

AT THE EDGE OF THE PRESENT
A CERTAIN TYPE OF FREEDOM

Written, Directed and Produced by
Roman Gerodimos

Narrated by
Sam Booth

PRESS KIT

Essentials

Short film: *At the Edge of the Present*
Duration: 16 minutes 31 seconds

Short film: *A Certain Type of Freedom*
Duration: 15 minutes 30 seconds

At the Edge of the Present and *A Certain Type of Freedom* are two visual essays on urban coexistence, public space, young people and digital media.

They are based on research and fieldwork carried out by Dr Roman Gerodimos (Bournemouth University), including interviews with architects and public space experts, visual ethnography in 40 cities and media experiments with students.

The aim of the research has been to understand how we engage with the urban landscape and with each other in public space, and how we can facilitate coexistence in increasingly diverse and dynamic urban communities, including through the use of digital media.

The films feature original still photos and video footage from cities across Europe and the US, as well as selected quotations from interviewees, participants and the scholarly literature, all beautifully narrated by actor Sam Booth (*The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable*, *Faust*).

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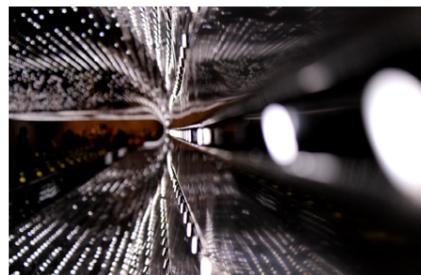
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AT THE EDGE OF THE PRESENT

A SHORT FILM ON URBAN COEXISTENCE
BY ROMAN GERODIMOS

NARRATED BY SAM BOOTH

AT THE EDGE OF THE PRESENT

Written, directed and
produced by Roman Gerodimos

Narrated by Sam Booth

Vocal engineer Anthony Galatis

Production assistants Ana Alania
Auguste Janutaite
Jordan Bunker

Duration 16 minutes 31 seconds

Language English

Format Digital (HD)

Recorded at Uptown Studios, London on Monday, 29 June 2015

Awards Winner, Award of Merit: Special Mention (Experimental),
Best Shorts Competition 2015

Winner, Award of Merit: Special Mention (Public Service
Programming / PSA), Best Shorts Competition 2015

Full film <https://vimeo.com/gerodimos/edge>

Other Resources [Trailer](#)
[Official Website](#)
['At the Edge of the Present' \(2015\) on IMDb](#)
['At the Edge of the Present' on Filmfreeway](#)

At the Edge of the Present is the first of two meditative essays on cities and urban coexistence; on how we connect with public space and with each other. Based on fieldwork and expert interviews, and featuring still photos from 21 cities, the film challenges us to step out of our comfort zone and engage with the city.



Script

"When you walk through a city and you get a wave of emotions, that's because you come across the footprints of those who have lived and died there – whatever is left behind – a certain 'humidity'. This is not merely the product of our individual culture – it is that, times one billion for those who have gone before us, and another billion for those who will come after us. We exist at that edge of the present. This is what a city is" [Nikos Vatopoulos, interview with RG]

ACT 1. TRIBES

Cities are the building blocks of our civilisation. The Greek language only has one word for both "the civic" and "the urban" (αστικός). Everything from social etiquette in our daily interactions, to law and order, to how we reach decisions as a society goes back to the idea of the city. Politics and police are rooted in the Greek word for the city – polis. Sociologist Norbert Elias showed that the emergence of urban culture required the suppression of our bodies and our behaviour in public space. The purpose of that social coercion, however, was not control for its own sake – but enabling coexistence with other people in the limited shared space of cities.

"Urban space is the space in which infinite differences have to coexist while ensuring the maximum level of liberty for everyone" [Myrto Kiourti, interview with RG].

The most fundamental feature of cities is diversity. Diversity of languages, ethnicities, sexualities, religions, professions, ideologies, socioeconomic backgrounds, habits, interests... But here's a paradox: the more diversity a city offers us, the more choices we have. But, the more we build our daily routines and relationships around choice, the more likely we are to fall back into predictable patterns of behaviour; to create habits; to withdraw to the safety of our private sphere; to only encounter those who think like us; those who are like us.

As we move across borders, as cities grow and become more multicultural "there has been a tendency towards privacy, withdrawal, segregation – increasing anxiety about the behaviour and values of others" (Bannister and Kearns 2013: 2713). When we encounter difference our first instinct is to withdraw – to disengage – to form tribes. Yet, as sociologist Richard Sennett notes, "tribalism couples solidarity with others like yourself to aggression against those who differ" (2012: 3). Gated communities and urban ghettos are symptoms of super-diversity and segregation. It is easy for a city to fall victim to its success; to afford its residents the luxury of retreating into their comfort zone. "Too many strong ties in a locality can lead to provincialism; the kind of oppressive small town culture that sociologist Georg Simmel warned against" (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 110). People focusing too much on the local, on the parochial. We expect more from cities. We expect them to provide us with a universal narrative, a gateway to the world.

