



Beyond Postmodernism: Spatialism and the representation of the infinite

Postmodern architecture finds itself condemned to undertake a series of minor modifications in a space inherited from modernity, condemned to abandon a global reconstruction of the space of human habitation. The perspective thus opens onto a vast landscape, in the sense that there is no longer any horizon of universality, universalisation, or general emancipation ...

Jean-Francois Lyotard 1992, p.76.

In his discussion of modernism and postmodernism, the two great philosophical and intellectual movements of the twentieth century, Lyotard writes that 'humanity's condition has become one of chasing after the process of new objects (both of practice and of thought)' (1992, p.78). His conception of the postmodern notes three problems directly related to ideas of loss and/or deficit. First, in terms of architecture, the postmodern perspective is an 'horizon'-less landscape, a 'bricolage', a 'destiny of repetition and quotation' which is 'condemned to abandon a global perspective of the space of human habitation' (pp.76-77). Second, in the developments of the complex world of technoscience, 'we can observe a kind of decline in the confidence that, for two centuries, the West invested in the principle of a general progress in humanity' (p.77). In this de-humanizing and dehumanized world, humans, Lyotard writes, 'are like Gullivers ... : sometimes too big, sometimes too small, but never the right size' (p.79). Third, in the 'expressions of thought' that include 'visual and plastic arts', literature, philosophy and politics, the idea of 'a kind of work, a long, obstinate and highly responsible work' (which was part of the true process of avant-gardism and modernity) must be restored as part of human 'responsibility'; without this, 'we will surely be condemned to repeat ... the West's "modern neurosis" - its schizophrenia, paranoia, and so on ...' (pp.79-80).

Margaret Wertheim, in a book devoted to the exploration of cyberspace within a more expansive cultural history of space, also writes of the difficulties facing postmodern Western society:

Like the late Romans, we too live in a time marked by inequity, corruption and frustration. Ours seems to be a society past its peak, one no longer sustained by a firm belief in itself and no longer sure of its purpose. (1999, p.23).

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All correspondence addressed to:

Associate Professor Rosemary.Ross Johnston
The Editor
PO Box 222
Lindfield NSW
Australia 2070
Phone: 61 2 9514 5402
Fax: 61 2 9514 5556
E-mail Rosemary.Ross.Johnston@uts.edu.au

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Wertheim's thesis is that 'conceptions of space and conceptions of ourselves are inextricably intertwined' (p.37), that space and conceptions of space provide the key to understanding an evolving world, and that 'the production of space - any kind of space - is necessarily a communal activity' (p.306).

One of the challenges of postmodernism is that it has disrupted traditional senses of community. On the positive side, this has been exciting, invigorating and liberating, dislodging hierarchies and imperialist linearities, and generating new and productive ways of thinking. In a postmodern world, the notion of an elite 'culture' shifts to an inclusive idea of cultural pluralism which embraces (and is enriched by) not only the different worldviews of all races and ethnic groups, but a slippage and blurring between the old polarities of 'high' and 'low', and a new sense of equity that is individually rather than communally located. Traditions, universals, neat theories of metanarrative, forms and structures, and the old comfortable binaries, are all gone - or at least, highly questionable. Everyman [person] is restored as hero but not as one grand universal figure standing for all, making the archetypal journey through life; rather, the hero splinters and diversifies into many heroes (heroes-of-the-instant) and a multiplicity of subjectivities. The popularity of soap operas, *telenovelas* and reality television testifies to this shift: the ordinary and everyday becomes the stuff of story, anyone can become - and is - a star.

Ironically, however, as the old hierarchies and imperialisms disappear, as barriers collapse and concepts of 'high' and 'low' merge, the critical language that describes this process (the language of postmodernism) reflects a new form of intellectual elitism, which is described by Currie as an ugly 'terminologisation' process (1998, p.33). He cites such examples as:

discursivity, referentiality, supplementarity, positionality, directionality, transversality, historicisation, hypercanonicity, structuration.

