerably large threshold.









IN MY ROOM |


NEUILLY-SUR-SEINE

SQUARE DE L'ILE DU PONT

AFIN DE PRÉSERVER CET ESPACE PUBLIC CRÉÉ POUR VOTRE AGRÈMENT ET DANS L'INTÉRÊT DE TOUS, IL EST INTERDIT :

-  d'émettre des bruits de nature à troubler le calme et la tranquillité des usagers (instruments de musique, appareils diffusant de la musique...)
-  d'y faire pénétrer des animaux domestiques, même tenus en laisse
-  de grimper aux arbres, de marcher sur les pelouses et les massifs
-  d'y introduire des boissons alcoolisées, de pique-niquer sur les pelouses
-  de déposer des déchets
-  de porter une tenue non adaptée à un lieu public (maillot de bain...)

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Du 1^{er} avril au 31 octobre : de 8h à 19h
Du 1^{er} novembre au 31 mars : de 8h à 18h

La Ville se réserve le droit de modifier ces horaires ou de procéder à la fermeture de cet espace, en cas de conditions climatiques particulières ou de nécessité de service.

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REPRESENTING AN ORIENTATION

The conceived space is the realm in which architects, city planners and policy writers traditionally practice their craft. Regardless of the reasoning behind specific rules, we internalise these rulesets, reproduce them by only practicing the acceptable behaviour and sometimes even actively impose these rulesets on others. For example, have you ever shushed someone making a loud phone call in the quiet zone-compartment of a Dutch train?

This increasingly happens before the realisation of a space itself, an approach driven by capitalist endeavours. Representations of spaces are often already promoting desired uses – and users – while construction site are still barren urban voids.

Rendering, more often than not, creates a fantasy in which social implications, political dynamics and internal tribulations are conveniently left out of the picture.⁴ Architecture becomes one of many professions which are subjected to the constant pursuit of commercialisation, to the point where agencies are giving in on a large scale to creating slick renders to promote their plans.⁵

Produced social space is increasingly influenced by such representations of space as associations of entire locations can be altered through technological interfaces on a global scale. These ‘premature orientations’ become a political tool to impose control, resulting in the reproduction of urban phenomena such as gentrification and homogenisation.

In conclusion, the lines of motion and of thought that make us behave in certain ways depend on the repetition of actions over time, thus shaping norms and conventions. This ultimately works both ways; a path is created because of repetitive action, and a path creates a repetitive action. Therefore, an orientation can be a situation that is or has been worked at meticulously and continuously so that its presence becomes unnoticeable or seems effortless and therefore almost indisputable. An orientation is an accumulated logic of movement, which suggests a ‘real corridor of space’. It is the force field within a produced social space.

1	<i>Lefebvre, 1974/1991</i>	4	<i>Minkjan, 2016</i>
2	<i>Tschumi, 1994, p. 10</i>	5	<i>Knikker & Davidson, 2016</i>
3	<i>Boebmer & Davies, 2018</i>		

*to see a possible
path because
it is taken
before you*

*to take a possible
path because you
built up the courage
to step out of line*

*to recognise
a path as an
imposed system*

SCENE FOUR: SMOOTH VIOLENCE

*I leave my house to then be blinded by an incredibly harsh and artificial white light.
It is too bright to be able to tell where the source is located, except for the fact that
I can see my shadow below me. The only way to navigate is to turn my back to the
light and walk forward, only being able to see the ground and the outline of my body
projected next to it.*

Orientation could be defined as a theoretically neutral concept, however, in reality, it is virtually always tied to socio-political force fields. In attempting to spatialise orientation further, the theoretical concept is applied to Boer's definition of the Smooth City phenomenon, which in turn also grounds the Smooth City in the phenomenological field.

Boer defined the Smooth City as an urban phenomenon in which the development of a city and its flows has selectively exceeded basic needs of a safe, hygienic and productive environment. Then, the development of cities becomes obsessed with ever-increasing levels of 'perfection' which in turn leave no room for alternatives. As discussed in Act I, smoothness affects the allowance of spaces. It increasingly lacks *other* possibilities of using, interacting, behaving, participating, critiquing and belonging in space. Therefore, the Smooth City undermines the democratic and emancipatory nature of what makes cities 'urban'.¹ Instead of seeing the Smooth City as a 'here and now', we should consider this decrease of urbanity as a process of 'smoothification', as he calls it too. The Smooth City is "*a horizon we are moving towards*";² it is an extreme that we have not yet arrived at, but should certainly deny as a desirable direction.