Creating and maintaining a sense of community in urban neighbourhoods requires interacting with others – having “meaningful encounters” (Henriksen and Tjora 2014: 2116).

“Public squares are crucial for the civic culture because they force you to coexist. A square puts you in the process of coexisting even with people that you haven’t chosen. The key factor is the coercion of citizens to coexist. The lack of choice” [John Karahalios, interview with RG].

“I have seen people transform and become mellower through social interaction in public spaces – by sharing experiences with others at the same time, in the same place” [Nikos Vatopoulos, interview with RG].

However, just being present in the same space with others is not enough. Nurturing coexistence requires tolerance. And tolerance requires respect and empathy – “the recognition of the legitimacy of difference” (Bannister and Kearns 2013: 2700). It’s okay to be different. We don’t have to agree with each other. We don’t have to be like each other. Even conflict is engagement. “You may live in a city that is constantly boiling but you’re part of that.

It’s not just about saying ‘sorry’ and moving on. Somebody may have an argument with you, but at least they engage with you and that makes you feel alive” [Dimitris Mihas, interview with RG]. You are acknowledged. You belong.

“Opening yourself up to the community is a good thing; you immediately get new data, which means that you keep moving forward- that you keep changing. Many people changing means that the city is changing” [Nikos Vatopoulos, interview with RG].

We have so much to gain from engaging with those around us... our surroundings. Pause. Listen... Look...

ACT 2. LIGHTS

“It takes a lot of lights to make a city...” [Raymond Chandler, *The Blue Dahlia*]

City lights are a metaphor for human progress. They are an expression of both enlightenment and hubris. They challenge nature and distort space. They create dreamscapes, imaginary worlds. They illuminate the darkness, and create shadows. They regulate movement.

“A beautiful urban space acknowledges and accepts speed. It allows the seamless coexistence of humans and cars; the efficient operation of complex systems” [John Karahalios, interview with RG].

Cities accumulate energy, wealth, talent, knowledge, innovation. We push each other to push boundaries, to break through, to make it. Yet, cities are “internally uneven spaces that produce and maintain inequality, even as they produce prosperity” (Elinoff 2014: 198). Invisible Others play their background roles in the daily performance of urban existence. The street cleaner who wakes up at the crack of dawn to collect my trash. The flyer boy who hands out

vouchers for tonight’s show. The charity worker who is trying to get me to sign up. The intoxicated beggar who is trying to survive one more day. The lonely saxophone player in the metro. The bullied teenager who keeps looking over her shoulder, scared to death. The sex worker, the car park valet, the bus driver, the concierge... They are all there, yet they’re invisible.

“Homeless people essentially live within the city. They are the ones who are most ‘at home’ in the city. They delineate and domesticate urban areas” [Mara Bitrou, interview with RG].

As urban centres are regenerated and redeveloped, they “struggle to find and make space for themselves in clean, smartly paved, well provided and increasingly pedestrianized settings. They tend to rely on other locations: ‘backstage’ settings, such as rear lanes and access and delivery ramps; vacant premises and a dwindling number of derelict plots, awaiting development; cluttered corners, little strips and skirts of neglected space and overgrown verges and all the other interstitial affordances of urban architecture – overhangs, underpasses, stairwells, recessed fire-exit doorways” (Hall and Smith 2014: 303).

“Society is used to seeing people as human resources. When they stop being resources and are merely human, they also stop being part of society” [Dimitris Mihas, interview with RG].

Spaces such as cemeteries, prisons, brothels and psychiatric hospitals are pushed to the margins of the city because they challenge society’s norms.

“This is where the Other lives. These places constitute an obscure second level of urban public space. They have their own rules. But they’re vital parts of the urban landscape. It’s important to keep spaces like that at the heart of the city. In the 19th century there was a drive to move cemeteries out of city centres because of the negative connotations. No - this is life, this is memory - this is how you shape the civic culture. We all come from somewhere, we will all go somewhere” [Mara Bitrou, interview with RG].

ACT 3. TIME

Urban public space holds the power and responsibility to connect us with our past and to allow us to dream of a better future. It reminds citizens of those who have fought for the freedoms we now take for granted. Monuments, statues, works of art - all the civic landmarks in a city remind us where we come from; the struggles, human tragedies and epic triumphs of our ancestors; but they also give us glimpses into the stories of those who are different from us; their cultures, their memories, their values. It is this ever- changing tapestry of memories that keeps a city alive.

“We can’t understand the conditions of life- we can’t understand change by using our own lifespan as a point of reference... The city exists and functions in a timeframe that is outside of your own timeframe. You have to step outside and become detached so as to be able to calmly observe and judge” [Nikos Vatopoulos, interview with RG].

