

defiguration of space

I wondered what *defining a space* is? It could be a question of defining a space just for oneself, or defining a space for another person or for a set or group of people. Or it could be a question of defining a space for an unknown set of people, perhaps a community which is not yet a community, a community “to come”, a community which we do not know about yet, whose existence could not be worked out from our present conditions. Or it could be the defining of a space for oneself become someone or something else; not oneself as I am now, but perhaps someone other than who I am now, someone I would become but in such a way that this becoming would not be dependent on what I am at this present moment. A becoming other-than-one-is-now which would require a way of ignorance, a going through ignorance.

There seemed to be two answers to this question of the defining of space for oneself or for another. One, perhaps the more obvious, would involve the creation of a cultural physiognom. The resources of the “physical” world are deployed to create a physical space which did not previously exist. This we usually call “building”, although there are a range of other activities, and disciplines with other names, which achieve the same creation of spatial cultural physiognoms.

The other, perhaps less obvious way of defining a space, for oneself or for another, would involve no configuring or reconfiguring of material elements. Defining a space for oneself or for another can occur in the act of paying attention to where we are, of glancing around, of positioning oneself in a landscape or a cityscape, of locating oneself relative to what is around. Perhaps one is in a wide, open landscape, the sky very large above and around, the clouds growing and moving overhead – and the awareness of this, the thematisation of the situation in one’s mind or heart defines the space where one stands; or the awareness of a busy street corner, people and cars streaming past, buildings above, metro beneath; or the same phenomenon in a clearing in a wood.

There are at least two types of attention occurring in these events. In the first type of event, attention is directed towards creating a more or less permanent situation by deploying physical matter to define space. In the second, attention is paid to the situation itself that one finds oneself in, and in that act of attention or thematisation, space is defined, without any necessary relocation of the physiognom. In the first instance, space is defined by means of a series of acts; in the second, an intention is directed towards what is, in “physical” terms, already there. This second intentional activity seems to have something more passive about it, perhaps more theoretical, more thinkerly, contemplative.

Now, either of these types of defined space can, in turn, be the subject of a more or less thematised gaze. If our vision is constantly bounded? by space, by that which defines space, then to what extent does this vision linger? When does a look become a *conscious* look, a look which knows it is looking? Defined space has this peculiar position in the cultural physiognomy, in that it is unclear the extent to which it itself, as a thing, as an object for attention is or should be attended to.

On the one hand (and this aspect we shall look at at some length) one can say that defined space should have the characteristics of the Heideggerian *tool*. It should be like the mobile phone, properly so-designed. For Heidegger, *Dasein* – that being which each of us is – is a being immersed in an environment made up not of objects, but of tools which do not become *objectified* except in exceptional circumstances. Thus, the mobile phone, as an efficient tool, disappears as an object; we want it, on the whole and for most of the time, to become part of a context of equipment which enables us to act, move, interact, live. If the mobile phone becomes an object for us, this means that it is doing what it should not do – it is bringing attention to itself and is not disappearing into its use. Just as, for Heidegger, a hammer has its being in being used for the purpose of hammering and in being taken up in its use by *Dasein*, and it is only when the hammer is broken, or when one hits one’s thumb with it, that it becomes an object for us; so with the mobile phone, which should be taken up into a whole

context of involvement in our life in an unthematized way, so that its use becomes almost invisible to us.

Thinking about space in this way would lead us to emphasise the way in which it provides a *setting* for whatever is to occur in it. Whether the context is installation art, film or TV sets, a setting for photography or figurative painting, architecture and interior design or urban or non-urban space-making, cultural physiognoms of these phenomena may well be directed purely towards the provision of “Spielraum” for the activities which are *other* than the space itself, considered as a separate physical thing. Thus, a theatre will provide the setting for a situation where a piece of dance will occur, and the audience will direct their gaze and attention *properly* towards the play of the event, not towards the space in which it occurs. Particularly the auditorium will be darkened in order to achieve this, but even the stage sets, well lit, are not there primarily to be looked at (beyond the initial burst of curiosity) but to provide a place for what occurs on stage without upstaging it. It would not be there to bring attention to itself, and if attention is directed towards the space, then we would perhaps say that such an attention is in some way deficient, and the performance or activity has failed to capture or retain the audience’s imagination.

Likewise, an urban square might provide the setting for a festival where the whole community gathers in an affirmation and reaffirmation of their life together as a society and community; in the festival, the participants not only do not or are not supposed to pay attention to the setting of the urban square (even though it provides the possibility for what is happening), but in participating in the event they are to lose themselves in the communal activity which is occurring and in which they are participating in an intensive fashion. The festival can stand as typical of all communal activities where the sense of self is absorbed into the sense of community, and its setting typical of all those places where the place itself should disappear into the background.

Or, for architecture, the setting it provides is intended for the mundane, the everyday, the *Alltägliche*, where the activities of everyday life occur and are played out within a context and environment where Dasein’s interplay with it is unthematized and the space itself disappears into the unthought, the almost unseen.

There is here the question of the peripheral, the out-of-focus, that which remains outside the focus of our gaze, that which is doubled-up by our binocular vision. For instance here, now, in this everyday situation, your attention is on this text and the to-and-fro, on the *spiel* between us, and this is occurring as an event in a setting, a room, where the walls and windows, the surroundings, remain at the edge of vision, not there to be paid attention to. Unless, of course, you are getting bored, your attention wanders; in other words, the attention to the space becomes a deficient mode of its existence, something which happens when things go wrong, not when the space is acting as it should be.

