

**“Oriental Spatialities”:  
The Alienizing Effects of Spatial Metaphors  
in the Description of Intercultural Processes**

In short what is now before us nationally, and in the full imperial panorama, is the deep, the profoundly perturbed and perturbing question of our relationship to others – other cultures, other states, other histories, other experiences, traditions, peoples and destinies. The difficulty with the question is that there is no vantage *outside* the actuality of relationships between cultures, between unequal imperial and nonimperial powers, between different Others. (Said 1989, 216)

The problem with the spatial metaphor of difference is that there is no ‘outside’ from which to view this relationship. Said’s remark demonstrates the simultaneous irresistibility and inadequacy of spatial metaphors. Spatial boundaries survive fully articulated to describe the most pressing concerns of cultural relationships in the post-colonial world. (Ashcroft 2001, 187)

These quotations from two of the leading theorists of the post-colonial condition vividly illustrate the crucial role of spatiality as a source of conceptual metaphors. The dilemma that spatial images at the same time seem to be indispensable and invariably flawed gets especially obvious in the fact that those who criticize established spatial comparisons in their own approaches usually rely on spatiality themselves instead of changing to a different semiotic field. Two prominent cases in point – Homi K. Bhabha and Bill Ashcroft - are going to be discussed in the following.

What is it that makes spatiality so attractive as a field of imagery for the description especially of cultural differences? The answer to this question is much more complicated than it might seem at first sight. Much of the popularity of spatial imagery in the so-called soft sciences results from its apparent firm grounding in the everyday world. To argue on the basis of spatial terms allows highly sophisticated concepts to pretend on a reliable anchorage in the extra-scientific cosmos. The experience of spatiality is such an existential necessity that it is maybe *the* category to appeal on the ‘common-sense’ as Tim Cresswell stresses to draw the attention to the ideological potential of spatiality.

... it is indisputable that an understanding of space is universally important to people’s everyday existence. Try living a day disregarding the expectations

that come with divisions of space. [...] Space and place are such fundamental categories of experience that the power to specify the meanings of places and expectations of behavior in them is great indeed. (Cresswell, 152)

Later on Cresswell puts the attractiveness and the risks of spatial metaphors in a nutshell: "Ideology seeks to link the concrete and the abstract. What better way than through place?" (158) In order to avoid this naturalizing effect and to increase the awareness of essentializing momentum of spatial metaphors either of two directions can be chosen. For one thing attention can be called to the problematic and ambiguous nature of spatiality itself in order to unveil its lack of explanatory power. The alternative would be to search for self-reflective spatial metaphors that constantly reveal their own limitations and thus prevent their users from a naïve confidence in their categorical correctness.

Recent geography especially under the influence of thinkers like Henri Lefebvre, Robert Sack and David Harvey has achieved a lot in the first of the two directions mentioned. Lefebvre, who analyses history departing from the question which role spatiality played at different stages of the social differentiation process, goes as far as to speak of a *Production of Space*. On the basis of Marxist assumptions he claims that the role of spatiality is inextricably linked with the current modes of production. Emphasizing the social nature of spatiality he deconstructs the myth of a pre-existing given. As will be shown in the discussion of the neo-marxist criticism of Homi Bhabha's theories, cultural materialism has put forth a valuable albeit somewhat partial contribution towards a more sophisticated notion of spatiality.

Within the current post-colonial discussion, Homi K. Bhabha's notion of hybridity is undoubtedly one of the most influential conceptualizations of transcultural processes. At the very core of his theories lies a spatial metaphor, the so-called *Third Space* - an interstitial spatiality that is used as an image for cultural positionalities that blend different cultural elements into a new identity- the hybrid culture. Especially with regard to the fact that Bhabha remains remarkably vague about nature of the spatiality on which he bases his theory, Lawrence Phillips arrives at the conclusion that his thoughts on the *Location of Culture* are "Lost in Space". Following Benita Parry's criticism of Bhabha's work, Lawrence argues that Bhabha on the one hand seems to be obsessed with a theoretical notion of spatiality, while at

the same time he completely neglects the concrete spatial background that forms the basis of the (post-)colonial processes. (cp. Phillips, par.1)

This disjunctive, ambivalent relation between 'culture' and the socio-economic base has produced a rich seam of work broadly termed cultural materialist, which Bhabha wilfully ignores by supplanting materialism entirely with the discursive abstraction that Parry terms "the linguistic turn in cultural studies" (ibid.)

