

# Space

*Nigel Thrift*

**Abstract** The turn to space is best understood as part of a more general struggle to produce a material thinking that has preoccupied social theory over the last 20 years or so. Its effect has been to multiply both the number of inhabitations that are understood to exist and the sensory registers through which they can be characterized. Most particularly, this proliferation of inhabitations has meant that nearness has been replaced by distribution as a guiding metaphor and ambition. The paper is in three parts. Using the work of Julie Mehretu as a guide, the first part considers the different ways in which space makes a difference. The second part then uses three vignettes to understand the range of spaces that can be produced and how they become attuned. Finally, there is a brief conclusion.

**Keywords** materiality, process, space

## Introduction

During the last 20 years or so, a 'spatial turn' has made its way across the social sciences and humanities. It has arisen from all kinds of theoretical and practical impulses, but its effect has been clear enough: the identification of what seems like a constantly expanding universe of spaces and territories, each of which provides different kinds of inhabitation – from the bordering provided by the womb, through all the things in the home that are just out of reach, through the corporeal traces of buildings and landscapes that provide a kind of half-remembered poetics, through the ways in which vast political and commercial empires – and the resultant wealth and misery – can be fashioned from the mundane comings and goings of ships and trains and now planes, through all of the billions of invisible messages that fleetingly inhabit the radio spectrum and each another dimension on to life.

There are no doubt many reasons to believe that the spatial turn will prove to be of lasting significance. But, in the final analysis, or so I would claim, the 'spatial turn' has proved to be a move of extraordinary consequence because it questions categories like 'material', 'life' and 'intelligence' through an emphasis on the unremitting materiality of a world where there are no pre-existing objects. Rather, all kinds of hybrids are being continually recast by processes of circulation within and between particular spaces. The world is made up of all kinds of things brought in to relation with one another by this universe of spaces through a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter and the often violent training that the encounter forces. This material schematism that has had some obvious forebears in the social sciences and humanities. I think of Gabriel Tarde's micrometaphysics, Pitirim Sorokin's forays into socio-cultural causality, Torsten Hägerstrand's time-geography, or Anthony Giddens's expeditions around social theory in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It has achieved more grip of late because of theoretical developments like actor-network theory, and the consequent rediscovery of authors such as Tarde and Whitehead, as well as the influence of the writings of authors like Deleuze and Guattari. As and probably more importantly, a whole series of fields have been constructed out of the resurgence of what Paul Carter (2004) calls 'material thinking', the 'performative' working methods and procedures of writings (and, very importantly, other

140 *Theory, Culture & Society* 23(2–3)

methods of exposition) that emphasize how the whole business of praxis and poiesis is wrapped up in the stubborn plainness of things, in 'tool-being' (Harman, 2002). These fields must necessarily emphasize the materiality of thinking, and include the study of material culture, the sociology of science, performance studies from dance to poetry, site-based art and architecture, various aspects of archaeology and museum studies, some of the excursions into interaction design, as well as various developments in cultural geography like non-representational theory. In particular, they have been forced to take the energy of the sense-catching forms of things seriously (Critchley, 2005) – rather than see things as mere cladding – because of their object of enquiry and, as a result, have begun to forge a new approach to 'theory', one which is both more and less abstract, more and less empirical.

In this short piece, I can only begin to outline why the processual sensualism that a material schematism provides is so important and how the study of the spaces of the world is now changing to accommodate that fact. So, I will begin by listing some of the dos and don'ts that this sense of space dictates. Then, I will move on to suggest three ways in which space makes more than a difference. I will argue that space opens up whole new worlds by making it possible to write about life without falling back into a romantic quest for a place of safety and about society without falling back on to static categories and about knowledge of being without falling back on the recondite. Finally, there is the briefest of conclusions in which I foreshadow the possibility of new a-where-nesses.

**Why Space?**

I am a great admirer of the intricately layered, flickering topographies of Julie Mehretu, the Ethiopian-American artist. Though one can see all kinds of echoes in her work – the historical push of Delacroix and Goya, the geometric swirls and abstractions of Kandinsky, Klee, Malevich and Mondrian, the enveloping wash of colour field painting, the various iconic and graphical moments that act as the frames of popular culture, such as brands and comic books and tattoos, the kinds of excerpt protest represented by practices as different as those of graffiti artists, propagandists and situationists, and the poetics of contemporary architects like Hadid or Ando – I think she also produces something new, a sense of what high-velocity hybrid landscapes made up of many kinds of actor and of plural events happening at many locations might look/feel/work like.

Mehretu's canvasses try to incorporate many kinds of spaces, many kinds of dynamics, many kinds of existences, many kinds of imagination, holding each of these spaces in tension and never trying to resolve them: collisions, concordances, cataclysms, they are all here, along with 'speed, dynamism, struggle and potential' (Mehretu in Fogle and Ilesanmi, 2004: 14). Instead of resolution, she sees her task as trying to produce a sense of trajectory which is probably the nearest thing to what used to be called history that social theory can now offer.

It seems to me that four closely related principles underlie her moves, principles that should be at the root of any approach to space. The first is that everything, but everything, is spatially distributed, down to the smallest monad: since the invention of the microscope, at least, even the head of a pin has been seen to have its own geography. Every space is shot through with other spaces in ways that are not just consequential outcomes of some other quality but live because they have that distribution. It is a bit like modern biology, which has discovered that the process of cell growth relies on a sense of where things are to produce particular parts of an organism, a sense that is more than just the provision of a map but rather is a fundamental part of the process of growth, built into the constitution of organ-ism itself. This is much more than complexity. Rather, it harks back to the insights of Gabriel Tarde on complex composites: that small can be as complex as large, indeed that the smaller can be the bigger entity, that the world is heterarchic through and through with the same method pertaining at all levels, and that the big therefore foregrounds some of the features of the small (Latour, 2002).

Second, there is no such thing as a boundary. All spaces are porous to a greater or lesser degree. For example, bodies caught in freeze-frame might look like envelopes but, truth to

tell, they are leaky bags of water, constantly sloughing off pieces of themselves, constantly leaving traces – effluent, memories, messages – through moments of good or bad encounter in which practices of organization and community and enmity are passed on, sometimes all but identically, sometimes bearing something new.

Third, every space is in constant motion. There is no static and stabilized space, though there are plenty of attempts to make space static and stable. Process (or perhaps, more accurately, force-being) is all in that it is all that there is, process arising out of informed or ‘transducted’ material and the lines of force of invention that result from ‘creating a novel entity other than the entities given in disjunction’ (Whitehead, 1978: 21). In this Whiteheadian microphysics ‘the world is a flux of vectors, vectorial connections actualized in the events through which it pluralises itself by expressing its own energetic activity in variable configurations’ (Alliez, 2004: 2). (Such an emphasis on creative self-determination as a sacrament of expression could no doubt be associated with many other neo-monadological positions: for example, Tarde’s micrometaphysical institution of the social, or Deleuze’s cartography of the movements and rhythms of thought, with its underlining of the concept as an open, consistent and intensive multiplicity, or equally his work on the movement-image as a material image that the biology of the brain discovers with its own means.)

Fourth, there is no one kind of space. Space comes in many guises: points, planes, parabolas; blots, blurs and blackouts. Some want to have it that the meeting is the thing. Others that it is scaling. Others that it is emergence. Others that it is translation. Truth to tell, all these things exist – and none – as part of the tuning of local variant systems (Levinson, 2004). In a world without levels, the words are necessarily approximations of the right size of the world that chime with the finding that the fundamental fact of human communication is its variability, co-evolutionary construals that are a part of how we learn to environ the world and how the world learns to environ us (Wagner, 2001).

