

Jean Robert

Friendship and our time's spatial imperative

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Friendship and our time's spatial imperative

Ideas presented at a seminar on "place and space"
at State College in 1988.

1. Our epoch could be defined by its urge to master space:

We live in the fire line of a spatial imperative

Modernity could be appropriately defined by its urge to master space and to expose all reality to a shadowless light in a controlled space. Long before Armstrong treaded the moon and even before Sputnik's bip was broascasted all over the world, modernity was "the space age".

Unlike other epochs, ours does not care to define its concept of the summum bonum as a graspable frame of orientation for action. It does not offer clues for decisions about ends, but for choices about means, and these means always imply free motion and shadowless vision in mastered spaces. All what our epoch considers worthwile can always be reduced to a mastery over spaces, to vision and to motion in a manageable space.

Bridge builders do no longer say that, by uniting the edges of a cleft, they gain a human site to the wilderness. They say that they remove an obstacle to a virtual flow of circulation. Traffic planners have adopted their language: in all that which opposes free motion in controlled space, they see a "factor of friction" to be removed.

Circulation and speed - the measure of its intensity - have become the axiomatic certainties underpinning a vision of the world as a collection of accessible objects and locations in space. Starting in the mid 19th century with the rapid propagation of the railroads, "space" has emerged into public consciousness as the ultimate substratum of reality. In the experience of speed, the lanscape is experienced as an immutable space which frames ever changing images. This fixed receptacle of fleeting images makes the abstract coordinate-space of mathematics and physics seem more real than the realities that "it contains". It is what commuters perceive as the "environment" in which they haste by selecting the appropriate signs along the highway, successively discarding sight after sight what E.V. Walter calls "the rubbish of perception". Traffic landscapes are not landscapes in which one dwells but landscapes through which one runs by abolishing their sight.

2. The "spatial imperative" of modern times is also an urge to break all boundaries open

Symbolically, speed is the arrow that pierces all circles and removes boundaries as disposable obstacles. Yet, circulation is not the only manifestation of our time's spatial imperative. It is only one of several symptoms. From astrophysics to topology, from cinematography to poetry, there is hardly a modern discipline or an art which does not start as an initiation to rules of composition in real or imaginary spaces.

Since centuries in the West, space is the medium of all visual representations. In "real space", representation becomes a simulation: an engineered deceit of the senses which abolishes the distinction between the image and its model. The new "pictorial space" opened by Alberti and Brunelleschi became the paradigm of the early modern scopic regime.

3. From the scanning of the sky to the skinning eye of anatomy

The adoption of the heliocentric world view led to a "spatialization" of the Earth. The place of all places was transformed into a globe.

Barbara Duden sees the image of the fetus which - since a famous photograph in Life Magazine - haunts the modern imagination as the outcome of the ultimate spatialization of the body. Building on Panofski, she shows that it started with Leonardo's pictures of the dissected corpses of pregnant women. From Leonardo to Hunter and to the sonogram, Duden documents the constitution of what she calls the public fetus as the result of a progressive "peeling away" of the maternal, caring body. In her book Geschichte unter der Haut, Duden contrasts modern anatomy - the art of piercing the skin and exploring the "obscurity beneath" to a reckless light - with the complaints of early 18th century patients to their physician Dr Storch.

"Speed" similarly transpierces all limiting horizon and makes "the beyond" part of daily experience. In No sense of place, Meyrowitz has shown that the electronic media break down any possible distinction between familiar objects and remote, ungraspable realities¹.

An age which disposes of the tangible "flesh" of all things - of all what offers resistance to the hand and is therefore "haptic" - first makes the unexpected seem obvious and then, as Ivan Illich says, redefines it as "that which is demonstrable but remains unimaginable".

¹Joshua Meyrowitz, No Sense of Place, the Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

We live in a world of unimaginable demonstrabilia that techniques of spatial simulation have transformed into visibles.

4. Recovering a sense of place

Though shadowless space overwhelms us, we still dwell among traces of lost boundaries. The flesh - the flesh of the "lived body" - still does not coincide with the charts of anatomy. Though a light imperative pregnates the epoch, we cherish shadow.

And there is friendship. Following Aristotle, the task accomplished by friends living together is providing each with enough knowledge of the other to enable them to choose one another. Part of friendship is "mutual good will", which is the choice that each friend makes for the other. When I choose to be friend with someone, I create a place for that person in my life, even if he or she is not physically present. The place of his friendship is found in the habits and memories that I am.

I would like to take it as the motto of our meeting: friendship is an activity which can make "places". We want to talk about the making of places by friendship and other activities.