I will argue that, although Phillips makes a good point when he criticizes the usage of spatiality in *The Location of Culture*, the argumentation he gives for dismissing Bhabha's theoretical approach comes short of the whole scope of the problem of spatial metaphors in the description of transcultural processes.

Taking into account the fact that the consideration of the modes of production forms the central cornerstone of a Marx's reflections on cultural conditions, it is hardly astonishing that an enduring impetus should come from cultural materialism to put greater stress on the importance of spatial aspects in the analysis of cultural processes. Unfortunately, though, there is a marked tendency in the work of authors like Parry or Phillips to concentrate too much on the economic dimension of space and not to consider the idiosyncratic nature of spatiality itself with all its implications.

For one thing it needs to be stressed that the habitual thinking about space that is established by the necessities of everyday live leads to certain associations that are automatically triggered as soon as a spatial term is used whatever the specific context may be. First, I would argue that numerating spaces like Bhabha does in his concept of the *Third Space* evokes the image of a stable spatiality with finite borders like for example a room or a hedged piece of real estate. The countability of spaces that is implied in a notion like the *Third Space* is sufficient to make it impossible to conceive of this kind of space as an infinite continuum. The space comes to be necessarily *defined*, which means cut apart from its environment by a border of any kind, be it a wall, a hedge, a fence or a racial difference in the case of an intercultural process.

There is also a second connotation of spaces that makes spatiality an inapt field of comparison: the seeming durability that is generally associated with spaces. The fact that the term "nature" has not only become one of the most overused buzzwords of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but even the guiding principle of

individual lifestyles as well as political parties is sufficient proof that spatiality is frequently regarded to be not only beyond human cultural practices, but as a matter of fact an opposite of it. The romantic myth of an ideal spatiality that is to be defined by the absence of human beings suggests that in its original and untouched state, space is something that does not change through history but forms the pre-existing framework in which all kinds of beings peacefully coexist. Lefebvre traces the emergence of the notion of an “environment” which according to his reasoning was introduced in the course of an increasingly culturally occupied spatiality in order to be able to keep up the imagination of a neutral space.

In the case of ‘the environment’, we are confronted by a typical metonymic manoeuvre, for the term takes us from the part – a fragment of space more or less fully occupied by objects and signs, functions and structures – to the whole, which is empty, and defined as neutral and passive ‘medium’. If we ask, ‘whose environment?’ or ‘the environment of what?’, no pertinent answer is forthcoming. (Lefebvre, 326)

In connection with the implicit reference to boundaries of a term like the *Third Space* the permanence that is habitually associated with space makes spatial imagery a very disadvantageous linguistic field for the description of transcultural processes. In the very act of celebrating the *Third Space* as an interstitial spatiality that prepares the ground for a subversive deconstruction of cultural boundaries, Bhabha through his insistent use of spatial imagery that suggests finiteness and limited spatiality, unintentionally re-establishes fixed positionalities and thus undermines his own assets.

A relatively recent attempt to conceptualize cultural hybridity that also relies on spatial imagery, but which avoids some of the major flaws of Bhabha’s space metaphors is put forward by Bill Ashcroft in *Post-Colonial Transformation*. For one thing Ashcroft is much more explicit about the role that spatiality covers in relation to the formation of cultural identities.

... if we see place as not simply a neutral location for the imperial project, we can see how intimately place is involved in the development of identity, how deeply it is involved in history, and how deeply implicated in the systems of representation - language, writing and the creative arts - which develop in any society but in colonial societies in particular. (155f.)

He emphasizes the urgent need for adequate theoretical approaches to get beyond the naïve notions of space and he is very aware of the extraordinarily problematic nature of spatial vocabulary.