What Mehretu’s work also simultaneously represents is a turning away from four other ways of thinking space. One is as part of a search for authenticity achieved. The literature is still replete with notions of space as a place in which everything comes together, if only for a little while, in a centred space in which things are co-located in such a way that presentations can come into alignment, thereby producing a sense of well-being which also confirms certain values. Even many convinced non-humanists have a longing for some kind of transcendence, be it an aesthetic, a synthesis, or even certain kinds of immanence which when triggered can expose a latent subjectivism which restricts referentiality to the ‘human’ (Harman, 2002).

The second turning away is from a search for a space that lies outside metrics. Mehretu’s work takes measuring, dividing and calculation in general as simply other ways of spacing out the world, with their own magic: indeed, in her projection of her drawings on to larger canvases, she is one of a long line of artists who have shown that measurement is not the enemy of art but a fundamental part of how art is made (Steadman, 2002). But, too often, essays on space have tried to picture the world as though the history of metrication is the polar opposite of creativity. Yet metrics have added in as much as they have taken away, producing not only new practices and apprehensions of motion but also fertile sources of conflict, as in the case of recent conflicts around post-socialist land, which have produced the phenomenon of the ‘vanishing hectare’; vanishing ‘as diminutions of people’s expected allotments, as false entries on property deeds, as reduced sites of personhood and economic value, and as diminished grounds for the experience of locality’ (Verdery, 2003: 32).

The third turning away is from space as a site separated from movement, in which mind and body can come to rest, an idea in all probability fostered by a sedentary perception of the world mediated by the allegedly superior senses of vision and hearing which arise with modern modes of transport and with the modes of seeing adopted by the cinema and television. This kind of perspective is currently being challenged by a ‘wayfaring’ perspective which stresses movement, both in terms of the many vicissitudes and sensory registers of travel-encounter and in terms of the stress on the movement-image, as Mehretu’s paintings show so well (Ingold, 2004). Thus, every place is regarded as a knot tied from the strands of the movements of its

142 *Theory, Culture & Society* 23(2–3)

many inhabitants, rather than as a hub in a static network of connectors. Life is a meshwork of successive foldings, not a network, in which the environment cannot be bounded and life is forged in the transformative process of moving around (Morris, 2004). Thus things do not just follow one another: it is the peculiar linearity of Western culture that dictates this perception, a linearity made up of writing, clocks, and other one-after-the-other manifestations of a particular practice of causality.

The final turning away is from the idea of space as somehow separated from time (May and Thrift, 2001). This is to argue against a notion that still has great currency, and not just in the flow of everyday life but also in theoretical excursions such as those based on the work of Bergson, in which time is seen as lending itself to spatialization but at the expense of losing what is most essential to temporality: its dynamic movement (Grosz, 2004). But this is to misunderstand the equally dynamic nature of space, making it into a static backdrop to time's activity, with only a limited positivity of its own. Such a viewpoint ignores the myriad poetics of movement occasioned by situational identity and latency, including horizontality and verticality (Vesely, 2004). Perhaps part of the reason for such a continuing obsession with time as the dimension of change is that Western societies now have such a heavy load of time weighing on them in the shape of all manner of archives holding on to all kinds of memories. Further, most of their ideational techniques still tend to be backward-looking means of summary and even monumentalization, although one might argue that there are signs of a cultural shift in the guise of practices as varied as corporate strategy and science fiction which are producing increasingly formalized geographies of the future in which time and space are refigured as potential.

### Three Vignettes

I want to finish off this entry by concentrating on three vignettes, which together start to show what I am trying to convey. It is a painful but necessary step to restrict the canvas I am working on while simultaneously signalling just how extensive that canvas really is. Rather like Mehretu's pictures, then, these vignettes are meant to act as indicative but hopefully potent summonings of particular characters and swarms, rather than as restorations of every nook and cranny of a particular field.

### *Being with Others*

I want to start with whales. The latest research on bioacoustics shows that whales appear to use 'singing' as a means of communicating over thousands of miles of ocean. Whale 'society', then, is premised on a much larger scale than that conventionally associated with humans: 'being with' other whales might mean communicating with whales who might be hundreds of miles away – and thus taking the long time delays involved as normal – and determining other whales' position in relation to distant continents and land masses rather than any nearby features. Whale space, in other words, is not so much stretched as routinely practised in the large as well as the small, all in a medium, the ocean, which has its own dynamics and sensory registers. This should come as no particular surprise. Large carnivores and many birds have similar extensive ranges and can read the land or the air in some of the same ways, so that we can argue that near and far just do not have the same connotations for them as for human beings.

But the world of whales also intersects with the worlds of others. It is too much to say that they communicate with these worlds. Rather, in von Uexküll's phrase, they are attuned with other worlds-for, though not necessarily in harmonious ways – as one of von Uexküll's favourite examples, the spider and the fly, shows all too well. Thus whales and human beings can become attuned but in order to make contact with their prey human beings have to adjust to the spaces of the whales, just as whales have to become attuned to the spaces of krill. Two examples will suffice. One is the whaling industry, originally one of the prototypes of large multinational organizations in its assiduous attention to travelling the world in order to do

violence to whale prey. This industry formed a vast geography of sites and materials, from the network of whaling stations of organizations like the Muscovy Company, through the large number of specialized intermediary practices and ways of life encapsulated in the harpoon and then the rocket harpoon, the whaling boat, or even humble carved whale teeth (or scrimshaw, which now often fetches vast prices as art objects) as well as all those whale-derived products that were spread all over the world: whale oil, sperm oil, baleen, spermaceti, whale meat or even the sperm whale ambergris that fixes the odour of perfumes. Or think now of an organization such as Greenpeace which has been intent on saving whales since 1975, when the first Greenpeace vessel, the Phyllis Cormack, engaged with a Soviet whaling ship off the coast of California, and which was instrumental in securing the International Whaling Commission's moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986. Greenpeace has been forced in to adopting the same multinational structure as the whaling industry in order to both escape and engage with jurisdictions that are meaningless to that which the organization wishes to save. Map is superimposed on map is superimposed on map.

What is interesting is the way in which human society is gradually gaining the same kind of capacity as whales: we are increasingly beings who can live with distant others as if they were close to. The spaces in which humans can be together have progressively increased in scale as new forms of materials, which are also new forms of spacing, have allowed new kinds of social relation to exist. Human reach is greater and becoming continuous at scales that were formerly the subject of stuttering or, at best, periodic contact. But only, it has to be hastily added, in certain registers and in certain zones. In large parts of the world, it may be possible to use a mobile phone to call for help – but no one will come.

In turn, various kinds of political projects have begun to come into existence that communicate with distant others on the premise that they are (or can be made) contiguous that before would have been more difficult, perhaps even impossible. For example, it could be argued that at least one impulse for the contemporary project known as 'Europe' is to forge a more hospitable and responsible citizenship from a permanent and permanently volatile cultural diversity. This kind of integralism (Holmes, 2000) – one in which help would come when needed – can only arise from the organization of many interlocking and overlapping spaces on the basis of political aspirations that are only half-understood and are easily foreclosed, or perhaps this is how political organization ought to be understood now, as an affective and performative set of spaces that, like science at its best, 'stops thought from just turning in self-satisfying circles' (Stengers, 1997: 5).