We are all transient beings. The way we usually experience the city is by going from point A to point B... purposefully... following predetermined routes. Yet, it is when we deviate from our habitual paths – when we lose ourselves, when we become explorers in our own city – that we start to observe, to experience, to connect.

I look around me and see surfaces that have been smoothed by infinite repetitions of movements over time. As if we are all just working on time's behalf...

Urban decay is both heart-breaking and beautiful. Buildings that were once full of life and enterprise, now reminders of a by-gone era; of how ephemeral we all are. David Lynch wrote that "when you see an aging building or a rusted bridge, you are seeing nature and man working together. If you paint over a building, there is no more magic to that building. But if it is allowed to age, then man has built it and nature has added into it - it's so organic" (Lynch, 2006: 119).

"Public space emits signals. They're not necessarily loud or visible. You walk down the street thinking about that meeting that you're going to. However, at the same time a second level of consciousness is registering the surrounding environment and 'saving' it into your brain... If we could unlock a commuter's consciousness, we'd reveal an emotional torrent about their relationship to the city" [Nikos Vatopoulos, interview with RG].

Fleeting encounters that affect us profoundly. Random acts of kindness – the kindness of strangers. Historic moments grounded in space. Yes, we all are transient beings but somehow everyone leaves their mark on the city. "Place is experienced space. It is what happens when geographic space takes on meaning of any sort—as an object of memory, desire, or fear... Place can function as the most powerful organizing theme of shared meaning. Street corners and neighborhoods, parks and schools, monuments and memorials— these are not just spots on a map. They are what hold the abstraction of social life together" (Gordon and Koo 2008: 206).

In an age dominated by speed, stress, risk, insecurity and fear, public space has the responsibility to enable us to imagine alternative realities. Public space should allow the creation of "emergent phenomena" [John Karahalios, interview with RG]; "the potentiality of the unexpected" [Mara Bitrou, interview with RG]; situations that are unpredictable, challenging and above all else, liberating. "Aesthetic beauty is ultimately about being moved by the realisation of liberation" [Myrto Kiourti, interview with RG]. Sometimes, I just close my eyes and listen to the sounds of the city... of the people around me. And I feel like I'm a tiny part of a living organism – that I am part of the city.

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Dr Roman Gerodimos



Screenings

At the Edge of the Present & A Certain Type of Freedom

- 3 August 2015 9th Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change, Schloss Leopoldskron, Salzburg, Austria (premiere)
- 15 September 2015 European Commission/Council of Europe Symposium on 'Youth Participation in a Digitalised World', European Youth Centre Budapest, Hungary
- 20 November 2015 Media Education Summit, Jackie Liebergott Black Box Theatre, Paramount Center, Boston, USA
- 21 February 2016 9th Thin Line Film Festival, Campus Theatre, Denton, Texas, USA

At the Edge of the Present and *A Certain Type of Freedom* are Roman's two first short films. He is Principal Lecturer in Global Current Affairs in the Faculty of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University, founder and convenor of the Greek Politics Specialist Group of the UK's Political Studies Association, and a faculty member at the Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change in Austria. He holds a BSc in International & European Studies (2000, Panteion University of Social & Political Sciences, Athens, Greece); an MSc in European Politics & Policy (2001, London School of Economics) and a PhD in Political Communication (2010, Bournemouth University). He is the winner of the 2010 Arthur McDougall Prize awarded by the Political Studies Association (PSA) for his research on youth civic engagement.

He is the co-editor of *The Media, Political Participation and Empowerment* (Routledge 2013) and *The Politics of Extreme Austerity: Greece in the Eurozone Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan 2015). He has published in international academic journals such as *Political Studies*, *Public Administration*, *Information, Communication & Society*, and *the Journal of Information Technology & Politics*.

Roman's current research projects focus on: the role of digital literacy in fostering civic responsibility and global citizenship; the relationship between digital media, urban public space and the civic culture; youth engagement with global current affairs; and emerging security challenges in Europe. In 2003/04 he was a visiting scholar at the Engagement Lab, Emerson College in Boston where he completed a project on "Utilising Media Literacy to Promote Student Engagement with Local and Global Issues: Research, Pedagogic Innovation and Community Engagement", funded by Bournemouth University's Fusion Fund.

As Founder and Convenor of the Greek Politics Specialist Group (GPSG) of the PSA over the last decade he has created and led the leading global network of experts on Greek society and politics.

Since 2010, Dr Gerodimos has been a faculty member at the Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change – a global summer school on media literacy and youth engagement run by the Salzburg Global Seminar in Austria; and as part of the Academy's global research consortium he has led numerous global research projects in the UK including *The World Unplugged* (2010), *The Tethered World* (2011) and *On Cities* (2012).

Dr Gerodimos is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and has won multiple awards and nominations for his pedagogic achievements and contribution to student learning. His work has featured in international media outlets such as: CNN, BBC TV, Radio and Online, Euronews, Associated Press, Radio France Internationale, ZDF, USA Today, International Business Times, Global Post, Newsweek/The Daily Beast, Radio Sputnik; as well as in national media across the world (USA, UK, France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Greece, Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, New Zealand).

