

Liminality: Place and Non-Place in Fine Art

Location and Place

Distinctions between location and place can be illustrated by the difference between the terms house and home. Home is mapped using co-ordinate points or postal addresses. Home, although alluding to house, is both a perception and recollection. A location is a position. Place, on the other hand, is a more elusive term, because it is derived from lived experience and personal introspection. Place is the product of our memories and our fantasies.

The following text and images are taken from *Rumours are Always Time* written by Tim Etchells and performed by Forced Entertainment.

All this used to be a desert, and before that it was mud. This is where the shoot out started, and this is where the lovers kiff in love, and this is where the barricades were. This is where they found the children, and this is where the bridge collapsed, and this is where the birds flooded, and this is where the alarm was raised. And isn't this the place where you walked each evening?

This text reveals location to be a fixed spatial reference, acting as both a setting and context for interaction. Location may help better define place, but a sense of place is difficult to ascertain as is shown by the text's final contrasting question.

Place and Time

Place, derived from the memories we associate with a location, is therefore a mental map that we construct and reconstruct over time. Parkes and Thrift (1980, p.138) distinguish between location and place and their relationship to time.

Location is determined outside the individual. Place is constructed from inside the individual, as mental maps and personalized images of time.

The geographer Tuan (1977, p.136) states that "Location is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning." The longer we reside at a location the more events we associate with it, the more we feel its particular qualities. The longer we pause, the further we transform location into place.

Place is therefore strengthened by repetition and reoccurrence. Graham Gussin's installation *The Fall* presents a video projection of a landscape alluding to a picture postcard. The image appears to be static. However, intermittent and random explosions in the lake continually disrupt the image. The explosions are caused by a random loop written into a computer programme which controls the work. Chance and unique explosions are mapped onto a concrete location. The artist's decision not to document the explosive events emphasises the distinction between location and place. Location is concrete and place is as transient and ever-changing as Gussin's random explosions.

The temporal and changeable character of place has been termed in various ways: N-dimensional, a paraspace, and more recently space-time. Location can be defined and represented within three dimensional space whereas place comprises and requires a definition of more than three dimensional space.

Place and Identity

Self is essential to a definition of place. Heidegger (1959) believes place to be the *unique dwelling of being*. The unique dwelling of being, the self, is the first stage of place construction. As individuals, we additionally subscribe to shared identities and external constructions of place because they reinforce and protect our self identification and internal place construction.

Mark Wallinger's ironic photographic work is entitled *Mark Wallinger, 31 Hayes Court, Camberwell/1 New Road, Camberwell, London, England, Great Britain, Europe, The World, The Solar System, The Galaxy, The Universe*. The title literally addresses the need in individuals to locate themselves geographically. The photograph depicts a place, identifying an individual's need to locate him or herself within a culture, to be a part of a group (in this instance the crowd), and the crowd requiring a greater national identity. Wallinger's work conveys how self and group identities become accentuated when individuals feel their personal memories of place to be threatened.

Mark Wallinger's photograph also suggests the potential conflict between rival groups sharing the same location but holding contradictory place loyalties. The reinforcement of group identities often involves an attempt to control, distort, or limit the place of others. A group protects itself against external threats to ensure that its identity is maintained (Auge, 1995). We retreat into believing that place is fixed. In fact it is location that is fixed (Massey, 1994).

Technique

Place is a deep-rooted and fundamental necessity to personal identity. A sense of place can be successfully manipulated to influence and control people, with the effects of place on our behaviour and conduct constructed for us in advance (Ralph, 1976). *Technique* involves the designing of experiences

and therefore the predetermination of a response. Recognition of place allows us an automatic response to the stimulus presented: we know what to do. (Umberto Eco, 1967)

The reproduction of places allows for quick recognition. We instantly recognize where we are, for example, when we pay a visit to a McDonald's fast food outlet. We can see recognizable places occurring more and more often in the homogenization of the high street. Here, technique gives consistency to a trademark.

The artist Guillaume Bijl builds temporary installations in galleries. He installs, for example, fully functioning shops as art works in a gallery space. His work addresses the ease in which a sense of place can be constructed. In these installations we can observe how a particular place affects people's behaviour, be it a gallery, and a men's clothing shop or a psychiatric hospital. As with Wallinger's work, individuals rely on place for stable self identities.

Non-Place

Place is, as established earlier, distinct from location. Place is revealed through memory, identity, and space-time. By contrast, non-places do not negate place, but often retain many qualities that can be ascribed to that of place, with their own characteristics, events, and social relations. And yet they sit aside from place as counter-sites or deviations (Foucault, 1986).

Non-place has an affiliation to space and time which parallels that of place. Through this similarity and often close proximity to place, they, in the words of Newman (1994, p.86) cause the *displacement and destruction of places... they are, unlike space, but on the same level*. There are various types of non-places that proliferate the contemporary environment.

Terrain - Vague

Enlaid - *Vague* is a French term used to describe the disregarded edge between distinct locations (Grathwol, 1992). It is a non-place that occurs unconsciously, an undaimed location, excluded from development and separated from its previous natural state. As is illustrated in the photographic works of Grethe Grathwol, *terrain-vague* is a non-place that defies inhabitation, a common non-place in many cities and suburbs (Bloomer and Moore, 1977).