### *Affecting Others*

Space is not just a series of interdigitated worlds touching each other. It is constructed out of a spatial swirl of affects that are often difficult to tie down but are nevertheless crucial. To illustrate this point, I want to turn first to the subject of empires. Empires are often built out of a palette of emotions. Take the case of the British Empire in India. Over a long period of time, the British presence in India was remarkably small: even at the late Imperial high tide mark, the 1901 census showed only 154,691 British inhabitants of India (Buettner, 2004). So how did so relatively few mainly middle-class households control such a large space? There are many answers, of course. One was the hybrid nature of the Raj: as subaltern studies historians have shown, the Empire in India consisted of imperial power mixed in with existing systems of authorizing power. Another was the scrupulous administrative techniques of the Indian Civil Service. Yet another was the careful measurement and dividing out of Indian space (Edney, 1997) and the construction of associated roads and barriers (cf. Moxham, 2001). One more, on which I will dwell for a while, was the setting-up of formalized circuits of departure and return which could and did represent affective spaces of commitment. For example, there was the circuit of departure and return constructed by middle-class families, which included all manner of aspirations and longings tempered by forbiddingly high death rates (Collingham, 2001). The Empire in India was a remarkable example of how a cardinal space of emotions was able to be constructed by these families, most especially through the exchange of

144 *Theory, Culture & Society* 23(2–3)

commodities (which themselves had complicated geographies, of course). In particular, gift-giving played a central role in the emotional economy of Anglo-Indian society (as it did, it might be added, in the relation between occupiers and the Indian elite). Gift-giving allowed a series of emotionally-charged mechanisms of colonial identity formation to be set up that worked especially through extended kin networks that were both the recipients of gifted largesse and the main means of regulation (Finn, 2004). These gifting mechanisms were at their most redolent in the transport of poignant objects such as mourning rings and broaches, which were vehicles for transporting the hair of deceased bodies around the world and thereby producing corresponding emotional tugs and reminders of here and there. What we see here is a set of interlocking circuits of Empire whose geographies were fundamental to the Empire's reproduction. Space was not incidental: it was what had to be worked on for the Empire to work (Wilson, 2003). Indeed, it has been argued that the deep emotional ties produced within and between middle-class families by circuits of gifted commodities were an early and very effective means of minimizing transaction costs, thereby making the Empire in India a much more efficient operation than it would have otherwise been. In turn, the fortunes that some of these families built were almost certainly one of the main sources of fuel for the late Georgian consumer economy and the Victorian railway boom, thus producing economic effects far beyond their original purview on spaces that were far-removed.

***Organizing Others***

Let me end by considering one other means by which space is produced. That is by and through the exigencies of performance. Modern commercial organizations are made up of many extensions of practice, each with their own methods of proceeding, that have now become naturalized as the stuff of 'organization', from flip charts to divisional structures to inventories to commercial statistics to various software packages, that have in turn produced their own modes of knowing which are acted out in various ways. For example, 'organization' is encapsulated nowadays in endless workshops, seminars, conferences and degree courses that reciprocally confirm particular modes of existence. Increasingly, therefore, in opposition to formalist approaches (which themselves can be seen as bids to enshrine technique), organizations are seen as composites, made up of many things which have been placed into more or less intense alignment by a combination of historical circumstance and the inspired actions of those long gone. If this is indeed the case, what holds organizations together and pushes them on? One of the answers is increasingly taken to be 'performance' (Thrift, 2005).

This is a word that is clearly a moveable feast but, in truth, it simply means an ability to act convincingly into the situation that presents itself by taking whatever propensity for dynamism may be offered that is also a practical ethic of discovery and invention. Organizations are rarely made up of practices that are so mechanical that they simply reproduce themselves. Usually, they consist of sets of root practices which can very often go wrong or, at the very least, require radical adjustment to keep the same (Law and Urry, 2004). In these circumstances, improvisation is often called for, improvisation which sometimes produces solutions that become the base of new practices. This process of almost continual improvisation is forced by the exact configuration of forces that presents itself to actors at any point in time which in turn requires a more or less skilled response to the arrangement of things, a sense of the propensity of the situation that the Chinese call 'shi', the potential born out of disposition (Jullien, 1995).

A critical element of 'shi' is space. For much of what counts as configuration is exactly that: a continuous re-arrangement of things in response to events. So what counts as shi requires all manner of spatial operations: linking, contrast, separation, combination, tension, movement, alternation, oscillation worked out in a series of different registers: bodily movement as exemplified by gesture, the different combinations of sound, touch, vision and smell that typify a situation, the lie of the land which pushes back on the body in all kinds of ways, for example, through balance, through the tools that are to hand, and so on (Ingold, 2004).

And so we arrive back at Julie Mehretu's speculative cartographies which are not only dynamic but also *strategic* arrangements. And this strategic element is important, for it is precisely the function of her art to capture the potentiality of potentiality, by deriving a portfolio of the various ways of inducing the efficacy to operate which also describe new states. And some of these states will be new hybrid actors, glimpsed for the first time at the beginning of the runway as they prepare to go about their work.

### Conclusion

And what does this all add up to? I think we can see it as the beginnings of new ways of thinking about efficacy and causality, about how we are in the world where there is no settled ground but where there is still coherence, where nearness is replaced by distribution. Roughly speaking, predominant ideas of causality have tended to be linear and self-contained plots, assuming that people do things that, through progressive aggregation into more capacious and more effective organizations, become social 'forces' (Kern, 2004). Now, we can see that this model of operativity is so simple as to be not just misleading but harmful. As a result, we are beginning to lay down new causal pathways in which how we pay due attention matters, in which becoming able to add or assemble is more important than subtraction, in which abstractions are lures, not generalizations, in which the demand for coherence can still include wonder, in which, in other words, new forms of friction are materializing as backgrounds change size and shape (Thrift, 2004, 2005; Tsing, 2005). And, as that happens, so space takes on not more relevance (since it is difficult to think of a world in which space is other than relevant) but more grip. It is no longer a by-product of something deeper or a convenient prosthetic or a concrete assay but, rather, pre-treated as it increasingly may be and made up of fragments as it undoubtedly is, it is the very stuff of life itself.

And if we can get that sense of space right it might feel like something that is both caring and in need of care.

### References

- Alliez, E. (2004) *The Signature of the World. What is Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy?* London: Continuum.
- Buettner, E. (2004) *Empire Families. Britons in Late Imperial India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carter, P. (2004) *Material Thinking. The Theory and Practice of Creative Research.* Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press.
- Collingham, E.M. (2001) *Imperial Bodies. The Physical Experience of the Raj, c.1800–1947.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crang, M. and N. Thrift (eds) (2000) *Thinking Space.* London: Routledge.
- Critchley, S. (2005) *Things Merely Are. Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens.* London: Routledge.
- Edney, M.H. (1997) *Mapping an Empire: Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Finn, M. (2004) 'Gifted Commodities East and West: Family Politics and the Exchange of Goods in Britain and British India, c.1790–1830', in J. Brewer and F. Trentmann (eds) *Consumption, Modernity, and the West.* Oxford: Berg.
- Fogle, D. and O. Ilesanmi (eds) (2004) *Julie Mehretu: Drawing into Painting.* Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center.
- Grosz, E. (2004) *The Nick of Time. Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Harman, G. (2002) *Tool-Being. Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects.* Chicago, IL: Open Court.
- Holmes, D.R. (2000) *Integral Europe. Fast Capitalism, Multiculturalism, Neo-Fascism.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ingold, T. (2004) 'Culture on the Ground. The World Perceived through the Feet', *Journal of Material Culture* 9: 315–40.
- Jullien, F. (1995) *The Propensity of Things. Toward a History of Efficacy in China.* New York: Zone Books.
- Kern, S. (2004) *A Cultural History of Causality. Science, Murder Novels, and Systems of Thought.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

