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## Network landscapes.....

As I write this it is early spring in Finland. A walk in the sunny countryside is a treat for all the senses. The winter landscape carpeted with white snow is quite dazzling. It is a unique and utterly genuine experience.

In the future, however, our experiences of a particular place will increasingly be anything but authentic meanings conveyed by the senses. Actually places have never been "exclusively" genuine, of course, for our human faculties of speech and writing combined with our imagination have always allowed us to shift from one place to another as fast as our thoughts will carry us.

All that has happened is that language itself and the technologies intended for communicating through language have altered our way of approaching places. The television screen has brought exotic landscapes into our living rooms, a friend can call direct from the wilderness of Lapland on his mobile phone, and we can pick up

a novel by a 19th century author and dive straight back into the landscapes of a bygone age.

The stream of electronic representations of reality that faces us nowadays is never-ending. Our consciousness is filled with images fed to us by the media which are apparently authentic but in fact cleverly chosen, realistically staged and carefully edited. The important thing is not what a place is like but how it is projected.

Various major events are linked with the names of certain places, for instance, as a result of information circulated by the media, but how many of us would be interested in those places for their own sake?

Prominent among the most recent channels for communicating language and meanings in this way are the data networks, through which our real landscapes are gaining serious competitors in the form of virtual, network landscapes. These networks offer numerous routes for arriving at meanings. Where television serves up ready-prepared pictures and sounds to passive viewers, the Internet allows the user to move around and navigate according to his own predilections, and also by chance to a certain extent.

In this way the Internet can create a tolerable imitation of real-life movement. A change of place - i.e. a change of Internet address - brings us to a new landscape. Websites form the network landscape building blocks for Internet travellers, feeding the imagination and allowing decisions to be made.

The Internet not only represents existing landscapes (literally denotes them over again) but also structures them. The Internet traveller can actively form his image of the world at his computer terminal, giving rise to a new form of geography, and new landscapes. If we set out to examine two small towns in Finland, Joensuu and Kotka, both with about 50,000 inhabitants, by means of the Eureka search engine, we score 74,000 hits in the former case but only 39,000 in the latter, which is not surprising, as Joensuu is a university town and in a different class from Kotka as far as its network visibility is concerned.

The significant places in network landscapes are "public spaces" composed of meanings that have to a greater or lesser extent been consciously created. Unlike physical spaces, however, a network service can be located anywhere, and distance ceases to create any friction. It may well be that traditional spatial units such as cities or provinces as we know them today will cease to carry any rational meaning in the future, as images and identities are increasingly created and absorbed via data networks.

On the other hand, visibility and recognition are as difficult to achieve in virtual form on the network as they are in the real world, if not more so. The eventual outcome is nevertheless a familiar one in this age of economic growth centres: that the areas lying in between the significant places are soon separated out as peripheries and wastelands.

Mobile communications networks are similarly able to alter the nature of place. What are the implications of the fact that a mobile communicator can provide its user with information on a previously unknown city, for instance? Naturally, we are all gathering information about our surroundings all the time, following up clues and piecing scraps of information together. A mobile phone network, on the other hand, allows us direct access to ready-processed information, e.g. where the cheapest pizza is to be had and how to get there. This means that our environment begins to compose itself according to a set of functions and the network landscapes become very monotonous.

Since we have a built-in capacity for choosing alternatives that make our daily lives easier, it is possible to imagine a situation, as services based on user positioning functions expand, in which places take on rational significance if one can do something there, provided, of course, that they are correctly defined on the network. The busy traveller will be inclined to drive past a particular point if his communicator does not tell him in time of the service available there and the bargain prices on offer that day.

It may well be that networks rather than computers will soon occupy in a key position in our lives. The technology visionary George Gilder is already of the

opinion that broadband communications will revolutionize our world. But are networking technologies really altering our everyday landscapes, or should we regard them more as tools? Can any technical device convey authentic experiences to the senses?

Network landscapes appear to be almost as real as the winter landscape seen from my window, but if we turn our mobile phones and computers off, they disappear in the twinkling of an eye. I pause to think for a moment, and decide to go out for a walk - amidst the white snow of the authentic winter landscape....

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