

Optical Illusions: travel stories

travel stories

Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice. For this reason, spatial practices concern everyday tactics.¹

Stories *take place*. Places can be linked through narrative. By stressing the spatial element of story telling, de Certeau's notion of 'spatial stories' allows narrative to be used loosely as a device for making connections between often disparate spaces. In the context of 'the city', the 'spatial story' is a way of understanding the urban fabric in terms of the relationships that can be made between people, things and places. In contemporary urban and architectural discourse, we are increasingly obsessed by spatial stories in the guise of figures which traverse space: the flâneur, the spy, the detective, the prostitute, the rambler. These figures are metaphors of our quest for knowledge. They represent voyages of exploration, passages of revelation, journeys of discovery both in and of the city and in and of the self. Spatial storytelling explores the territories between public and private, between past and future, between real and imagined, but most importantly between space and subjectivity.

I believe that an interest in the spatial story is currently being articulated implicitly in a series of contemporary urban art projects whose fascinations appear to be with various forms of movement through space - specifically with dispersal, narrative and travel. New curatorial strategies have a tendency to focus on dispersal. A number of recent show have placed the works included across parts of the city, in Bourneville, as in 'In the Midst of Things' (1999) and across the country, from Liverpool to Hull, as in 'Artstranspennine' (1998). These projects are constellations, composed of multiple pieces. They are cartographies which map a selection of sites not as isolated spots but as relational entities - as networks. The ways in which the interventions relate to one other is a function primarily of their geographical distribution - usually understood as a horizontal plane. The maps are also sedimented topographies which operate on another vertical dimension, where connections can be made between the layers of physical, social and imaginative space. Working with physical traces as clues and memories of previous occupations, artists alternatively use these to reveal existing conditions previously hidden and to subvert dominant histories by constructing new narratives. Each fragment locates us physically and conceptually in both space and time, allowing us to make momentary sense of the world. Here we have the gallery dispersed into multiple city-wide or even country-wide cartographies of art works whose relationships are not sequential but layered and exploded.

¹ Michel de Certeau, 'Spatial Stories', *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, 1988, p. 115.

Another emerging aspect of the 'spatial story' in contemporary art practice is the artist's walk, composed of a route or journey, exposing the audience to series of encounters with differing aspects of place. In some cases, the work itself takes the form of a narrative - an unfolding of space through time and vice-versa, an unfolding of time in space. In Janet Cardiff's 'The Missing Voice' (1999) a work for Art Angel in Whitechapel, London, the artist took the role of story-teller. Cardiff created a CD rom which led the audience, wearing headphones and a discman obtained from Whitechapel's public lending library, on a choreographed route through the city. The sound track layered historical narratives concerning Jack the Ripper's activities in the area, with fictional detective stories and more recent observations made by the artist of the area itself. The listener experienced a juxtaposition of empowerment and disempowerment - at one moment they were encouraged to take the role of a detective following clues the next a victim being followed. Marysia Lewandowska's 'Detour' project (1999) also took the form of a route through the city. But Lewandowska chose to adopt a more anonymous role. Her research into aspects of exchange production, consumption and waste - key to the history of the Paddington basin area of London was then passed on to professional tourguides, workers and residents, who in turn related these findings to an audience group. The tour included visits to a storage site for a major Oxford street retailer, an antiques market and a resident's home.

Sue Ridge's recent photo-images, 'Optical Allusions', funded by Commissions East, a temporary installation at Norwich station deal with the spatial story in another configuration - travel. For me the work can best be discussed through two different moving figures - the nomad and the angel, both of which I go on to explore here. The nomad allows us to talk of travel in terms of movement as the content of the work - the images are traces of changing views experienced from a train window. Their delicacy captures beautifully the fragility of life in a moment of transition - held in suspense between departure and arrival. The figure of the angel on the other hand suggests a concern, not with the end product, but rather with the process of making the work by creating connections with people on the train. Rather than adopt the role of anonymous observer, or even voyeur, Ridge engaged in conversations with four different passengers on the Norwich-London train service. She gave each a disposable camera and asked them to make visual records of their journeys. Over a period of time she learnt how their individual experiences of the same physical landscapes differed, and how variations in purpose, frequency, duration and direction could create four unique travelogues. Each photo-image is the result of this process of discovery, each one is an intricate layering and manipulating of the documentation of journeys taken both by the passengers and by Ridge herself. Each one is a 'spatial story'.

the nomad

*The nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity*²

Recent work in feminism, cultural studies and human geography, has increasingly focused on issues of identity, difference and subjectivity. The language of these texts is highly spatialised, with words such as 'mapping', 'locating', 'situating', 'positioning' and 'boundaries' appearing frequently. Academics might 'explain' this new emphasis on space as typical of postmodern discourse. (Postmodernism in this context refers to a questioning of truth, history and the all-knowing modern subject and instead describes a series of discourses exploring new epistemologies and ontologies.)

These searches for new ways of knowing and being are being framed in spatial terms. For those concerned with issues of identity - race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity - spatial metaphors constitute powerful political devices which can be employed as critical tools for examining the relationship between the construction of identities and the politics of location. For example, Jane Flax's 'standpoint theory' and Elsbeth Probyn's notion of 'locality' have been used to negotiate such on-going theoretical disputes as the essentialism/constructionism debate. Positionality in these cases provides a way of understanding knowledge and essence as contingent and strategic - *where* I am makes a difference to what I can know and who I can be.