146 *Theory, Culture & Society* 23(2–3)

- Latour, B. (2002) 'Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social', pp. 117–32 in P. Joyce (ed.) *The End of the Social. New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences*. London: Routledge.
- Law, J. and J. Urry (2004) 'Enacting the Social', *Economy and Society* 33: 390–410.
- May, J. and N. Thrift (eds) (2001) *TimeSpace*. London: Routledge.
- Morris, D. (2004) *The Sense of Space*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Moxham, R. (2001) *The Great Hedge of India*. London: Constable and Robinson.
- Steadman, P. (2002) *Vermeer's Camera. Uncovering the Truth Behind the Masterpieces*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stengers, I. (1997) *Power and Invention*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Thrift N. (2004) 'Movement-space: The Changing Domain of Thinking Resulting from the Development of New Kinds of Spatial Awareness', *Economy and Society* 33: 582–604.
- Thrift, N.J. (2005) *Knowing Capitalism*. London: Sage.
- Tsing, A. (2005) *Friction. An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Verdery, K. (2003) *The Vanishing Hectare. Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Vesely, D. (2004) *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation. The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wagner, R. (2001) *An Anthropology of the Subject. Holographic World View in New Guinea and its Meaning and Significance for the World of Anthropology*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Whitehead, A.N. (1978) *Process and Reality*. New York: Free Press.
- Wilson, E. (2004) *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wilson, K. (2003) *The Island Race. Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century*. London: Routledge.

**Nigel Thrift** is Professor of Geography and Head of the Life and Environmental Sciences Division at Oxford University. His main research interests are social and cultural theory, cities, the effects of new technologies, management knowledges, and the history of time. His recent books include *Cities* (with Ash Amin) (Polity, 2002) and *Knowing Capitalism* (Sage, 2005).



Ruffian Logistics



# Knowing Space

Rob Shields

**Keywords** genealogy, knowledge, space, spatialization, topology

## Introduction

Knowing space is of universal social interest and the topic of some of the most historic knowledge projects and texts produced by human cultures. How is space known? How might we take stock of our spatial knowledges across cultures? What are the elements of a genealogy of space? If history and geography have a descriptive bias, a genealogy would go in a different direction, attempting to both avoid describing and ‘speaking for’ while critically exposing the conditions and formations of time–space discourses (however fragmented and discontinuous).

Yet conceptions such as space and time are intrinsic to the intellectual ordering of our lives and our everyday notions of causality. When we turn to our daily speech, read the headlines of our newspapers or scan learned journals, we find an unexpected cornucopia of spatial references, elaborate expressions and elegant spatial metaphors which position the term within our own knowledge as well as practice. ‘Space’ evidently plays an important role in knowledge and in knowing the world. Nearly every philosopher and social thinker has dealt in some way with space or spatiality. Analysis is complicated by the intangibility (virtuality) of physical space. ‘Space’ is also translated in different ways between languages and between disciplines: engineers conceive of space as a void; physicists, mathematically as a set of dimensions (e.g. from 2-dimensions of a surface up to 11-dimensions in particle physics). And, in the late 20th century, social scientists began to understand space not as a void but as a qualitative context situating different behaviours and contending actions.

## Etymology/Translation

The *Oxford Dictionary* presents more than 17 definitions for ‘space’, which is (like the French *espace* and the Italian *spazio*) etymologically descended from the Latin *spatium* but whose English-language meaning is often more closely related to the Latin *extensio*. Hindu philosophy defines *Akasa* (*akasha* – space/ether. Sanskrit, from *kas*, ‘to shine’) as an infinite but indivisible

imperceptible substance that has as its sole nature to be a static principle of extension (in contrast to movement, *prana*), or an eternal matrix or context of accommodation (*kham-akasa*, see *Khândogya-Upanishad* I. 9, 1). Italian and French writers such as Lefebvre (1981), Castells, Bachelard (1981) and Zevi have felt at ease with the use of the full range of meanings, denotative and connotative, of ‘*spazio*’ and ‘*l’espace*’. In the *Dictionnaire Larousse*, ‘*l’espace*’ denotes ‘place’ (*lieu*), ‘site’ or an area, ‘surface’, or ‘region’. ‘*L’espace*’ does not mean just ‘space’. By contrast, English-language theorists have often limited their appreciation of space to a quantitative definition with reference to distance and to time (and vice versa, e.g. graphically on a calendar).

## *Shan Hai Jing/Kitab Nuzhat*

A small selection demonstrates the relevance of a genealogical approach, for the first geographers are historians and mythographers. One of the first books, *Shan Hai Jing* (*The Guideways through Mountains and Seas* (P’o Kuo [Guo Pu], 1985)), though misinterpreted as mythology by subsequent generations, was originally a geographical compendium describing the character of regions at the edges of the Zhou Dynasty empire (approximately 1046–771 BC). Virtually spanning recorded history, including the history of European contact and of printed books, commentaries on *Shan Hai Jing* mirror cultural changes in the successive dynasties. Its classification changes in Chinese historiography from bestiary and mythology, to between travelogue and strategic guide, depending on the extent to which it was found to be useful to the Imperial court as an empirical reference in dealing with peripheries and foreign contacts.

As Herodotus remarked, map-makers both challenged and structured how the Earth was understood as a flat plane (Herodotus e.g. IV: 36). For example, Ptolemy’s later concepts of latitude and longitude were related in part to an interest in defining *Klimata* – ecologico-ethnological characteristics of regions (Ptolemy, 1969). The most voluminous 12th-century knowledge project was the geographical encyclopaedia *Kitab Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq* (*The Recreation for Him Who Wishes to Travel Through the Countries*) (Idrisi Muhammad ibn Abd al-Aziz [Al-Idrisi], 1990). The *Kitab Nuzhat* built on previous Arab geographies but also involved teams that did fieldwork. Although this

148 *Theory, Culture & Society* 23(2–3)

Sicilian masterwork was unknown in Rome until the 16th century, its organization of research and its narrative and cartographic representation of knowledge – including a large silver globe (destroyed AD 1160) and a circular map – were, in the most profound sense, world views which influenced far more than cartographic practice: It inspired Imperial desires and possibly Columbus. It anticipated the organization of state knowledge-enterprises in later centuries, from the Inquisition to the collecting practices of Napoleonic armies to Royal Commissions (see *Virtualities*, this issue).

**Extensio/Topology**

However empirical geographies have attempted to be, there has been no consistent historical consensus on the nature of space that would establish cartographic method once and for all. Statements of the ‘problem of space’ by Aristotle, Euclid, Descartes, Leibniz and Newton, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, along with modern writers such as Lefebvre (1981), have marked out entire epochs in the treatment of space. Enlightenment philosophies of space depended on Euclid’s geometry and presumed a three-dimensional *extensio* known through geometry. However, the Aristotelian tradition casts space as a mental category by which objects are named and classified. By contrast, Kant (1953: 41–51) cogently argues that space is neither cognitive nor subjective. Privileging only relations over a geometrical reality involves attributing to space relations that are proper to objects. But if all continuous motions in a three-dimensional space are real, not much is saved by denying the reality of space itself. At a minimum, space can be successfully argued to be an intangible substance and the substantial bearer of topological properties whose consequences we can notice in ordinary experience.

