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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 Most particularly, this proliferation of inhabitations has meant that nearness has been replaced by distribution as a guiding metaphor and ambition.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

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 inter-action 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-wherenesses.

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 emnity 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

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

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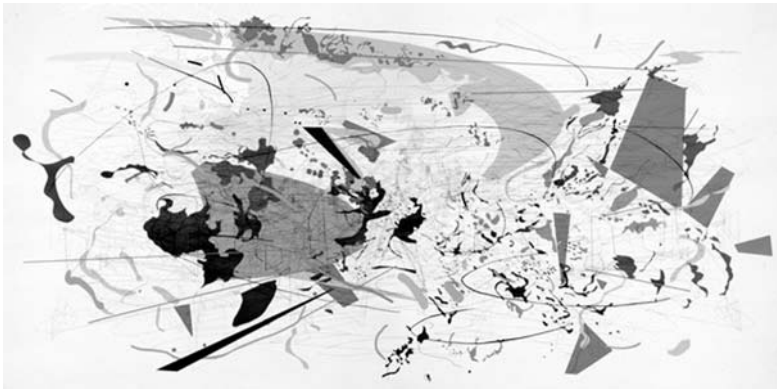
And if we can get that sense of space right it might feel like something that is both caring and in need of care.

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Ruffian Logistics