The indicators of smoothification can be noticed in daily life such as the replacement of cashiers with self-checkout systems in supermarkets, or the expulsion of sex work hotspots from urban centres. Moreover, the process can also be found in historic accounts of urban development, most notably the Haussmannisation of Paris. These are processes that are often promoted as a benefit to 'the consumer', but are largely developed because of a capitalist or (neo-)colonial perspective, often accompanied by negative effects for a wide array of marginalised communities. To consider these downsides, this research turns to similar phenomena of urban development which can be found in the notions of infrastructural violence, slow violence and symbolic violence.

Smoothification holds ties to infrastructural violence, a process in which infrastructure is, for example, used as a means for the state to control marginalised population groups through uneven urban development.³ Infrastructure is in this case considered not only as a technology, but as an ethnographically graspable manifestation.⁴ These are perpetual, sometimes even unconscious processes which are likened to the concept of slow violence, a term coined by Rob Nixon.⁵

This is not an urban development strategy preserved for state institutions, but can also be recognised in private infrastructural organisations which are active through projects in another country financed by donor states. Moreover, these kinds of development are not only detrimental to certain human demographics, but also to the more-than-human. Nixon uses an example from an ad by the Philippine government that read ...

[... to] attract companies like yours, we have felled mountains, razed jungles, filled swamps, moved rivers, relocated towns ... all to make it easier for you and your business to do business here.⁶

More generally, such infrastructural projects can be likened to developments such as gentrification⁷ and homogenisation⁸. Instead of only considering the physical transformation of spaces through these processes, the definition of infrastructural/slow 'violence' asks us to realise the impact of development through determining damage and hurt to bodies and objects. For example, research found local gentrification to amplify and intensify effects on the everyday lives and labours of a community of low-income African American women, resulting in exhaustion, illness and even chronic pain.⁹

LIGHT AND DARK

Using a dialectic of orientation-disorientation, a careful analysis can reveal this violence within smoothification. Ahmed compares the dialectic between orientation and disorientation through a hypothetical scenario; she questions the different implications that walking into a dark room can have, comparing one that is familiar to one that we do not know. In the dark room, one tries to reach out, literally extending ourselves, to reach something that can orient us, e.g. the corner of a table. When this table is in a familiar room, one in which you are aware of the orientation of its objects, the orientation of the table can provide more information than it would in a strange room.¹⁰ This scenario can highlight the complex nature of disorientation in which 'strangeness' and 'familiarity' become fluid.

Moreover, the metaphorical dark room reveals the relation between the orientation-disorientation dialectic and its ties to infrastructures which illuminate social arrangements of bodies/objects. It can simultaneously bring to light the resilience found through way-finding in the dark as well as the violence inflicted by such infrastructures.

LIGHTING THE DARK

Light has long been intertwined with the concept of orientation. The constellations of bright stars have functioned as foundations of topographical orientation for centuries, especially in regions that experience extremely long periods of darkness such as Qilak in Inuit country.¹¹