Classical approaches emphasizing three dimensional space break down both in everyday usage and metaphor as well as with the mathematical exploration of a second major anomaly in Euclidean geometry: the ‘Parallel Postulate’ – through one point in a plane it is possible to draw only one straight line parallel to a given straight line in the same plane. This Euclidean law can be violated if the three-planar dimensions of space are warped – such as in the geometries produced by Lobachewsky and Riemann in the first half of the 1800s. The art of Escher demonstrates the paradoxes of these mathematical ‘phase spaces’ – more projected topographies of mathematical solution sets than any Euclidean ‘lived space’. Physicists and mathematicians envisioned an infinite number of spaces, all in motion with respect to each other. This opened up a relativist plurality of spaces and

helped legitimate the possibility that the history of the earth and its discoveries might be construed differently in different sociocultural spaces. Ever since, Cartesian absolute space has become just the topological space that describes the human experience of embodiment. Other mathematical topologies may better describe the social configurations of those bodies in everyday life (Von Uexküll). Thus we are led to examine alternatives which might more appropriately describe the complexity of global culture than the commonsense, Euclidean ‘spatialization’. In this plurality of spaces, it makes sense to talk of ‘*social spaces*’, which gain meaning as the changing topologies mapping affinities between bodies, meanings and sites (Mach, 1901: 94; Poincaré, 1952: 50–8).

**Social/Space**

Durkheim audaciously proposed a correspondence between social structure and the society’s notion of space laying the ground for structural anthropological studies. He provided the example of the Zuni Indians, concluding that their space was nothing else than, ‘the site of the tribe, only indefinitely extended beyond its real limits’ (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963: 12). One could venture from reports of Aboriginal conceptions of space as the ‘Dreamtime’ that landscape can become not just sedimented traces but an historiography, read through embodied presence, perigrination and pilgrimage. This view of social space is mobile and topological. It emphasizes qualitative heterogeneity, varying not only from place to place, region to region (some being perhaps sacred, others profane); but it is not locked within one topology: from the mid-1950s space is argued to be contested within societies. This heterogeneous social space must be produced and reproduced as a cultural artefact and performance.

The multiplication of spaces was deeply disturbing to the commonsense mind of both the European Left and Right. The implied subjectivity and relativism threatened the stability of objective reality, of what could be taken for granted as truth. Space, it was argued, must ‘exist before social groups can be perceived to exhibit in their disposition any spatial relations which may then be applied to the universe; the categories of quantity have to exist in order that an individual mind shall ever recognize one, the many, and the totality of the division of his society’ (Needham, 1963: xxvii). Such opinions are part of an attempt to realign social science with the natural sciences (thus to re-achieve the lost Kantian orthodoxy of one space: the alignment of ‘social space’ and ‘physical space’). This was crucial to the 19th-century achievement of a homogeneous spatialization allowing and legitimating the power practices of

an expansive European imperialism (Lefebvre, 1981).

Piaget's experimental research challenges the Kantian assertion that space and time *are a priori* modes of conception. For Durkheim (1976: 11) also,

space is not the vague and indeterminate medium which Kant imagined; if purely and absolutely homogeneous, it would be of no use, and could not be grasped by the mind. Spatial representation consists essentially in a primary coordination of the data of sensuous experience. But this co-ordination would be impossible if the parts of space were qualitatively equivalent . . . To dispose things spatially there must be a possibility of placing them differently, of putting some at the right, others at the left, these above, those below, at the north of or at the south of . . . space could not be what it is if it were not, like time, divided and differentiated. . . . All these distinctions evidently come from the fact that different sympathetic values have been attributed to various regions . . . and that almost necessarily implies that they be of social origin.

Knowledges of 'space' are part of social and cultural processes. Yet social space is not just a cognitive mapping. It cannot be derived entirely from forms of social solidarity. This would render space entirely cultural and thus epiphenomenal. Space could be discarded as inconsequential. How might one understand conflicts over social space or the production of 'counter-spaces' of resistance? How might one understand the juxtapositions within social space and its nested spaces within spaces in which very different rules apply?

### Spatialization/Difference

In the late 1960s, Lefebvre turned Durkheim's hypothesis of countless social spaces back on the West to consider struggles over the organization and meaning of space. What are the real relations masked by the spatial phantasmagoria of a Cartesian absolute, a priori and ineffable 'social space'? Is this contradictory and paradoxical structure not a type of cultural 'signature' of a dominant 'modern' technocratic and capitalist 'social spatialization'? This made social space appear to be a homogeneous, smooth order. 'Distance' became its most important feature. Rigorous discussions of the spatialization of this system were marginalized, even though influential writers of the first half of the century had placed a priority on the geographical expansion of capitalism as a 'fix' for system contradictions and inefficiencies. But the importance of non-Euclidean mathematical spaces in science set the stage for late 20th-century re-appreciations of social space.

### Problematizing Global Knowledge – Space 149

Making *distance* the basis of the social appreciation of spatialization is Eurocentric and technocratic. Distance – a word we should be extremely careful about – has been treated as an invariant quantity with a meaning in and of itself regardless of cultural variations in the qualitative meanings associated with distance. In such a spatialization of the world, alternatives are masked (Shields, 1991). We need to know space as not just about relations and distance between elements but as a social produced *order of difference* that can be heterogeneous in and of itself. 'Knowing space' is not enough – trigonometric formulae, engineering structures, shaping the land and dwelling on it. We need to know about 'spacing' and the spatializations that are accomplished through everyday activities, representations and rituals.

### References

- Bachelard, G. (1981) *La poétique de l'espace*, 10th edn. Paris: Quadrige/PUF.
- Durkheim, E. (1976) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 2nd ed. New York: George Allen and Unwin.
- Durkheim, E. and M. Mauss (1963) *Primitive Classification*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Idrisi Muhammad ibn Abd al-Aziz (Al-Idrisi) (1990) *Kitab Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraaq al-Afaq*. Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafah al-Diniyah.
- Kant, I. (1953) *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysic*. Trans. G.R. Lucas. Manchester: University of Manchester Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (1981) *La Production de l'espace*, 2nd edn. Paris: Anthropos.
- Mach, E. (1901) *Space and Geometry in the Light of Physiological and Psychological and Physical Inquiry*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Needham, R. (1963) 'Preface', in E. Durkheim and M. Mauss *Primitive Classification*, pp. vii–xlvi. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- P'o Kuo (Guo Pu) (1985) *Shan Hai Jing: Legendary Geography and Wonders of Ancient China*. Trans. H.-C. Cheng, H.-C.P. Cheng and K.L. Thern. Taipei: National Institute for Compilation and Translation.
- Poincaré, H. (1952) *Science and Hypothesis*. New York: Anchor.
- Ptolemy (1969) *Geographia*. Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum.
- Shields, R. (1991) *Places on the Margin*. London: Routledge.

**Rob Shields** is Henry Marshall Tory Chair and Professor at the University of Alberta. For more information see <http://www.spaceandculture.org>

# Mobility and the City

Brenda S.A. Yeoh

**Keywords** gender, globalization, migration, place, space, transnationalism

## The City as Centering

The city is often thought of as a material (lived) and imagined (ideological) space that came into being as a result of a consolidation of power (social, cultural economic, political). It is hence often represented as an economic node or hub, a centrifugal point for the collection of resources, a crucible of ideas and innovation, the locus of imagined communities, and a source of identity and security. Cities are privileged sites of consolidation, power and dwelling. John R. Short (2003: 18–23) describes three urban discourses – *the authoritarian city* (cities as ‘sites of social aggregation that involve compulsion, order, and discipline as well as freedom, anarchy, and self-realization’); *the cosmic city* (cities as religious artifacts reflecting and embodying cosmologies); and *the collective city* (cities which are ‘sites of collective provision, collective consumption, and the workings of civil society’).

