

How to quote this text: Nunes, F. O.; Braz, S. 2011. Mobility, absence and yellow cloaks. Translated from Portuguese by Luciana Roça. *V!RUS*, [online] June, 5. Available at: <<http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/virus05/?sec=5&item=1&lang=en>> [Accessed dd Month yyyy].

Mobility, absence and yellow cloaks

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Figure 1: Captas performative acting, 2010. Performer: Jovevan Oliveira. Photo: Soraya Braz.

A guy dressing an unusual yellow cloak so permeable as a sieve passes through the street as if he were looking for something. There are sound speakers in the cloak's elbows, muted at that moment, tied in bracelets. While he walks, some people stop and watch, trying to decipher that mystery. Others, more curious, ask him what is that about, but he does not speak with anyone. Suddenly, someone comes in the street talking on the cellphone and the yellow cloak begins to react. Its sound speakers start to "talk a blue streak"¹, reproducing ordinary phone talks recordings. The yellow cloak found what it wished. It comes closer to the absent-minded talkative, involving him with its noisy speeches, following him determinedly until he notices his surroundings: a strange and troublesome action.

The above description is about Captas, a mobile-urban art intervention, performed in 2009 and 2010, in which flashy yellow cloaks start to jabbering loudly when they find the use of cellphones, in transit through the city. This action involves performers and yellow cloaks equipped with an electronic system able to play pre-recorded conversations when they find any mobile phone in use, through the emission of electromagnetic radiation. It is our intent, in this project, to discuss social implications of mobile telephony in urban space. In this aspect, urban space is understood as a shared space, of "high speed" coexistence, managed, many times, by tacit rules of interpersonal relationships.

Such coexistence rules are infringed before boundaries that are increasingly blurred between public and private spheres, in situations provided by new technologies. In the particular case of mobile technology, we witnessed on last decades an explosive increase of mobile phone use, resulting in its popularization. Probably not many mobile telephony users remember how communicate was under the immobility paradigm: how was it possible to arrange a meeting under the risk of unpredictability? If the very immobility of metropolis – a chaotic traffic – prevents us from being there where we wish to be, we need to make us foundable by others. On this hypothesis of individual mobility in counterpoint to a motionless city, we may even think about the obsolescence of fixed telephony – which we use in our home intimacy.

The fact is that with cellphone people live anywhere – naturally making themselves intimate with others wherever they are; their home is no longer their single place of intimacy. In public spaces one shares feelings, ideas or phrases which a stranger would never listen to before the advent of the cellphone. Some people cry copiously on the telephone, others yell furiously. Mobility makes us build a bubble, a place designed as only ours, (and our interlocutor's) that is re-dwelled on every new call.

¹ [N. of T.] The phrase, in brazilian portuguese, refers to the sound speakers located at the cloaks' elbows. The literal translation of this phrase is "talking through the elbows".

But, this bubble occupied by the speaker will never be included only in the physical level of space. This projection is his remote habitat, which offers the necessary conditions for telepresence in mobility to be effected successfully. Well, according to Pierre Lévy (1999, p.81), telephone is the first telepresence medium. The voice of he who speaks on the phone – with his intonations and pauses – is in fact present when his interlocutor receives it remotely. The concept is fundamental to understand a dimension of contact which becomes effective in every conversation: the concomitance of both physical presence and telepresence for a same single individual. The telepresence implies perceptive absence. The remote involvement allows physical presence shutdown and its implications. When talking on the phone, we forget a little where we are or who is around us – except when local stimulation surpasses remote involvement.

When telepresence becomes effective, many talkers lose the accuracy of their perception of intimacy limits. A circumstantial absence is thus created, in which speakers neglect themselves and become inconvenient: they expose outloud their most intimate conversations, even though we do not wish to hear them; they disturb us in inappropriate places like cinemas; they compel us to share their opinions, their prejudices, and even, their lies – when their whereabouts told on the phone does not match the speaker actual emplacement. Moreover, we know that on a face-to-face contact, both interlocutors are aware of where they are and who surrounds them.

The inclusion of mobile technologies in urban places offer us a new view on the telepresence phenomenon: the relational implication. What relationship with anonyms who share this involvement? In many cases, those who are not remotely involved, the 'teleabsents', are disturbed. The inconvenient phone chatter in urban spaces deprives others presents of the implicit right of knowing nothing, of the quiet contemplation of places, things, people, of the right to be immersed in oneself.

In an opposite impetus, we believe that an effective way to problematize this question is to interrupt the significative involvement made possible by distance. It is necessary to turn the bubble more permeable. The talker needs to get used to both concomitant presences – the remote one and the physical one – without overlapping one to another, when surrounded by other people. In order to think over that question, nothing better than direct interference: the communicational noise.

These reflections introduced here were inspired by Captas art project, explained in this text's first few lines. Captas is also an invasive attempt to give back the nuisances resulting from mobile technology. It is a noisy cloak, striking and loud, which challenges the talker by taking him back to the space of present people. Well, if remaining telepresent is the rule – to the point that few are those who does not have any cellphone and many are those who own more than one device – this action is necessary as a reflexive and critical attitude aiming at

expliciting the implications of mobile technologies in the urban space, in human relationships and in its users perception.

Reference

Lévy, P., 1999. *Cibercultura*. 2nd edition. São Paulo: Editora 34.