In bell hook's passionate claim for the margin to be understood and occupied as a place of radical difference, the exploration of difference in female identities through race and class is explicitly spatialised. hook's work makes clear two very important things for contemporary feminism. First that links must be made between the metaphorical spaces of positioning in feminist theory and the places women occupy in day to day life. Second that space and subjectivity are intrinsically linked. The work of feminist geographers (see Liz Bondi, Gillian Rose, Doreen Massey and Linda McDowell) starts with an interest in space; whereas feminist philosophy (see Elizabeth Grosz, Moira Gatens and Rosalyn Diprose) originates with an investigation of the subject. Both disciplines overlap. Rosi Braidotti and Luce Irigaray are, for me, the two feminists where space and subjectivity are most closely linked. For Braidotti, the nomadic subject is an important 'theoretical figuration for contemporary subjectivity'.

The nomadic subject in Braidotti's writing describes an epistemological condition, a kind of knowingness or unknowingness that refuses fixity, that allows us to think between, or to think

² Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 22.

'as if'. Braidotti argues that the 'figuration' of the nomadic subject recurs in the work of many feminist theorists, from Judith Butler's notion of parody to Donna Haraway's cyborg. The fleetingness of travel, of being no where for some time, may be celebrated theoretically, creating as it does a limbo position, a rejection of fixity. But it can also be critiqued. For some nomads the rejection of home as located and the choosing of detachment is affirming, but for others it may be problematic. What of the exile, the nomadic subject who has never had a home, the nomadic subject who has been denied entry, nomadic subject who has been ejected from their place?

the angel

*The angel is that which unceasingly passes through the envelopes or container(s), goes from one side to the other, reworking every deadline, changing very decision, thwarting all repetition.*³

As well as provide a feminist critique of women's existing position in patriarchy, Luce Irigaray's writing also offers women an utopian position. For Irigaray, the female subject position radically differs from the male and offers possibilities for a new way of living. The spaces of the female body metaphorically describe these new forms of culture and social exchange between men and women as equal but different subjects. Irigaray proposes an alternative female symbolism based metaphorically on 'two lips', one which is not unitary but diffuse, diversified, multiple, decentered, fluid, with a double role as inside and threshold.

Irigaray's work also suggests an alternative and celebratory way of viewing female movement in terms of the 'angel'. The angel circulates as a mediator, as an alternative to the phallus, who rather than cutting through, goes between and bridges. The angel cannot be represented in patriarchal terms since she rethinks the organisation of patriarchal space and time. For Irigaray, men have confined women as and in the spaces of the male symbolic systems of law and language, in order to deny the angel, or their nomadic status. It is difficult I think to generalise movement and sex, to suggest that all women would like to, or are equally able of moving. This is not what Irigaray is about. In my opinion her mode of operation is suggestive, she is providing us with the opportunity to imagine new possible relations that women might have with space.

Moving is not strange to me. I have always liked to be on the go, both physically and intellectually. I am most comfortable in motion. More than that, I have no choice than to

³ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, London: The Athlone Press, 1993, p. 15.

always be moving out of my place, whether country, institution, lover. And I always feel happiest when I know I am just about to leave, as the nostalgia sets in. Much of my written work celebrates women and movement. The figure of the angel - as one who moves between and challenges existing boundaries - fascinates me intellectually.

I have been moving between London to Nottingham for over a year now. My experience of commuting appears to have weakened my immune system so that I constantly get ill. It has also alerted me to the dangers of using theory as a tool for generalising. Movements vary in their political dimensions, according to material circumstances and personal experiences. The figure of the commuter, for example, rarely comes up in any discussion of the politics of travel. The commuter holds little of the political urgency of the migrant or the exile, nor the poetic resonance of the nomad; but for many commuting takes up an exhausting amount of time in each day. Clearly there are different kinds of movement, various modes of travel, and only some are to be celebrated.

My commute has made me somewhat critical of my earlier position. Where I was fond of arguing that a sense of stability may come from being in motion, now I am keener to consider how people attempt to create homes⁴ while in transition - it appears that we so still desire a sense of stability when moving. Interestingly this is an aspect of the angel, I had overlooked before - the importance of connection, both between people and between people and places. In other writing Irigaray discusses this in relation to 'at' and 'to'.

Women are more attentive to the question of place: they are close to things, to others (autres, which is related to one of the indo-european roots of the verb être [to be]).

I love to you means a relation of indirection to you. . . the 'to' is the sign of non-immediacy, of mediation between us. . . the 'to' is the guarantor of two intentionalities: mine and yours. . .⁵

Sue Ridge's research for 'Optical Allusions' reveals a similar set of concerns with 'at' and 'to'. Passengers' responses to a questionnaire Ridge designed and handed out on the train, displayed an obsession with obtaining their seat of choice for the duration of their journey - whether window or aisle seat, facing or in reverse, the exact configuration of 'at' was for each individual highly significant. In the conversation I had with the Sue Ridge about the project after the work was completed, it seemed that what remained for her, were not the photo-

⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference*, London: The Athlone Press, 1994, p. 49.

⁵ Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You*, London: Routledge, pp. 109-13.

images themselves, beautiful and poignant though they are, but the traces of the relations she had made 'to' the four narrators and their spatial stories. So for me, 'to' provides another important way of understanding the work.

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