In the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, architecture, theatre art and other means of cultural endeavour take their being, their mode of existence, from this thought of the setting, the situation, and most particularly from the concept of the *play*, the *spiel*, back-and-forth between setting and activity, between what in the tradition of western metaphysics and aesthetics is called “subject” and “object”. In emphasising *play* as a clue to the ontological status of the art work, of theatre and of architecture, Gadamer positions himself *outside* or beyond aesthetics as a philosophical discipline. Aesthetics is that consideration of art which sets it up and maintains it precisely as objects, as objectified, separated and positioned over against the subject. Whereas the aim of Gadamer’s work is to reveal the being of these works as *play*; that is, the object and subject disappear, or never appear in the first place, and it is the consideration of the play between them that becomes the task of the cultural analyst.

This foregrounding of the concept of play moves the concept of defined space away? from the question of figuration, away from the question of figure/representation, and instead regards it more in terms of a sort of *process which occurs*, as an event, between a setting and the activities which occur in it. An essential *dynamism* infects the concept of space, turning it from a passive location or container into an active and activating movement.

But this movement of *defiguration* in the name of *spiel* cannot simply set aside the question of figuration and representation. For on the other hand defined space, along with all other

cultural physiognoms, *can always* become the subject of a thematising gaze, of the gaze of representation and figuration. Alongside the play of the festival and its urban setting, the *Alltäglich* and its architecture, the dance and its theatre, there always remains the possibility that the gaze will turn away from what Heidegger and Gadamer would perhaps characterise as the *proper*, authentic way of relating to them. This moment of figuration or representation is, it seems, inescapable; its possibility lives alongside its supposed opposite, and the thematising gaze, the objectifying view, which at the same time appears to have the character of a self-aware-gaze, always lingers as a temptation, a lapse, something which may befall even the most rapt participant.

Maurice Blanchot, in his short essay *The Two Versions of the Imaginary*, speaks of this possibility:

...we can also recall that a utensil, once it has been damaged, becomes its own *image* (and sometimes an aesthetic object...). In this case, the utensil, no longer disappearing in its use, *appears*. This appearance of the object is that of resemblance and reflection; we might say it is doubled. The category of art is linked to this possibility objects have of “appearing”, that is, of abandoning themselves to pure and simple resemblance behind which there is nothing – except being. Only what has surrendered itself to the image appears, and everything that appears is, in this sense, imaginary.

Here, the image, that which is re-presented, that which is figured or which becomes a figure for us, is that which allows appearance self to occur and “being” itself to arise. In challenge to Heidegger, the tool, the utensil, when broken, becomes for Blanchot not merely conspicuous, not merely present-at-hand; it becomes an image, its own image, and this becoming is presented to us as a positive possibility rather than a secondary, derived type of being – which appears to be its character for Heidegger. The utensil is not present, but re-presented as image.

In respect of defined space, this re-presentation, this becoming-an-image, this direction of attention would on the one hand, clearly, be the root of all those disciplines which would comment upon or react to it, such as the media in all its forms, cartography as a mapping of space, or a theoretical discourse which would take space as its theme. But more radically, this image-making occurs, I would argue, at the same time and as part of the same movement of play which we were characterising as the so-called “proper” way in which to consider the nature of space. Thus, the well-known and well-analysed ways in which what is *secondary* to a discipline such as architecture comes to affect its nature and its being will be seen to be part of a wider and deeper phenomenon. I am referring here to, for instance, the way in which media representations of architecture, the way it is photographed or presented, turns back on the “thing itself” (architecture) and affects how it is made and seen; or the way that modern western cartography and surveying as established by Alberti in the mid-1400s was intrinsically bound up with how architecture was perceived and made and how it was represented in linear perspective.

Blanchot radicalises and deconstructs this process, the schema of the image, of figure and representation. The circulation implicit in these phenomena of cross-infection, of the influence of the secondary on the primary, media on that which it is supposedly mediating, is raised in Blanchot’s thought to another level, is made hyperactive, and turned back on itself when he writes:

according to the usual analysis, the image exists after the object; the image follows it; we see, then we image. *After* the object comes the image....

...in the image, the object again touches something it had mastered in order to *be* an object.

What is implied here is a reversal of the object-image relationship, of the presentation-representation schema, such that the thing only comes to exist when the image occurs. Not the thing itself, *then* its image, but rather the image first, the representation (or the possibility of representation) first, followed by the thing itself which is given the possibility to exist by the image. It is not the image that occurs as a secondary phenomenon after the thing represented; rather, the thing which is represented only becomes possible *because of the*

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image, thus recasting the image as that which comes first, that which is prior. (Although there is no time now to work on this theme, this reversal of priority also implies a reversal of time itself, considered as a sequence of present moments.) The image *before* the thing represented; *or*, the thematised gaze before the thing to which it turns its attention. Such as space. It is as if the possibility of the thematised and thematising gaze is the thing which gives us the thing itself. It is perhaps the nature of space only to occur, only to have its possibility, when it is *not* purely itself within the play to-and-fro between subject and object; but when it has been, as it were, contaminated by its own representation.

We come back to the two types of space definition I outlined at the start – the definition of space by means of physical arrangements and the definition of space by means of the way a place exists for us, by means of the way we represent it or thematise it for ourselves. And we can see that the difference between these two, together with the crude dualistic concept of the difference between “material” “physical” presence and its supposed opposite, the non-material, the thoughtful, the abstract, would begin to collapse.

Bibliography

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