Interview with the director

What was the initial spark for 'A Certain Type of Freedom' and 'At the Edge of the Present'?

These projects came out of my research on cities, public space and young people. It all started when I realised that a lot of young people were so glued to their phones and devices that they felt they were not taking in or observing their surroundings. Public space is a very powerful means of engaging and bringing people together, so I wanted to find out more about the relationship between decreased youth engagement and increased use of technology. At the same time I was doing research on cities and urban landscapes whilst going around various cities taking photographs and observing spaces, and talking to architects and urban planners, especially in Athens. It was then, when I started transcribing the interviews with both the architects and the students, and started putting together the scholarly literature, that I noticed how powerful they were. I remember transcribing this particular interview in late 2013 and I came across this beautiful quote about the past and the present in connection to cities, and I realised that it had to be visualised. That made me look at some of the photos I had taken and I could suddenly see the link between the visuals and the material I had and how well it all worked together.

Are there any particular influences from cinema or from art to your work?

I'm sure there are. I have been a huge fan of films since early childhood, but I never thought I would actually make my own. Thus, I'm sure my visual vocabulary has been influenced by various genres in ways that I'm probably not even fully aware of myself. When you create something it's natural to speak in a way that aligns with what you've learnt. One piece of art I distinctively know has influenced me is by this amazingly influential, but not very well known, French director called Chris Marker, who did a filmic essay called [La Jetée](#) in 1962. I first came across [La Jetée](#) after having watched the film [12 Monkeys](#) by Terry Gilliam, which is a loose adaptation of Marker's work. [La Jetée](#) is a 28 minutes long science fiction featurette constructed mainly from still photos describing a post-nuclear war Paris, and it is incredibly powerful, engaging and atmospheric. So I thought if Chris Marker can use still photos to create one of the most powerful and influential narratives in the history of cinema, then it's legitimate to use the visual essay as a means to get my message across.

There are other cinematic references in both films so

keen viewers will easily spot them. I thought it would be quite fun to "encode" the films with some subtle – and a couple of not so subtle – references to some of my favourite filmmakers and movies. I should also mention a documentary called [Hoop Dreams](#) by Steve James. This is one of my favourite movies of all time and talks about the barriers facing marginalised youth in the Chicago suburbs. They are basketball players and trying to make it to the NBA. I wanted at least one of the two films to pay a tribute to [Hoop Dreams](#) so that partly explains all the basketball hoops in [A Certain Type of Freedom](#)...

What did the production process look like?

The whole process of creating these projects was part of discovering the medium. The films are not conventional; there is not a lot of motion in them in terms of conventional video. We didn't even start with a script and then went scouting for locations - it was literally the other way around. It started with the visuals and the ideas and the concept, and then we built the script around that. You could almost compare the process to sculpting – you realise what it is you want to do and then you dig down through the material until you reach a point where you finally feel you've materialised your vision. The bulk of the work took place from May to September in 2015. Up to May I had piles of interviews and literature, and 10,000 photographs, but there was no script, no plan and no actual production schedule. Around May I put together the scripts, and decided on the two concepts with the slightly different themes and pitches, kind of carving out the material for the short films. Then in June we did the narration recording with Sam Booth and after that it's just a blur - choosing the music and the visuals, mixing the soundtrack, editing, putting everything together, it all just happened in a very short period of time. It was a very intense 4-5 months with lots of late nights, but at the same time one of the most creative, challenging and rewarding things I have ever done. I was lucky to have people around me who shared that vision and who "got" what I wanted to do. Occasionally I bet they thought I was crazy, but generally speaking they could really see where I was going with it.

What was most challenging with the creative process?

A huge challenge was not having the roadmap there, not having a How To-guide. It was such an instinctive and impulsive process, which was both the best and the worst part about it. My gut instinct often told me whether I should do



something or not, but this also meant that there was no safety net. I had to learn on the go - even practical things! I have never before done serious editing or serious mixing, I learned all those things because the project forced me to, and it was actually really good fun! It's interesting when the practical elements partly shape your thinking about the creative pieces. You realise they are not two different bubbles. Instead, the technological or material reality intimately interacts with the creative idea. Naturally this is sometimes limiting but often it expands the horizon of what you can do and forces you to find solutions.

In the end I would say that the hardest part was not the creative or the production bit. It was always going to be how to promote and disseminate two movies that are neither conventional cinematic narratives, nor your typical online video lasting for a minute or two with cute cats and puppies. I love cute puppies, but that's not what this is. [At the Edge of the Present](#) and [A Certain Type of Freedom](#) are both meditative and quite slow, offering another kind of ambience and demanding a different kind of attention from the audience. A fifteen minute online video thus has to compete with the distractions of being connected and having a gazillion windows and applications on at the same time, making it very hard to have a genuine experience in the same way you would

in a cinema. So the challenge was creating these avenues and outlets for people to watch these two documentaries. This happened in a number of ways - I was given the space in Salzburg, in Budapest and in Boston to screen the films to audiences genuinely interested in these topics, which was amazing. Getting these first screenings, although so early in the production process, was a really special moment for us, sharing something we had been working on for a long time. It was really scary and very different for me as an academic being used to so called invisible audiences of researchers reading and commenting on your articles.