With the emergence in recent years of the discourse on global/globalizing cities, the centering role of cities is further emphasized. For example, the term *global cities* has now gained common currency to represent the ‘mega-cephalic’ corporate and financial centers for capital accumulation within a hierarchical articulation of global space. Apparently, during the Apollo space flights, it was reported that one of the astronauts, looking back to Earth, expressed amazement that he could see no boundaries. This new view of our world as the ‘blue planet’, famously captured in NASA photo 22727, presented a view of the Earth with no territorial markings but made up most visibly by lights delimiting a global pattern of cities, consisting of a broad swath girdling the mid-latitudes plus many pinpricks of light elsewhere (Beaverstock et al., 2000: 123). In this formulation, cities are the only visible nodes in the global imaginary; other spaces are invisible.

## Counter-Topographies

Yet, these electric nodes of light on space photos are actually connected by massive electronic flows of information as well as material flows that cut

across territorial boundaries. Historically, cities have always existed within interconnectivities comprising all manner of linkages and networks. These very systems of flows sustain and generate urban space in the first place.

Increasingly, translocal (often transnational) mobilities disrupt this sense of the city as centrality, as stasis, as a gathering together, as a permanence. The experience of city life as centering is being shot through by the multiple possibilities of combining ‘here’ and ‘there’, absence and presence, ascription and disavowal, in everyday life – astride boundaries and across ever-widening distances and spaces. Mobility, traveling, migration and unmoorings (often circular, multi-directional, ridden with detours) are the quintessential experience of these times and often one arrives in the city only to leave again. Cities are hence as much spaces of flows as they are spaces of place.

This is not to say that cities are ‘places which are leaking away into a space of flows’ (Thrift, 1997: 140). With information and communication technologies speeding up interconnectivities between places and enhancing the simultaneity of absence/presence, being in the city is a multidirectional rather than a centering experience. In as much as the city as a locality is constantly reconfigured by ‘hybrids of the “newly arrived” and the “previously there”’ (Short et al., 2000), human experiences in terms of mobility have also grown so much larger than can be encompassed by the spatial fixity of the city. This is accompanied by both pains and gains for the individual as may be illustrated by examples from either end of the migration spectrum.

The embodied urban experiences of unmoored transnational lowly paid migrant workers whose navigation of transnational routes to and from ‘home’ and ‘host’ (the city) are not inevitable but perpetuated by the city’s disciplinary policies of ‘use and discard’. For example, policies ensuring the transience of female foreign domestic worker bodies in cities such as Singapore, in turn, reinforce the permanence of transnational mobilities among unskilled labor migrants. With little chance of sustainable employment in her home country where she is a citizen and even less likelihood of becoming an immigrant-turned-citizen in the country where she is employed, the migrant domestic worker is locked into unending circuits of transnational care, affection, money and material goods in order to sustain the family in its

transnational form. One needs to ask the question: Do transnational mobilities always work to the benefit of individual transmigrants attracted to the city? Or do the resources and cushioning effects provided by transnational connectivities somehow make it even easier for the cities to extract labor power from transmigrants while abdicating responsibility for their social welfare? Such abdication of responsibility – the lack of provision for rights and resources – is often justified by dint of the fact that transmigrants are non-citizens who have roots and networks anchoring them to the sending nations elsewhere (Yeoh et al., 2004).

The experience of upper-end skilled/professional migrants in the global city ('foreign talent' as they are referred to in Singapore) is also not necessarily one of centrality and consolidation as far as the social spheres of life are concerned. Often, in order to circulate from one global city to the next, family forms have to be made flexible. Being in the city often means being away from the family as in the case of Hong Kong 'astronauts' and their families (the so-called 'astronaut wives and parachute kids' syndrome). Against the centering, inclusive effects of city-living, there is also the need to recognize the simultaneous embeddedness in the 'city' and 'elsewhere', and the need for constant mobility in linking the two in order to sustain social and cultural institutions such as the transnational family.

The importance of grappling with the way 'centering' and 'mobility' work with and against each other in specific contexts is implied in Michael Smith's (2001) *Transnational Urbanism* where he uses the 'transnational optic' as a counter to the globalization perspective, as a bifocal lens which brings into view bodies – disposable labor or embodiments of talent in circulatory flows – and at the same time frames them within contested historical and geographical contexts as socially and spatially situated subjects. As Ryan Bishop communicated to me before, 'the tension between storage/archive/consolidation on the one hand and circulation/amnesia/dispersal on the other reveals the inherent urbanism operative on both sides of the tension' (pers. comm.). In the city, sedentarist administrative procedures and disciplining border controls have an in-built tendency to immobilize human bodies; at the same time, other contradictory impulses to move, circulate, defy fixity and transcend boundaries are equally powerful.

### Costs?

As already implied, there is nothing inevitable about the simultaneous impulses of centering and connecting in the shaping of globalizing cities. Feminists, for example, have insisted on giving

attention to the *politics* of transnational urbanism. Not only has mobility across borders intensified in complex ways, there has been a feminization of many of these flows as a result of changing production and reproduction processes worldwide. Globalization processes, in which production activities are relocated from core economies to those of the periphery to take advantage of cheaper input costs, have drawn on the pre-existing gender relations and targeted cheap and flexible female workers – many from countries with declining employment opportunities – to enter factory employment in export processing zones and industrial parks in rapidly industrializing countries. The other numerically more important form of female labor migration is linked to reproductive activities, such as domestic service and the sex industry. Major accounts of cultural globalization to which the transnational framework is linked tend to be masculinist, for they 'make no attempt to identify the processes that increasingly differentiate the power of mobile and non-mobile subjects' (Ong, 1999: 11). In traversing transnational space, men often feature as entrepreneurs, career-builders, adventurers and breadwinners who navigate transnational circuits with fluidity and ease, while women are alternatively taken to be missing in action from globalized economic webs, stereotyped as exotic, subservient or victimized, or relegated to playing supporting roles, usually in the domestic sphere or as a trailing spouse (Yeoh et al., 2000). As Freeman (2001: 1018) observes, 'travel, with its embodiments of worldliness, adventure, physical prowess, and cultural mastery, is widely constructed as a male pursuit.' In short, that 'women stay home and men go abroad' is a taken-for-granted expectation (Clifford, 1997: 6).

We also need to be suspicious of the claims that the transnational subject embodies liberatory potential that could challenge 'oppressive nationalism, repressive state structures, and capitalism'. Aihwa Ong (1999: 15) reminds us of the 'diverse forms of interdependencies and entanglements between transnational phenomena and the nation-states' which trouble any easy assumptions equating mobility with emancipatory impulses. Indeed, the hypermobility and the easy transgression of national borders in today's globalizing world may well be liberating or emancipatory for the individuals involved, but may also reinforce existing social ideologies, including those of the nation-state. It is important in a feminist approach to transnationality not to somehow attribute a sense of inevitability in thinking about transnational processes but to look them squarely in the eye and ask the all-important question as to who reaps the gains and who bears the costs of rapidly developing transnational social practices in global

152 *Theory, Culture & Society* 23(2–3)

cities. Is it the transnational subject himself or herself, in subjecting his or her body to the constant state of being 'neither here nor there'? Or are transnational families at risk, and does the cost fall mainly on women who often bear the emotional costs of holding the family stretched across countries together? Or do those outside the transnational project, such as the poor and those with little access to networks, bear the brunt of growing transnationality as a privileged discourse?