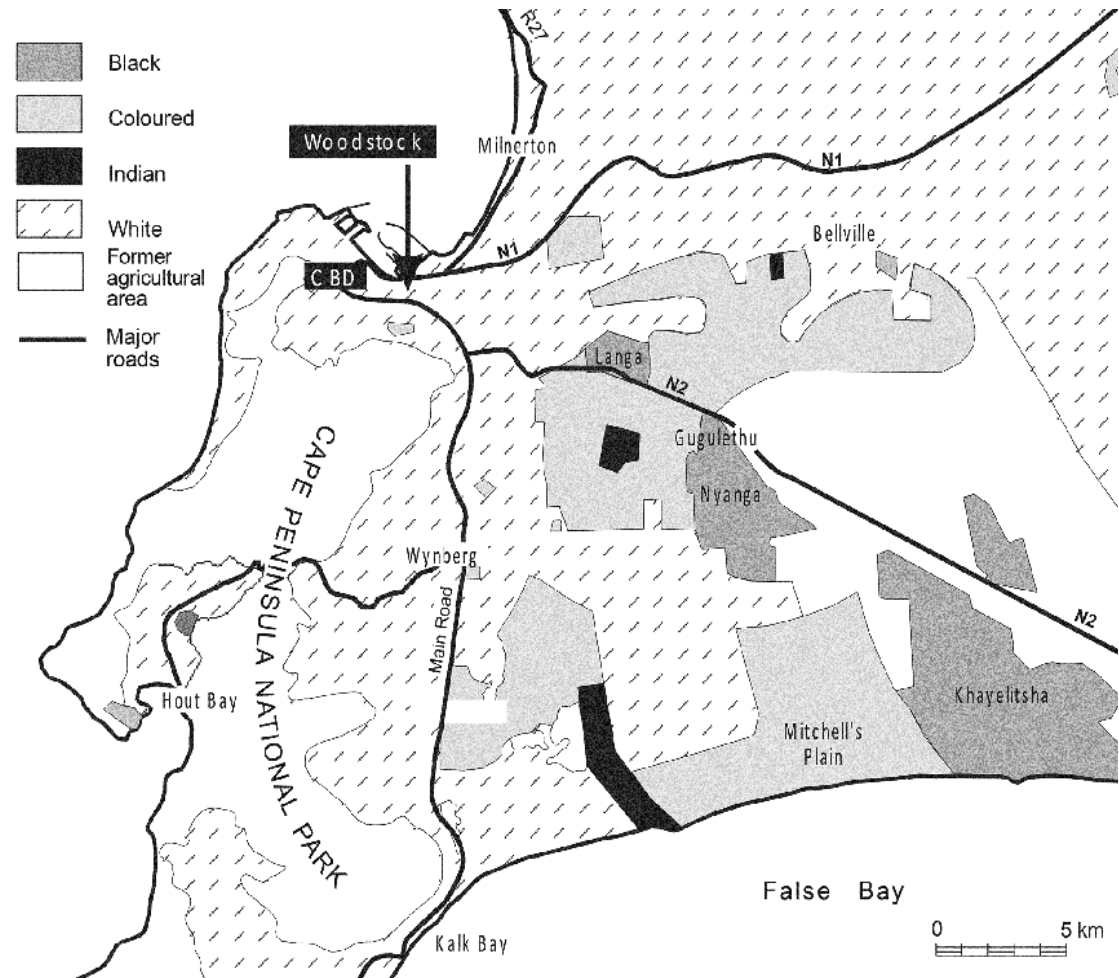
However, Western hegemony has often wielded lighting and the lack thereof as an oppressive means to impose control and order. Before the Algerian War of Independence, we can find the relocation of the bidonvilles in suburban Paris into quartiers de transit for surveillance benefits, while Algerians were continuously surveilled by armed French soldiers on Algerian grounds as well.¹² Colonial and imperial forces continuously depended on the surveillance and control of these colonised bodies during daylight hours, and on curfews or 40 meter tall high-mast lights in the dark.¹³

Not only the use of artificial lighting has been connected by violent oppression, but so has the acquisition of electricity been equally destructive.

People that use products for lighting or navigating dark and unfamiliar spaces (lightbulbs, smartphones, street lanterns) are connected to a history of attempted genocide of Indigenous people, flooding of vast areas of land, intergenerational trauma or the displacement of people and animals from their homes. We can now, for example, identify the devastating impact of British Columbia's hydroelectric power plants on the Blueberry River First Nations territory.¹⁴ While other's lives are uprooted, in order for large organisations to light and orient our modernising cities, we are complicit with an incredibly parasitic project which is increasingly seen as separate from the urban environment.

The projection of the Smooth City does not solely require infrastructure to exert pressure. To understand this, this research turns to the murder of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012. Martin was visiting his father's partner in a gated community in Florida. His murderer was a self-appointed security guard in the neighbourhood. The murderer identified Martin as a hoodie-wearing, seventeen-year-old African-American, which, in his reading, is someone certain of illegal capacity. After the murderer confronted Martin, the altercation lead to his death.