What is the main difference between 'At the Edge of the Present' and 'A Certain Type of Freedom'?

The overall format of the two films is generally very similar in terms of the visual language and the narration and the music, but their starting points and the scope of the arguments are slightly different. [At the Edge of the Present](#) mainly looks at urban coexistence and how we experience the city. It has three acts - Tribes, Lights, and Time – breaking down the concept of a city, looking at its core elements, and what you get is its building blocks. It's the passage of time, a diversity of people

coming together, the creation of identity and community, with boundaries of exclusion and inclusion. It's talking about these big, abstract themes, but talking about them in a way that is grounded in people's daily experiences. As its core material *At the Edge of the Present* uses interviews that I did with architects and public space experts in Greece, but the scope of it aims to be global with photographs from over 20 cities in Europe and the United States. I would have liked for it to be truly global though I didn't have the time or the material needed, but maybe that is for a future project.

A Certain Type of Freedom looked more specifically at young people and their relationship with public space and the city. The research material for that was different and was collected from the various studies that we did with young people - *Unplugged* and *On Cities*. Thus, it was more about their voices coming through in the script. One of the key drivers was to show how insightful young people's own voices can be, and they have the most emotive and powerful ways of talking about issues that affect everyone. It's better than creative writing because it directly reflects the experiences of people who are the experts in their own lives. Allowing and enabling these voices to come out in a way that makes sense was really important to me.

The most satisfying and emotional thing for me is

when people respond to and engage with the film, commenting how they can identify with the themes, connecting them to their own experiences. The point of the movies is to facilitate a discussion about these issues.

How do the visuals support the themes and arguments of the films?

At the Edge of the Present is more of a creative form of writing and a bit more dramatised, so I wanted that to show in the photographs. For example, towards the middle there is a sequence that is quite dark and fast paced, talking about marginalised people outside the mainstream and outside the borders of what we consider acceptable. To demonstrate this, I wanted the visual language to be more about lights and shadows. The third act was about memory and time, themes which are a bit more straightforward to demonstrate through photographs. Generally, I tried to create an aesthetic framework that would allow people to use their own imagination.

A Certain Type of Freedom was a bit more complicated as it looks at human relationships and our relationship to space. Because it's about people it's harder to conceptualise. It uses 'bokeh' photography, which is when you use out of



focus points of lights producing a more abstract image. This ambiguity forces the audience to use their imagination to make the connections and to take the experience and fill it with their own. If you're too literal you're facing the danger of telling people how to read your text, so I was trying to avoid this at all costs.

It's really fascinating how different people's interpretations of the films were. I have been teaching about media, active audiences and different types of reading for 13 years now. To witness this in action with my own films was extraordinary, as people were giving new points of views on my own creation that hadn't crossed my mind before. Having that exchange of other people's perspectives is amazing, so being too close-ended and too literal risks dictating to the audience how you want them to interpret something, going completely against the point of the films. Rather we wanted the audiences to encourage people to engage with themselves and with public space, instead of telling them what to think.

Why did you work on such a tight schedule?

We decided for the deadline to be at the Salzburg Academy in the beginning August 2015, where I wanted to screen both films even if only a rough cut at the time. Occasionally you start a project and then you reach a point where, especially if there isn't a pressing deadline or outlet, you feel you've learned all you had to learn and you leave it aside. You think that you'll have the chance to complete it soon but it never happens and the project kind of rots in a drawer. That's happened to me a few times! *Laughs* This time I was determined not to do that. Therefore I felt that if I didn't finish the films before Salzburg, if I don't push myself, it was never going to happen. My new motto now is that "perfect is the enemy of good" and if you do your best and aim for good occasionally you do even better. At Salzburg, *At the Edge of the Present* was pretty much finished. We only had some final touches with the sound and resolution left to do. *A Certain Type of Freedom* on the other hand still needed a bit of work.

What was it like working with Sam Booth?

First of all I have to say that this wouldn't be even close to what it is without Sam Booth. Working with him was an amazing experience and I'm very honoured that he agreed to do this. I first saw Sam in *The Drowned Man*, an immersive theatre production by Punchdrunk at the National Theatre in London. *The Drowned Man* was a huge cultural, intellectual and physical experience for me – it affected me profoundly and has become a really important part of my life. Sam had a very commanding, mesmerising presence in the show – his character pulled the strings as it were, and in a way determined everyone's fate. Sam is an incredibly versatile

actor and gave the role a life that went beyond the confines of the performance space. He also has a unique voice that literally haunted everyone who ever saw *The Drowned Man*.

