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AlieNation: The Map of Despair

Space/Time Control, Space Travel, and Space
Exploration

CrimethInc.

September 11, 2000

In the modern world, control is exerted over us automatically by the spaces we live and move in. We go through certain rituals in our lives — work, “leisure,” consumption, submission — because the world we live in is designed for these alone. We all know malls are for shopping, offices are for working, ironically-named “living” rooms are for watching television, and schools are for obeying teachers. All the spaces we travel in have pre-set meanings, and all it takes to keep us going through the same motions is to keep us moving along the same paths. It’s hard to find anything to do in Walmart but look at and purchase merchandise; and, accustomed to doing this as we are, it’s hard to conceive that there could be anything else we could do there anyway — not to mention that doing anything but shopping there is pretty much illegal, when you think about it. There are fewer and fewer free, undeveloped spaces left in the world where we can let our bodies and minds run free. Almost every place you can go belongs to some person or group which has already designated a meaning and proscribed use for it: private estate, shopping district, superhighway, classroom, national park.

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And our very predictable routes through the world rarely take us near the free areas that do remain. These spaces, where thought and pleasure can be free in every sense, are being replaced with carefully controlled environments like Disneyland — places in which our desires are prefabricated and sold back to us at our financial and emotional expense. Giving our own meaning to the world and creating our own ways to play and act in it are fundamental parts of human life; today, when we are never in spaces that encourage this, it should be no surprise that so many of us feel desperate and unfulfilled. But because the world has so little free space left in it, and the circuitry of our everyday lives never takes us there, we're forced to go to places like Disneyland for any semblance of play and excitement at all. Thus the real adventure our hearts crave has been largely replaced by fake adventure, and the thrill of creation by the drill of spectatorship.

Our time is as thoroughly occupied and regulated as our space; indeed, the subdivision of our space is a manifestation of what has already happened to our time. The entire world moves and lives according to a standardized time system, designed to synchronize our movements from one side of the planet to the other. Inside of this larger system, we all have our lives regimented by our work schedules and/or school hours, as well as the hours that public transportation runs and businesses operate, etc. This scheduling of our lives, which begins in childhood, exerts a subtle but deep control over us all: we come to forget that the time of our lives is ultimately ours to spend how we choose, and instead think in terms of work days, lunch hours, and weekends. A truly spontaneous life is unthinkable to most of us; and so-called “free” time is usually just time that has been scheduled for something other than work. How often do you get to see the sun rise? How many sunny afternoon walks do you get to take? If you had the unexpected opportunity to take an exciting trip this week, could you do it?

These restricting environments and schedules drastically limit the vast potential of our lives. They also keep us isolated from each

other. At our jobs, we spend a great deal of time doing one particular kind of labor with one particular group of people, in one set place (or at least in one set environment, for construction workers and “temp” employees). Such limited, repetitive experience gives us a very limited perspective on the world, and keeps us from coming to know people from other backgrounds. Our homes isolate us further: today we keep ourselves locked apart in little boxes, partly out of fear of those capitalism has treated even worse than ourselves, and partly because we believe the paranoia propaganda of the companies that sell security systems. Today’s suburbs are cemeteries of community, the people packed separately into boxes... just like our supermarket products, sealed for “freshness.” With thick walls between us and our neighbors, and our friends and families scattered across cities and nations, it’s hard to have any kind of community at all, let alone share community space in which people can benefit from each other’s creativity. And both our homes and our jobs keep us tied down to one place, stationary, unable to travel far through the world except on hasty vacations.

Even our travel is restricted and restricting. Our modern methods of transportation — cars, buses, subways, trains, airplanes — all keep us locked onto fixed tracks, watching the outside world go by through a screen, as if it were a particularly boring television show. Each of us lives in a personal world that consists mostly of well-known destinations (the workplace, the grocery store, a friend’s apartment, the dance club) with a few links in between them (sitting in the car, standing in the subway, walking up the staircase), and little chance to encounter anything unexpected or discover any new places. A man could travel the freeways of ten nations without seeing anything but asphalt and gas stations, so long as he stayed in his car. Locked onto our tracks, we can’t imagine truly free travel, voyages of discovery that would bring us into direct contact with brand new people and things at every turn.

Instead, we sit in traffic jams, surrounded by hundreds of people in the same predicament as ourselves, but separated from them

by the steel cages of our cars — so they appear to us as objects in our way rather than fellow human beings. We think we are reaching more of the world with our modern transportation; but in fact we see less of it, if anything. As our transportation capabilities increase, our cities sprawl farther and farther across the landscape. Whenever travel distances increase, more cars are needed; more cars demand more space, and thus distances increase again... and again. At this rate highways and gas stations will one day replace everything that was worth traveling to in the first place.

A curious effect of the development of rapid transit systems is that as the distance between communities closes, the distance between individuals within those communities widens.

Some of us look at the internet as the “final frontier,” as a free, undeveloped space still ripe for exploring. Cyberspace may or may not offer some degree of freedom to those who can afford to use and explore it; but whatever it might offer, it offers on the condition that we check our bodies at the door: voluntary amputation. Remember, you are a body at least as much as a mind: is it freedom to sit, stationary, staring at glowing lights for hours, without using your senses of taste, touch, or smell? Have you forgotten the sensations of wet grass or warm sand under bare feet, of eucalyptus tree or hickory smoke in your nostrils? Do you remember the scent of tomato stems? The glint of candlelight, the thrill of running, swimming, touching?

Today we can turn to the internet for excitement without feeling like we have been cheated because our modern lives are so constrained and predictable that we have forgotten how joyous action and motion in the real world can be. Why settle for the very limited freedom that cyberspace can provide, when there is so much more experience and sensation to be had out here in the real world? We should be running, dancing, canoeing, drinking life to the dregs, exploring new worlds — what new worlds? We must rediscover our bodies, our senses, the space around us, and then we can transform

this space into a new world to which we can impart meanings of our own.

To this end, we need to invent new games — games that can take place in the conquered spaces of this world, in the shopping malls and restaurants and classrooms, that will break down their proscribed meanings so that we can give them new meanings in our accordance with our own dreams and desires. We need games that will bring us together, out of the confinement and isolation of our private homes, and into public spaces where we can benefit from each other’s company and creativity. Just as natural disasters and power outages can bring people together and be exciting for them (after all, they do make for a little thrilling variety in an otherwise drearily predictable world), our games will join us together in doing new and exciting things. We will have poetry in the factories, concerts in the streets, sex in the fields and libraries, free picnics in supermarkets, public fairs on freeways.

We need to invent new conceptions of time and new modes of travel, as well. Try living without a clock, without synchronizing your life with the rest of the busy, busy world. Try taking a long trip on foot or bicycle, so that you will encounter everything that you pass between your starting point and your destination firsthand, without a screen. Try exploring in your own neighborhood, looking on rooftops and around corners you never noticed before — you’ll be amazed how much adventure is hidden there waiting for you!