- see overleaf -
Two maps showing planned racial segregation in Cape Town on the left and the implementation of regular street lighting (gray dots) or high-mast lighting (white dots) on the right.
Briers, 2024



The majority of the (primarily female and white) jury took a particularly free and highly normative interpretation of the piece of cloth; the hoodie had led to the prosecutor being acquitted. According to them, it considerably conveyed mistrust, interpellation and even murder intent – when worn by a certain body, of course.¹⁵

SMOOTH VIOLENCE

This is where smootification distinguishes itself from infrastructural/slow violence; the Smooth City is sufficiently controlled by convenience, capsularity and collective association that it does not recognise the informal and destructive processes it is dependent on. It could therefore be considered as *smooth violence*, in which the projection of an orientation is clearly dependent on oppressive and exclusionary processes.

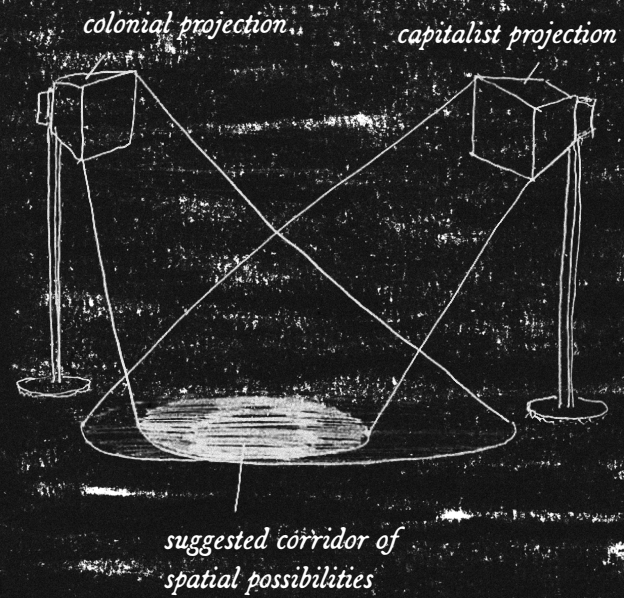
In other words, smooth violence is considered a process of continuously creating an orientation. The violent straightening out of what are considered ‘oblique lines’ builds upon colonial history as it perpetuates the power position of primarily white people to securitise and maintain order, based on territorial, agential and even sartorial matters.

Smooth violence is the creation of an orientation which relates to the direction and shaping of bodies or objects through the imposition of historical, social and cultural norms of a hegemonic orders, consequently determining what is e.g. ‘familiar’ or ‘strange’ and ‘accessible’ or ‘out of reach’ in a given context. It is a directive that is not only seen through the various technological developments, but equally experienced as ethnological and psychological phenomena.

This surveillance apparatus is there for our “security.” For our security we are all under surveillance; that is to say, we are all constructed as suspects, for our security. It does lead me to ask: under these conditions, who are we, the citizens, the new colonials?¹⁶

-
- | | | | |
|---|---|----|-----------------------|
| 1 | Boer, 2023 | 7 | Boer, 2023 |
| 2 | R. Boer, <i>personal communication</i> , 29 October 2024 | 8 | Sendra & Semmet, 2020 |
| | | 9 | Kern, 2019 |
| 3 | Otsuki, 2024 | 10 | Abmed, 2006b |
| 4 | Rodgers & O'Neill, 2012 | 11 | Zawadski, 2024 |
| 5 | Nixon, 2013 | 12 | Djeral, 2024 |
| 6 | Quote from the magazine <i>Fortune</i> in 1975, cited via (Nixon, 2013, p. 117) | 13 | Lambert, 2024 |
| | | 14 | Wong, 2021 |
| | | 15 | Lambert, 2020 |
| | | 16 | Sassen, 2013, p. 220 |

*orientation as a
projection of light
within darkness*



SCENE FIVE: WHAT FLEETS IN SPACE

To learn is to swim. We find ourselves in an ocean, either still or rippling. Everything flows. The water will come back. That is to say that the wadi that was once dry and barren ground, will soon flood again with the water hailing from the mountains; the clouds above and the ice within. The river shaped the land, not the land the river.

As the importance of countering the process of smooth violence is apparent, we should consider the potential impact of *disorientation* within a spatial setting as well. When discussing disorientation as a spatial concept, it is easily associated with spatial disorientation; feeling lost or ‘without orientation’, e.g. not knowing the way in a complex city. When zooming in on the moment of disorientation itself, we can find it as a bridge between orientation and re-orientation, a latency in way-finding.