When I realised I wanted to do something that included a narration I just had that moment, in early May, when I realised it had to be Sam Booth. I literally couldn't or didn't want to imagine anybody else, and if Sam had said no I have no idea what I would've done. The whole process was piecemeal from the beginning. Initially it was going to be an academic documentary, then it became more elaborate and ambitious, then we thought "OK, we have this material, how far can we push it and ourselves?" And when Sam kindly agreed to join us, that's I thought we really need to do justice to his contribution.

So, what does the future look like? Are we to expect any similar projects?

Well, I usually don't like doing the same thing twice, and I can't imagine doing the exact same thing. The overall experience has generally been very rewarding. I find learning the language of creative multimedia really exciting, and I love the medium of the short documentary because it's a powerful tool, especially for academic researchers, not just showcasing our research but also to open it up to a real dialogue with the audience on issues people care about. I'm not sure whether my future projects will be in the format of visual essays - there are various ideas - but as I'm driven by my gut instinct there is never a precise and carefully laid out plan of what to do next. If I come across a location, a concept or some material that inspires me it will eventually take on a life of its own, giving me directions to what technical means and what format to use rather than me starting with a certain format in mind.

Generally speaking, I find this format a nice way of communicating ideas, and I have noticed that it's definitely reached a much wider audience than traditional research outputs would have reached. Perhaps the most important lesson of this experiment has been that non-experts, a general audience at large were able to engage with and appreciate it, whilst at the same time established academics were able to find value in it as well. Being able to find that balance between expert and non-expert audiences is a really interesting challenge for me. I think there are ways of having a meaningful dialogue between academia and 'the outside world'. What I know for sure is that any future projects will continue to try to walk that line between these two audiences.

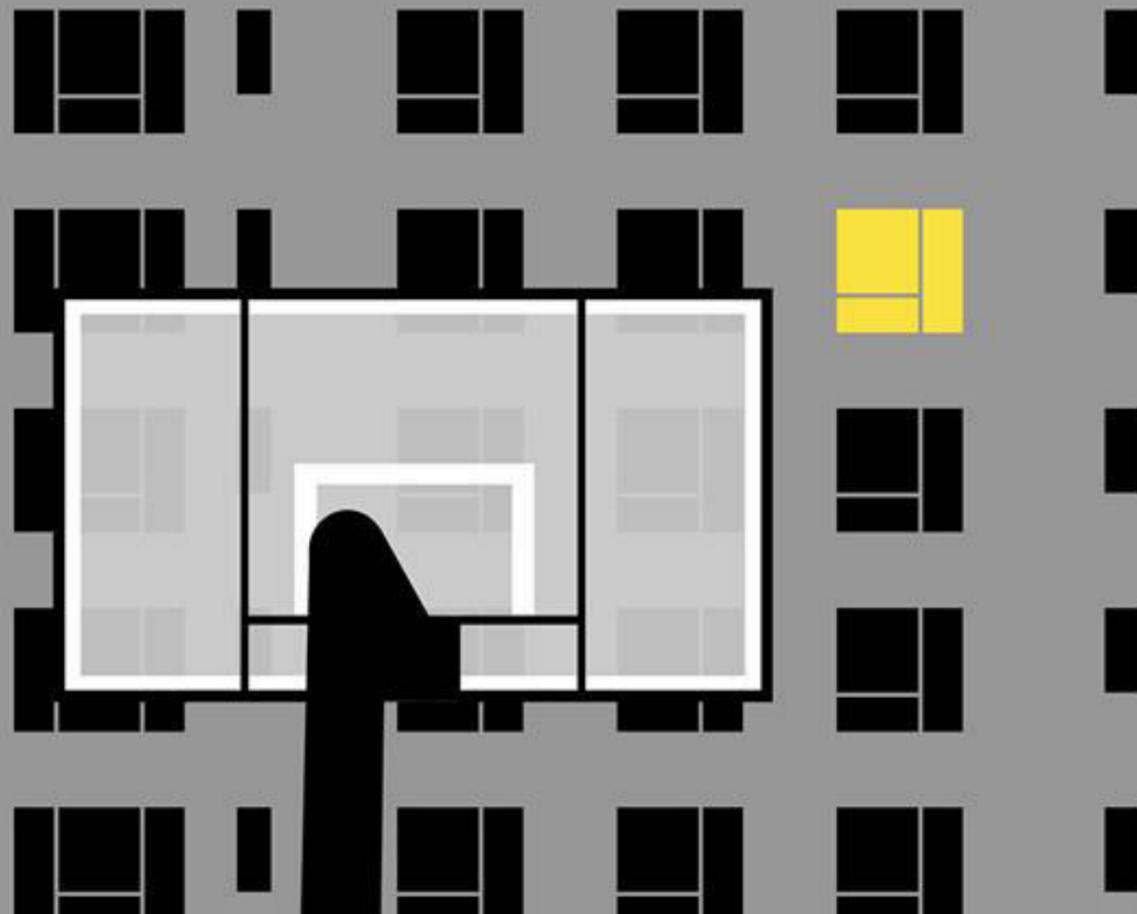
Interview by Sofie Edlund
22 January 2016