The issues surrounding the concept of place - how it is conceived, how it differs from 'space' or 'location', how it enters into and produces cultural consciousness, how it becomes the horizon of identity - are some of the most difficult and debated in post-colonial experience. (Ashcroft 2001, 124)

As a vantage point Ashcroft relies on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the cultural *habitus*. According to Ashcroft, Bourdieu prepares the ground for conception of spatiality that takes into account the inextricable link between geographic locations and the cultural practice of its inhabitants. Ashcroft adapts Bourdieu's term to the post-colonial context and argues that the sense of locatedness of cultural practice is the source that successful resistance against colonial powers takes its origins from. (cp. 157f.) On the ground of this spatialized understanding of culturality Ashcroft approaches the problem of the cultural boundary and introduces his notion of what he calls *horizontality* to delineate the specific horizons that form the basis of cultural identities, but which in contrast to the metaphor of a cultural boundary or border conceptually include the omnipresent potential for change of cultural locations as well as the arbitrariness of individual horizons. He thus introduces an imagery that although it is grounded in spatiality retains a high degree of self-reflexivity. Although the existence of boundaries is not denied and identity is still defined by what is within the subject's field of vision, differences lose much of their distinctive power. The fact that as soon as any individual begins to move, his or her horizon is always in flux while no point comes where the familiar ends and the unfamiliar begins, draws attention to the limited nature of the accustomed horizon of the individual. At the same time this relativity opens up the possibility of respect for other individuals who are accustomed to a different horizon and may thus be able to function as a guide in the new unfamiliar surroundings.

... whereas the boundary is about constriction, history, the regulation of imperial space, the horizon is about extension, possibility, fulfilment, the imagining of post-colonial place. The horizon is a way of conceiving home, and with it identity, which escapes the inevitability of the imperial boundary. Horizontality is, possibly, the *only* way in which the predominance of the boundary in Western thought can be resisted. (Ashcroft, 183)

Just at the point where Ashcroft has convincingly introduced his theory of horizontality as an alternative to a traditional Western epistemology, which depends on the fixity of boundaries that can be validated on binary oppositions, he stumbles across his own use of spatial metaphors. In an attempt to introduce yet a revised characterization of cultural hybridity he takes the veranda as an image to visualize the nature of the hybrid.

Verandas are the very model of the 'contact zone' where inhabitants and strangers may meet with ease. They are the space in which 'inside' and 'outside' interact, and not only do they reveal the provisionality of such apparently unnegotiable boundaries but they represent that space in which the inner and the outer may change and affect one another. (195)

Ironically, the veranda meets all the criteria to be an excellent image of a *Third Space* but fails to cover several of the key features that Ashcroft has attached to the horizontal conceptualization of cultural differences. Not only does a wall, and thus the most frequently used symbol of a permanent and distinct border, separate the veranda from the inner of the house, but the gradual change of vision that Ashcroft claims to be the defining criterion of horizontal differences does not correspond at all with his spatial comparison. Either somebody is inside the house, where due to the fact that he or she is surrounded by solid walls nobody would usually speak of a horizon, or he or she is on the veranda, where your vision is usually blocked from the inside of the house. Of course, to argue that the veranda itself is neither inside nor outside does make sense. But at the same time it is a separate spatiality with fixed boundaries, which separate it from the inside as well as from the outer environment, and thus an inadequate image for a hybridity based on Ashcroft's notion of horizontality.

Ashcroft's approach to transcultural processes, in spite of several lucid comments he makes on the importance of a precise notion of spatiality in the field of post-colonial studies, in the end does not succeed in introducing a convincing alternative to prior spatial conceptualizations of cultural difference. Although his notion of horizontality offers many advantages in comparison to conceptualizations based on the image of a boundary or even a border, in his thoughts on cultural hybridity he does not manage to make use of the framework of horizontality.

To sum up, it seems obvious that a growing awareness of the habitual imaginations that are associated with spatiality is necessary in order to avoid many of the conceptual traps into which spatial imagery can lurge. The alienizing tendency that results when spaces, with their common connotations of fixity and finiteness are used to visualize the highly complex nature of transcultural interaction has to be kept in check in order to avoid a conceptualization of cultural difference that in spite of its well-meaning impetus ends up consolidating cultural boundaries in the act of proclaiming their obsolete nature.

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