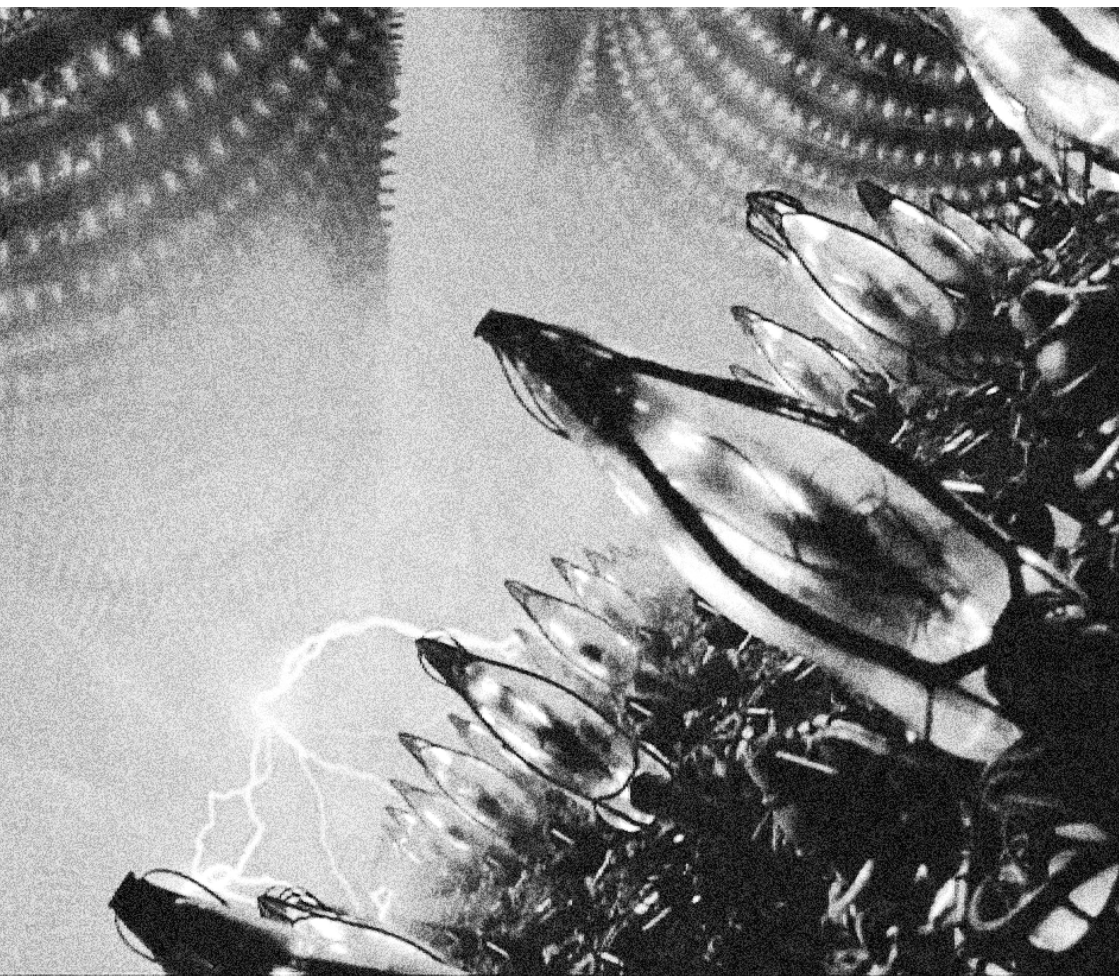
Seeing this moment as expandable and recognisable is crucial. This allows analyses to become more considerate of the shift between perception, confusion, and (re)action. For example, while an exhibition could intentionally instigate disorientation in a physical sense, of the ‘where are you and where do you go within a space’ kind, disorientation could also become noticable as an exhibition intricately displays and questions the mechanisms through which we perceive the world around us and how we act within it.¹ So, disorientation becomes a potential expression of immanent critique. In other words, can moments of disorientation show us what lies below the surface of attention that naturally orients us, to subsequently change the mechanisms in and of space itself?