A SHORT FILM ON YOUTH AND THE CITY
BY ROMAN GERODIMOS

A CERTAIN TYPE OF FREEDOM

NARRATED BY SAM BOOTH



A CERTAIN TYPE OF FREEDOM

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Winner, Narration: Sam Booth, Hollywood International
Independent Documentary Awards 2016

Full film <https://vimeo.com/gerodimos/freedom/>

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A Certain Type of Freedom is the second of two meditative essays on cities, youth and media; on how we connect with public space and with each other. Featuring original research and still photos from 20 cities, this film highlights the challenges facing urban youth and encourages us to rethink our relationship with technology.



Script

"I found myself staring into space a few times and simply thinking. The quietness made me think about my dog, who died a few months ago, as she was a husky and always howling. I found myself missing her and feeling much more upset about losing her than I had in a while. This made me realise how much I use media to distract myself from certain feelings and emotions. Turning on the television or going online is an easy way to disconnect from unpleasant feelings rather than dealing with them. I imagine this is probably something quite common. There is a lot of stress in daily life and perhaps one of the reasons why all forms of media are used so much is to enable people to disconnect from their daily worries and concentrate on something else. It would probably be healthier to deal with our emotions rather than disconnect from them" [Sarah, 'Uplugged' participant].

ACT 1: DISENGAGING

Media and electronic devices are often accused of making young people isolated; of disengaging them from their surroundings, and encouraging them to spend more time in their own private comfort zone. As televisions, personal computers and video games gradually infiltrated their bedrooms, it looked as if young people were withdrawing from the city, spending less time with family, engaging in fewer physical activities, instead preferring to escape to virtual realities. The potential side-effects of heavy media use should certainly not be overlooked – in fact, an increasing body of research has shown a link between problematic internet use and poor quality of life, especially amongst children (Jackson, Brown and Pardun 2008; Kittinger, Correia and Irons 2012; Mazer and Ledbetter 2012). The thing is – factors such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and lack of social skills may actually be some of the causes of such increased media use, rather than merely the effects (Kalpidou, Costin and Morris 2011; Weinstein and Lejoyeux 2010). Media and the privacy of the bedroom provide young people with a safe space in which they can explore their identities, experiment, follow their personal interests, understand their bodies and develop their individual self away from the pressures of peers and family (Livingstone 2005: 170).

More importantly, we should ask ourselves whether it is, in fact, the condition of our cities and public space that has forced young people to withdraw, rather than the other way around. Why do they choose to develop their identities and seek self-fulfilment in the comfort and safety of a private, virtual space, as opposed to a public, physical one? What is it that is stopping them? Privatised bedroom culture has developed partly because of the failures of a more public, outdoor leisure culture, in terms of access, cost and variety of activities (Bovill and Livingstone 2001: 17). Society offers young people "few alternatives" (Livingstone 2005: 167) and many "still view the private as the only space in which to imagine any sense of hope, pleasure, or possibility". (Giroux 2011: 20).

Even spaces that ought to be open and public – such as plazas and parks – are increasingly privatised, managed, demarcated, signposted, controlled... Teenagers are often treated as pests. The Mosquito alarm, used in transport hubs and shopping malls across Britain and in other countries, emits sound at very high frequency that can only be heard by young people, so as to deter them from gathering or loitering in specific areas. The concept of 'loitering' itself is problematic. What does loitering mean? It means "remaining in a particular public place for a protracted time without an apparent purpose" (Wikipedia). In some circumstances this is illegal. So the way our public space is both structurally and legally constructed makes it difficult to exist there "without an apparent purpose". And "in our classist, consumer society, those who can't be consumers of goods are forced to be consumers of control" (Pakosz 1998).

The degradation of the urban landscape is not class-neutral; it does not affect everyone equally. Children and young people from poorer backgrounds depend on their local spaces for vital amenities (Leahy Laughlin and Johnson 2011: 453). Public space is not just parks and fields. It is also local libraries, swimming pools, youth clubs, museums, learning spaces, meeting points. So, if our public space is hostile to young people, and if media and digital devices provide them with spaces for socialisation, learning and escapism, how can we help them re-engage with their physical surroundings? How can we enable them to take ownership of the urban landscape and imagine a different reality?

ACT 2: UNPLUGGING

Over the last few years, a global team of researchers at the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change have been developing innovative ways of encouraging students to reflect on their relationship to technology and to use digital media to engage with the city. We found that unplugging completely from all media, even for just a period of 24 hours, was a crucial first step – in fact, for most participants it proved to be a profoundly transformative and empowering experience.