### References

- Beaverstock, J.V., R.G. Smith and P.J. Taylor (2000) 'World-City Network: A New Metageography?', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90(1): 123–34.
- Clifford, J. (1997) *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Freeman, C. (2001) 'Is Local:Global as Feminine:Masculine? Rethinking the Gender of Globalization', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26(4): 1007–37.
- Ong, A. (1999) *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Short, J.R. (2003) 'Three Urban Discourses', pp. 18–25 in G. Bridge and S. Watson (eds) *A Companion to the City*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Short, R.S., C. Brietbach, S. Buckman and J. Essex (2000) 'From World Cities to Gateway Cities: Extending the Boundaries of Globalization Theory', *Cities* 4(2): 317–40.
- Smith, M.P. (2001) *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Thrift, N. (1997) 'Cities without Modernity, Cities with Magic', *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 113(3): 138–49.
- Yeoh, B.S.A., S. Huang and T. Devasahayam (2004) 'Diasporic Subjects in the Nation: Foreign Domestic Workers, the Reach of Law and Civil Society in Singapore', *Asian Studies Review* 28: 7–23.
- Yeoh, B.S.A., S. Huang and K. Willis (2000) 'Global Cities, Transnational Flows and Gender Dimensions: The View from Singapore', *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Social Geografie (Journal of Economic and Social Geography)* 2(2): 147–58.

**Brenda S.A. Yeoh** is Professor, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore and Research Leader (Asian Migration cluster) at the University's Asia Research Institute.

## Junk Space

*Bobby Chong Thai Wong and Ryan Bishop*

**Keywords** architecture, modernization, multi-cultural space, urbanism

The rapid growth of urban areas that began in the 18th century led to numerous theories and practices about the proper and rational use of space. Often the terms 'proper' and 'rational' emerged from specific historical and intellectual traditions peculiar to European nations. The categories and standards to be pursued for urban space on a global scale were carried forward by imperial enterprises and later international capital and organizations. Usually deviations from these are dismissed as underdeveloped, chaotic or irrational ways of conceptualizing space. What these evaluations ignore, of course, is the larger spatial context in which any specific space occurs. We wish to use two student projects from studios run by Bobby Wong at the National

University of Singapore's Department of Architecture to explore descriptions and evaluations of urban space at the end of the 20th century made by Rem Koolhaas. Specifically we are interested in exploring his provocative concept called 'junk-space', which he claims to be a ubiquitous global phenomenon.

This space has come about through the process of modernization (including globalization) that cannibalizes itself or has exhausted itself or become the apotheosis for the disenfranchised and the dispossessed. Koolhaas (2004) uses the analogy of space junk (that is, debris in outer space floating free of any context or control) to describe this coagulation. 'If space junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet' (p. 162). The two student examples reveal the strengths and limitations of Koolhaas' concept, and to modify and supplement this concept we will use the work of Walter Benjamin (1996, 1999) to provide a more

nuanced sense of the use of urban space than that allowed by Koolhaas.

Koolhaas' captions and writings implicitly bestow an abstract quality onto all junk-spaces, rendering them more or less equivalent. But before such 'abstractness' totalizes junk-space, we wish to explore some hypothetical projects that would simultaneously support and render problematic the totalizing dimensions of Koolhaas' analysis. The first is a racetrack town proposed along the Malaysian North–South Highway, a scheme developed by a group of students led by Paul Chang. The studio was investigating 'Anywhere' architecture occurring sometime in the mid-1990s, the height of the real estate boom that gripped Southeast and Northeast Asia, and the moment as well as sites of numerous examples of junk-space upon which Koolhaas draws. The 'Anywhere' architecture, in fact, explicitly manifests the qualities of junk-space insofar as it deploys a range of architectural strategies and assumptions peculiar to modernism without taking into account the context in which the building materializes, as well as ignoring notions of scale and fit. The scheme proposed by Chang's team zoned strips of land, of approximately four kilometers in width, parallel to and on either side of the Highway as land possible for real estate development. In this space would be built the racetrack town.

The scheme was premised on a reality occurring at the time of immense profits to be made from real estate development, made possible by the construction of the North–South Highway, Peninsula Malaysia. The actual site of placement was irrelevant, befitting Anywhere architecture. The natural topography and vegetation offered no obstacles because they could be overcome by technology. Similarly, knowledge of actual racetrack construction could be overcome simply by copying and transporting virtually in digital form a given track and overlaying it across the said terrain. The Monte Carlo racetrack was chosen. The racetrack forms the basic armature to lay out the other urban elements of the town: mechanical garages, car show rooms, hotels for weekend getaways and so on. Similarly the various urban technologies upon which great profits could be generated from real estate speculation along a major new artery of international transport were replicated and modified in the site. The highway links the flows of goods, vehicles and peoples between nations while the racetrack depends upon the use of automobiles and expenditure of natural resources for no instrumental purpose of transportation, but merely going about in circles with limited traffic. The scheme, therefore, pushes the 'noble' profession of architecture into recycling its body

parts; signs that are correlated with modern architectural elements (flat roofs, transparency, wall planes and columns as points on plan) that were once thought authentic and original were now constantly being reused, recovered and rearranged. Similarly the term Monte Carlo, which invokes the authenticity of space and its use, is decontextualized and 'transported' into a part of the world other than its own site, the racetrack. Renamed the Marlboro Race Town, to further link language, space and corporate branding, the town takes on a character oddly reminiscent of but quite unlike that of the original.

The town embodies important elements of Koolhaas' junk-space through its appropriation, replication, decontextualization and improper use of space/architecture that forces a rethinking of accepted standards and practices in a creative manner. Koolhaas' junk-space, as exemplified in this project, resembles Benjamin's notion of inscription as articulated in 'Painting, or Signs and Marks' (1917). Inscription reveals a de-historical use of space, one that discounts context and tradition within a given site. The inscription presumes the space as capable of conversion into a *tabula rasa*, which can be inscribed and erased at will. The racetrack reveals such an inscription while also revealing a counter-historical understanding of space. That is, one can attempt pure erasure and pure replication but within the process of replication change occurs. What Chang's team shows us is a latent and unavoidable political project inherent in even the modernist, ahistorical, apolitical strategies of universal architectural practice. Koolhaas' junk-space, unlike Benjamin's notion of inscription, seemingly ignores or downplays these ineluctable aspects of replication and recontextualization.

But there are spaces that might be labeled, pejoratively as 'junk space' by Koolhaas that reveal a complexity of embedded local knowledge interacting with global modernity and commenting upon it in ways not grasped by an outsider. Such a fecund, critical use of space can be detected in the second student example: a shopping centre in Singapore located along North Bridge Road on a site between Peninsula Plaza and the Capital Cinema. The scheme, a Master's thesis by Lim Fun Kit, is driven by a thematic issue called 'Unveiling the Verses' and came into being mainly as a result of a number of coincidences. In the first place, there is a coincidental axis of entrances to two important religious structures: Masjid Burhani mosque and St Andrew's Cathedral transept. These two elements face one another. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the USA and the Jamal Islamia incidents in Singapore, the scheme's deployment of this coincidence between mosque

154 *Theory, Culture & Society* 23(2–3)

and church took on added significance. The Dawoodi Bohras, members of an Islamist sect hailing from Gujarat and custodians of the Masjid Burhani, while practicing a highly orthodox form of Islam (in matters relating to dress, prayer, physical comportment and food), are also merchants ('Bohra' means 'to trade') who want to trade and exchange. The confluence of trade and worship, regardless of religious or ideological background, carries particular resonance in Singapore's history. The proposal examined building a shopping complex with the thought that while exchanging goods and services for money, the building could also become an instrument of the faithful to share Islamist values. This additional form of exchange to be carried out on the site reveals the long historicity of exchange between Islam and Christianity from colonial times to the present while also taking advantage of the import of trade and exchange within Islam itself.