SPATIAL ESTRANGEMENT

In *Act I*, hostile architecture was already posed as a potential physical expression of spatial disorientation. The erasure of homeless people in public spaces has become a familiar practice as many consumers feel uncomfortable with their presence. Additionally, businesses often advocate for hostile architecture near commercial centres to increase their sales.² However, in seeing an expression of hostile architecture through violent spikes, these measures make *a transformation from something that is ‘familiar’ to something that is ‘strange’* for some passers-by. Even though the spikes provoke a clear message, the intervention as a metaphysical object does not provide a clear stance to be taken towards these measures, homeless people in public space or its sudden ‘strangeness’. It creates a moment in which the mechanics that create such situations are questioned. Underlying norms and values become less rigid; they are suspended.

This fluidity of space is inherent to architecture. Spatial objects and space itself are always in a process of becoming rather than being. Additionally, the performance of space does not only consist of the interrelatedness of various ‘bodies’, but also the interrelated being as a process of becoming.³

- see overleaf -
Metal studs outside private
flats on Southwark Bridge
Road, London.
Corbisbley, 2015



We can identify such spatial moments in cultural media as well. For example, films and other artistic projects can expose hidden structures of power on a deeper level with lasting impact on the individuals that experience them. We could consider cult classic *The Matrix* as an experiment in disorientation, as it aimed to discuss the invisible force fields of the built environment and the flows of production in it. The film proposes the ultimate rupture (*spoiler alert!*); in which the main character wakes up to a new reality, suddenly aware of the constructed orientation he was living in.⁴ The new reality outside of 'the matrix' is, however, still not free from a hegemonic orientation. In any case, the movie possesses a curious quality which attaches new meanings to objects and behaviours in reality, through a fictional story, to the extent that viewers have noted to look at the world around them differently because of the movie.⁵ It alludes to the fact that disorientation can reverberate through various realms; the individual, the collective/spatial, the ideological.

This begs the question whether disorientation could be a tool with radical potential or if its 'reverberations' are constrained by certain spatio-temporal characteristics.

Pods in 'the matrix' that
harvest human energy.
Wachowskis, 1999

AGLITCH URBANISM

Similar questions have been posed in the recently conceptualised field of *urban glitch theory*. Urban glitch theory concerns an unexpected slippage of the system functioning in technology-driven urban environments. It seems that with the creation of any new kind of technology, humans will unintentionally also create a new kind of potential accidents.⁶ Likewise to the approach of disorientation within this research, urban glitch theory blurs the typically negative connotation of glitches and assumes a generative quality instead: a Freudian slip that unearths desires, mechanisms, truths.⁷ More specifically, urban glitch theory outlines five qualities to identify such erroneous moments; they are 1) unintentional, 2) temporary/ephemeral, 3) democratic, 4) generative and 5) qualitative.

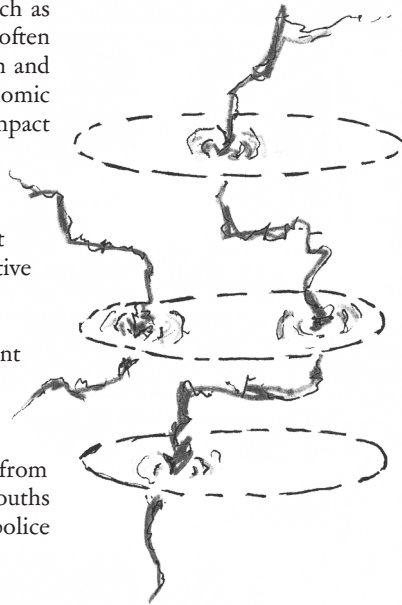
There is a crack in everything, that's how the
light gets in.⁸

A spatial conception of disorientation could help further the understanding of urban glitches and their qualities, while being aware of the potential negative impact that accompanies 'failures of the system'. Again, this is explored through the interplay of light and darkness as spatialisations of (dis)orientation.

NIGHTSPACE

Our still-growing dependency on electricity puts us at an increasing risk of glitches as technology becomes fully embedded in our daily lives. A blackout can reveal this dependency on electricity due to a natural cause such as a lightning strike or offensive means such as war missiles.⁹ One's experience with blackouts is often unfairly connected to the history of colonisation and oppression as war, uneven development, economic crises and environmental disasters increase the impact of blackouts. The everyday - and especially *everynight* - lived experiences in targeted areas is troubled or even made impossible through the eradication of electrical infrastructures. It shows disorientation as moments of destructive manipulation with lasting impact.