Since 2010 thousands of students around the world have taken part in Unplugged – a voluntary experiment which requires participants to give up use of all digital media and devices, from TV and radio to computers, smartphones, mp3 players and video games, for 24 consecutive hours, and then reflect on that experience. The point of this exercise is not to demonise media or to reduce their use. The aim is to appreciate and celebrate the opportunities available to us, but also to reflect on the things that we may be missing out on, by restricting ourselves to a digital comfort zone. Most of our participants felt shaken by the experience of being unplugged – they initially felt bored... lonely... isolated...

"I felt an eerie silence in the house. Instead of music playing or having the TV on, there was silence. It made me, and I think the others in my family, very aware of each other and it felt almost intrusive, without the noise, it felt like there was less space around you" [Amy, 'Unplugged' participant].

The lack of digital opportunities for socialisation and entertainment meant that people were forced to leave their comfort zone and engage – with others in physical space, but also with their own self.

"One possible benefit from the experience was the amount of thinking I did. It was strange how in what felt like such an empty stretch of time I was able to think about things completely uninhibited by any sort of distraction... I found myself contemplating thoughts and concepts that usually wouldn't have entered my mind. It was almost like experiencing a certain type of freedom. There were no objects that could have prevented the expansion of my thoughts, and moreover, the depth of my thoughts" [Rosie, 'Unplugged' participant].

This experience revealed that one of the reasons we shut ourselves from others using smartphones and headphones isn't that we want to be rude or antisocial, but that, often, we're just insecure. We don't know whether we're supposed to speak, and what we're supposed to say. And we may even think that there's no point in engaging in small talk with someone we're unlikely to ever meet again – or with someone who seems to have so little in common with us. Yet it is precisely those millions of tiny, seemingly meaningless, encounters that create the fabric of our social lives and of our communities. They practically force us to perform and to coexist, for the sake of being polite – of being civil. And it is through this process of coming out of our comfort zone that we learn about others and about ourselves.

Going unplugged, even for a few hours, can also help us observe and appreciate our surroundings.

"During the day, I saw the world from a more local perspective. I began to talk to people at the bus stop, rather than shielding them with my iPhone or iPod. In a way, it felt like isolation, but then I also felt more part of a local community" [Joshua, Unplugged participant].

While unplugging is a very liberating and enlightening experience, digital media can be a valuable tool of engaging with the city.

ACT 3: REENVISIONING

If we want to empower young people and enable them to engage with public space, then we should be prepared to listen to them and to their own ideas. And, these may well be different from the ideas of architects and urban planners. In fact, research has shown that young people emphasise social, rather than physical, solutions to urban problems. Their top priorities are accessibility, sense of belonging and the ability to be with friends (Leahy Laughlin and Johnson, 2011).

Rather than trying to remove young people from public space, we should "draw attention to their lives and generate opportunities for them to critically assess, revision, and re-create a portion of their neighbourhood environment" (Breitbart 1995: 35).

One simple way in which we have been encouraging our students to do that is by going to their community and taking a photo of something they perceive to be a problem facing their city or local public space. We then ask them to write a short note explaining why they chose that particular spot and reflecting on potential causes and solutions.

This simple act of mindful engagement produced a torrent of emotional narratives. It unlocked young people's imagination and allowed them to express their concerns.

"We live in cities that are essentially clones of each other. There is no longer room for diversity. We are mere replicas of the inhabitants of the neighbouring towns and cities. We wear the same clothes, eat at the same restaurants and drink at the same coffee houses... The possibility of independence is now just a fabrication of our imagination" [Jade, 'On Cities' participant].

Emerging disciplines and methods such as digital literacy and visual ethnography provide us with powerful ways of empowering and engaging not just children or young people, but adults as well. Public and community art, design, performance and environmental intervention - they all have multiple benefits both for the people involved and for the broader community (Breitbart 1998). Interactive mobile apps such as the Museum of London's A Hollow Body (ahollowbody.com) enable city dwellers to immerse themselves in the architecture and history of the urban landscape. Interviewing local residents to create oral histories showcases "the extraordinary quality of ordinary lives" and breaks the isolation many feel within their urban neighbourhoods (Breitbart and Worden 1994: 83). The Human Library project (humanlibraryuk.org) acts as a mobile library bringing people from different backgrounds together in a shared public space so as to combat prejudice and stereotypes. "Mobile media art invites citizens to take stock of their surroundings and 'perceive urban spaces in a different way'" (Wilken 2008: 45). As GPS, mapping applications and other "location-aware technologies" continue to expand in urban spaces, "the nature of spaces, and, in time, the nature of the city will change" (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 101). Engaging with others and with our surroundings will not happen automatically. If anything, our instinct often is to withdraw and to avoid the complexity and potential awkwardness of the unfamiliar. Technology provides us with the choice to withdraw and disengage or to experience and interact. How and when we do those things is entirely up to us. All it takes is a simple, conscious decision.

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