To highlight these levels of exchange, Lim adopted several strategies. First, he had the mosque and the cathedral look at each other by adopting and transposing the morphological structure of the cathedral nave and its columns such that its sectional symmetrical center coincides with the axis, thus framing in perspective the façade of either building depending on the direction of one's gaze. The use of the Christian motif of the cross interacting with an Islamic site of worship (and trade) does not stop there. Lim goes further by mapping repeatedly the diagram of the cruciform (nave, two aisles and with transepts turned 90 degrees inward in alignment with the nave) from one end of the site to the other. Extensive use of an abstracted crucifix in the design of the shopping complex would be acceptable for Islamic worshippers, because shopping in its 20th-century guise of mass consumption is largely a global capitalist enterprise which links it to Christian uses of capital and trade that differ from those dictated by Islamic law.

The replications of the transept can be used in various ways to structure space. In total, there are six of these replicated transepts, two of which are used in the plan to form two reflective pools. They are placed in a symmetrical relationship to each other in the mosque/transept axis, and therefore, frame the entrance to the rear of the mosque. The remaining four replicated transepts are transformed into volumetric containers. One of these houses the *madrasah* while another houses the library.

Because the plan highlights exchange at many different levels, Lim uses the metaphor of the *hjab* (the dress that veils the Muslim females) to articulate barriers to exchange in the midst of shopping as an activity while at the same time providing the

possibility of transgressing barriers. The library walls are formed by transparent glass partitions, with the perimeter book stacks lining the inner sides of the partitions. The many changing gaps found amongst books within each book stack provide visual cues for shifts between the inside and outside of the library. Similarly the space for the *Madrasah* exposes and transgresses barriers, except it does so aurally rather than visually. The container is made up of solid dense concrete with a perimeter opening that separates the wall from the ceiling. As a result, readings of the Quran can be heard, though not seen, in and amongst the shoppers immediately outside the *Madrasah*. The architectural metaphor of the *hjab* is also used in the department store to screen areas specifically dedicated for women's clothing and lingerie. Within that space, Muslim women can do away with their *hjab*s without transgressing their accepted practice. Because it is away from the male gaze, women, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, can shop with a sense of privacy.

'Unveiling the Verses' operates in a densely allusive and complex environment, and if its appropriation of modernist architectural practices was deemed 'junk-space' by Koolhaas for its apparent lack of modernist context, then it would only highlight the fact that every site – every space – contains a range of invisible contexts that shape the visible space in very specific, often contested, ways. What is of further interest in these two schemes, themselves junk-spaces in Koolhaas' terminology, lies in their emergence. Each has its own narrative, and when seen together with their own images and drawings, correlations can be made with Walter Benjamin's idea about signs and marks. Benjamin indicates that signs, whether they are made through graphic lines, geometric or written lines, are lines that are printed, scripted over something, while marks emerge from them. In this sense, then, the racetrack town operates an inscription, the lines found in them mere graphic lines that demarcate a racetrack from a background, which could have been made on any landscape. These graphic lines, following Benjamin, only impress a sign. The shape and pattern of the racetrack may or may not be a copy of the real Monte Carlo, something which was not ascertained at the time. As a result there is an air of ambiguity in the scheme. Building types and forms are vague. Besides the grandstand, buildings are mere blocks in the landscape with vague presupposed functions attached to them. Forms and functions can change as and when the aspects of the symbolic, libidinal or the political economy dictates.

The shopping center site, however, works with the mark in ways Benjamin would find familiar, for



it materializes the political dimensions of the caption that Benjamin thought essential to understanding and conveying the mark. There is something specifically real about this project, which involves guilt and atonement; very much like Benjamin's description of Belshazzar's Feast in the Old Testament. The coming together of the mosque and the cathedral after 9/11 and the entire making of the shopping complex centered on an exchange, disguised as shopping, is a way a community can overcome a present by gesturing towards a future, so that the past, present and the future can be magically fused. The reception of this space – with voices reading the Quran, the visual confrontation between cathedral and mosque, the visual separation between two worlds mediated by book stacks and glass partitions – slows down spatial perception in ways that involve the body. In the case of Koolhaas's aphoristic analyses of 'junk-space', the cognitive is privileged. But as these two sites reveal, the body, the imagination, the mind, space, and local-global context and interaction are more deeply intertwined than Koolhaas' 'junk-space' often allows, despite its provocative potential. Koolhaas claims a ubiquity of 'junk-space' at

*Problematizing Global Knowledge – Space* 155

the turn of the century and, to a certain extent, bemoans its existence. But the category remains so large and elastic as to perhaps outstrip its usefulness, especially when one delves deeper into the trajectories at play in any specific site.

**References**

- Benjamin, W. (1996) *Selected Writings Vol 1. 1913–1926*. Ed. Richard W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1999) *Selected Writings Vol 2. 1927–1934*. Ed. Richard W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Koolhaas, R. (ed.) (2004) *Content*. Koln: Taschen.

**Bobby Chong Thai Wong** is Associate Professor of Architecture at the National University of Singapore.

**Ryan Bishop** teaches at the National University of Singapore in the Department of English and has published on urbanism, military technology, critical theory, avant-garde aesthetics and international sex tourism.

## FROM SAGE PUBLICATIONS

### Sex and Manners

Female Emancipation in the West  
1890 - 2000

**Cas Wouters** *University of Utrecht*

'This is a highly original and in many ways brilliant text. It is a model of how historical/process sociological research ought to be conducted and written-up. The author's subtle blending of theory and data is outstanding' - **Eric Dunning, Professor of Sociology, University of Leicester**

Situated in the figurational-process tradition of research associated with Norbert Elias, this dazzling book examines changes in American, Dutch, English and German manners books regarding the changing relationship between men and women. It examines the disappearance of rules for chaperonage and the rise of new codes for public transport, public dances, courting, dates and the work place.

This original and thought-provoking book:

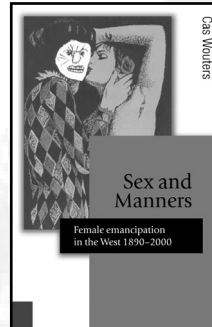
- provides empirical evidence showing in detail how the balance of power between the sexes has increased in women's favour
- monitors the changes in codes regarding sexuality
- focuses on general trends as well as on national differences, particularly between the general trends in the USA and Europe
- reports changing answers to the question of the balance between the longing for sexual gratification and the longing for enduring intimacy.

This is a major work of great accomplishment combining historical material with sociological, psychological and cultural analysis of a high order.

**Published in association with Theory, Culture & Society**

July 2004 • 192 pages

Cloth (0-8039-8369-7)



**SAGE Publications**  
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi  
*The Academic and Professional Publisher of Choice*

Order online at  
[www.sagepublications.com](http://www.sagepublications.com)