This harmful force also became strikingly apparent as noticed in the New York blackout of 1977. As if sparked by lightning themselves, thousands of marauders took to the streets once the lights went out and looted whatever they could find, from supermarket stocks to Pontiac car parts, and youths were throwing molotov cocktails and eggs to police officers.



Authorities described the less than 24-hour power outage as total mayhem with over 550 policemen injured and a total of 4,500 looters arrested.¹⁰

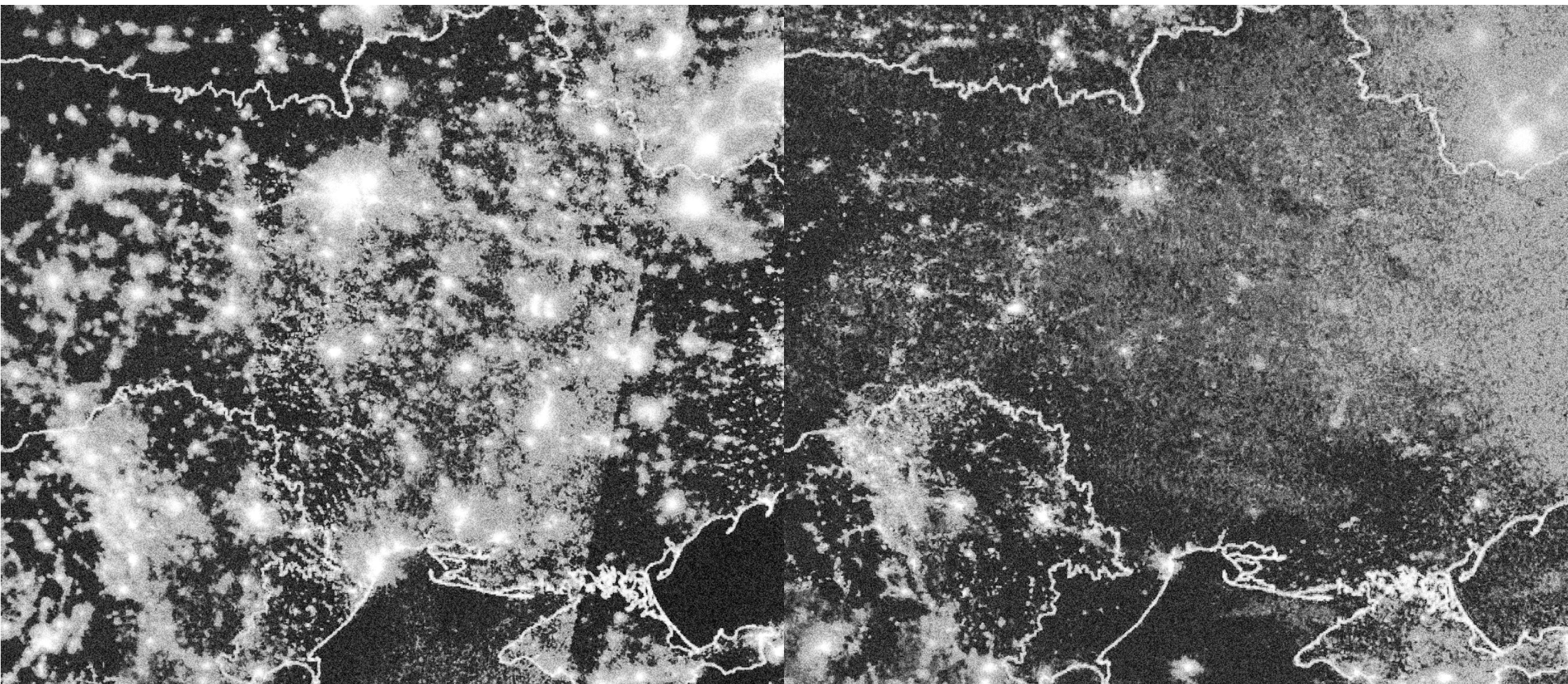
Therefore, large scale power outages can be considered a heavily impacting form of disorientation. They not only bring to light the dependency on electricity, ironically enough, but they often lead to situations in which the perceived allowance of spatial regulations is heavily influenced.