This second photographic piece by Grathwol emphasises the detachment of *terrain-vague* from place. The advertising hoardings face away from the disorganised wasteland. Other non-places prevail in the contemporary environment and involve the physical dislocation and displacement of people. They are transient, the non-place in an expanding *travelling culture* (Oiffonl, 1992). The term *travelling culture* does not refer in this context to nomadic cultures but that of the passenger or tourist. Nomadic cultures maintain history and identity within mobility, and the perpetuation of mobility reaffirms nomadic status. Conversely, *travelling culture* results from innovations in the technology of mobility. The status of the subject within the *travelling culture* is often a-historical, a-cultural, and concerned with non-identity. Within the *travelling culture* we experience temporary non-places. The relationship between a location and, for example, a vehicle is often ad hoc, casual and unmediated. Vehicles can relocate. Planes and boats are the most dynamic vehicles within temporary non-places because they are unconnected and unrestricted by the fixed location of a passage.

Other modes of non-place are restricted in their passage: the motorway for the car, the track for the train. These are also termed static vehicles because they do not move, yet they enable us to move (Virilio, 1991). A passage in a *travelling culture* sits between identified locations. The motorway, the corridor, and passport control are all passages and states of transition between recognised locations. Julian Opies painted screen saver entitled *imagine you are driving (7)* depicts the road ahead, with the passage presented as subordinate to the destination.

Uminality

The anthropologist Van Gennep (1960) focuses on rites of passage as the transition between important cultural intervals, such as the interval between childhood and manhood. The passage between these statuses is described as liminal, or non-place. Liminality takes up definition as an entity in its own right, a counter-site or deviation, aside from place.

Mike Bode's *Corridor* represents a liminal state, which in this instance is a hospital passage. From the exterior we view *Corridor* as an entity in itself. The exits are located at each end of the furnished institutional static vehicle. With the *doors* closed *Corridor* becomes a passage between.

During the transitional stages of liminality, the subject's status is ambiguous and may determine or be determined by the non-place in which he or she resides. Liminality is defined by its non-specific or inverted characteristics. It is this ambiguity that defines a rite of passage. Victor Turner (1969, p.94) describes the status of the subject in a liminality stage as a passenger because they are neither here nor there; betwixt and between. He writes that the passenger *elude[s] or slip[s] through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space*.

Ed Ruscha's painting of a petrol station is titled *Standard Station*. Although petrol stations are important locations within the *travelling culture*, they are also unstimulating, routine and impersonal. Petrol stations elude all the qualities of place, as Ruscha's title suggests.

A dictionary definition of liminality is the limit below which a *given stimulus ceases to be perceptible*. Liminal or non-places are often designed to ease the passenger into a state of detachment. Self-identification becomes replaced with a number plate, a ticket, a digit. Within the travelling culture the aim is to unburden the passenger or the tourist.

A precondition of non-place within the travelling culture is the non-identification and non-recognition that occurs within it. Auge (1995, p.78) writes on the detachment of the self in non-place.

For a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity will be a non-place.

Reverse Technique

Technique previously referred to as the pre-designing of locations to influence our recognition and recall, is applied to liminality in reverse. Reverse technique is used to numb our sense of non-place and our ambiguous position within it. This absence of sensation is confused with a sense of comfort.

In addition, developments in technology allow us accelerated movement within liminal or non-places. Yet the same technology's mask the speed at which we are travelling. Reverse technique is therefore embedded in these technologies (White, 1996).

La OS by the Brazilian artist Gabriel Orozco focuses on technology's attempts to reduce the time spent in liminal space. In this instance, the famous Otreon car has been subtly reduced in width, a streamlined form implying potentially greater acceleration and speed.

This is a still from my installation piece, *Drive-In*. Parked model cars watch a video projection of driving. A moving image is speeded up and framed within the front windscreen of a car.

Driving Movie sits adjacent to *Drive-In*. The static model taxi houses a small projector. We view a navigating taxi driver and passenger. The work is motionless but also in a state of transit. These are absurd images. The model cars are reduced to passengers. The road comes to them, compressing perceptions of space and time, and manipulating our perception of non-place (Harvey, 1989).

These works attempt to draw parallels between the passage, the road ahead and the passage, the computer terminal. Liminality within the travelling culture is extended by digital technology when we visit locations on the internet. The works also address the paradox of non-locations on the world wide web. Reverse technique is embedded in the advancements of digital technology which attempt to reduce the interval of download time. It is ambiguous as to whether the goal of technological innovation to create simultaneous departure and arrival has been successful.

Developments in technology mean that we spend growing amounts of time in interval or liminal periods, "dwelling" in the non-place of travel. Contemporary artists are increasingly negotiating combinations of stasis and motion, a paradox arising out of disrupted conceptions of location, place and identity. Technological innovations have initiated a collapsing of the perceived boundaries between space and time. And both trends are now accelerated by digital technology.

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