DABBLING IN THE DARK

Twelve years before, another blackout in New York created a stark difference. In 1965, only 4 people had been arrested and people dubbed to have experienced it with a mood of euphoria or an almost cosmic joy. The onset of disorientation as a result of a blackout seems to have differing outcomes of impact and intensity; one shows heavy physical manifestations, which would be imprinted on citizens' minds for decades, while the other merely manifested a psychological mode.

It seems spatio-temporal qualities influence the appropriation of the allowance that nightspaces, or darkness in general, is imbued with.

- see overleaf -
Aerial views of Ukraine
before and after Russian
missile attacks on
critical infrastructures
on November 24, 2022,
shutting down many power
plants.
CNN, 2022.



The earlier-mentioned euphoric atmosphere of the 1965 blackout reverberates sentiments of queer intimacy in the dark. Although unrelatedly, darkness has been reappropriated by queers as an experimental space for challenging norms of masculinity and control.

So-called *dark rooms* in the back of night clubs or bathhouses are sites for sexual intimacy, especially homosexual men. In the pitch black, they reconfigure masculinity and sexuality to reassemble new forms of erotic configurations that point to possibilities of a 'post-masculinity'.¹¹

While the intricacies of the erotic endeavours can be left to the imagination, it is interesting to link the emergence of this reappropriation to other historical modes of embracing isolation amongst queers; cruising in bathroom stall, forests or parks, the conception of glory holes¹² or the more modest sapphic encounters that bourgeois lesbians had in the interior of belle époque boutiques of Paris¹³.

As the projection of an orientation pushes queers to the margin, they find 'loopholes' to reappropriate spaces. By imagining and realising allowances, they produce space for alternative ways of being and becoming.

It additionally gives a glimpse of the importance of resilience needed for the continuous creation and maintenance of such spaces within an orientation. Ultimately, appropriating darkness thus becomes an act of resistance, of which the conviction needed to perform such activism cannot be ignored.

In fact, marginalised communities have taken the aforementioned nightspace as a crucial spatio-temporal moment for resistance, that is not without risks. After the August 20, 1955 offensive, Algerian guerilla fighters were only able to train and prepare for the fight against the French colonials in the war for independence during the night as daytime was characterised by heavy surveillance. Later on, this would be considered a crucial turning point for the National Liberation Army as both literally and metaphorically, they had to overcome their fear of the night. This appropriation of nightspace should be understood as an approach of disorientation motivated by the will of the people to free themselves from colonial power.¹⁴

Just as the high light masts have been used as tools for segregationist oppression, so could an (artificial) night provide a temporal-spatial construct that suspends rules and regulations, expectations and allowances.

Through these spatial examples, we find that disorientation is related to the suspension of an orientation, generating spatial allowances that are able to be appropriated. Contrary to urban glitch theory, such moments can, but are not always, intentionally provoked. Additionally, instead of creating more space for democratic potential, disorientation also wields the power to diminish accessibility of space, to decrease participation or to fully control a people. Intentions stretch from provoking destruction and danger to evoking pleasurable exploration. The relation between intention, allowance and appropriation should therefore be explored through the analysis of other spatial projects and interventions.

Endless dynamism and flux operate on the landwater boundaries and the impermanence of all human efforts is revealed as if in a mirror.¹⁵

1	<i>Elliott</i> , 2019	8	<i>Lyrics by Leonard Cohen.</i>
2	<i>Stumpf</i> , 2019		<i>Anthem.</i>
3	<i>van den Heuvel & Gorny</i> , 2017	9	<i>Hannah</i> , 2024
4	<i>Wachowski & Wachowski</i> , 1999	10	<i>Frum</i> , 2000
5	<i>Niola</i> , 2024	11	<i>Haywood</i> , 2022
6	<i>Virilio</i> , 1989	12	<i>Muñoz</i> , 2009
7	<i>Sayegh et al.</i> , 2023	13	<i>Lageschaar</i> , 2023
		14	<i>Djerbal</i> , 2024
		15	<i>Lyon</i> , 2019, p. 12

*momentarily generating
starting points*

*deliberately carefully
short-circuiting spaces*

*charging with potential
to learn to live
through darkness*

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