As Wertheim points out, 'it is the language we use - the concepts that we articulate and hence the questions that we ask - that determines the kind of space we are able to see' (1999, p.306). The problem is, of course, that the impulse to postmodernism has created an increasingly abstract world space, with few of the old reference points ('truth', 'meaning', 'universal' etc), and abstract words such as those quoted above have become part of the expression of abstraction. Thus, for example, 'reference' is too specific; in the extraction of abstraction it must become 'referentiality' - the potential for reference, the idea of reference. In this abstract, ambiguous world, the only real absolutes are physical ones; thus we are arguably living in the most physical conception of the world ever envisaged. As Lyotard noted, the production of postmodern space is unmarked by horizon, confusing the sense of location. Rather than enhancing conceptions of the infinite, this has had the effect of encouraging near-sighted dependence on the immediately physical. The physical worldspace produced by the West has configured space in a curiously limited way. Wertheim writes:

[W]hile we have been mapping and mastering physical space, we have lost sight of any kind of religious or psychological space ...

How did such a monumental shift occur? How did we go from seeing ourselves at the centre of an angel-filled space suffused with divine presence and purpose to the modern scientific picture of a pointless physical void? What was at stake here was not simply the position of the earth in the planetary system but the role of humanity in the cosmological whole. How did we go from seeing ourselves embedded in spaces of both body and soul, to seeing ourselves embedded in physical space alone? And, critically, how has this shift in our vision of space affected our understanding of who and what we are as human beings? (1999, pp.32, 38-39)

However, in these early years of a new century, I believe that there is evidence of movement towards a different configuration. All over the place, across the disciplines, in cultural studies, and in the work of such diverse thinkers as Edward O. Wilson, Geoff Mulgan, John Ralston Saul, Simon Schama, Stephen Hawking, Paul Davies, Margaret Wertheim, there are portals - diverse and variegated - opening into an expansive new critique which has been triggered by postmodernism: the discussion of space and spatial perspectives. This critique can be called *critical spatialism*. Critical spatialism is a world view that defines ontologies of being in terms of space - geographies of space, webs of space - that are physical, mental, emotional, spiritual; and that uses a concept of unmeasurable space - the infinite - as a critical marker and point of connection and community. This infinite - unmeasurable measure, distance beyond comprehension of distance, boundless beyond, untouchable, unreachable, unassignable sign - is in a world of individual manipulation and non-constants, the one constant beyond arbitration, an unattainable perspective that relates humans to something forever beyond themselves. Spatialism is *critical* not only in the sense of critique and criticism, but also in the senses of being crucial, essential, acute, decisive, sustaining and sustainable. Here is a re-working of Bakhtin's 'Not-I in me, something greater than me in me' (1986 p.146). The infinite, like the infinitive, cannot be inflected to indicate person (individual), number (power) or tense (time). It is a substantive point of commonality, a point of community, a perspective that indigenous peoples across the world have scripted into the skin of their everyday lives, but that the increasingly individual-syncretic West has resisted and ignored. The imageries of this critique are imageries of landscapes and mindscapes, spaces of being and belonging, cultures of immanence and transcendence. The Australian Aboriginal artist of the Arrawar region, Kame, expressed her life and being in a series of paintings of sweet potatoes: as tubers and deep tangled roots entwined underground; as shoots beginning to form and break through the dry, cracked earth; as a golden explosion of blossom. Kame was a Sweet Potato woman. Recently I heard an indigenous colleague, an Emu woman, refer to a friend who is a Black Swan and Willy Wagtail woman. These are their totems, their connections - self, landscape, community and Dreaming - to the infinite.

Consider the profound idea of space:

space in mathematics
 space in science
 space in drama and dance
 space in history
 space in philosophy
 space in visual arts
 the idea of Cartesian coordinates positioning a point in space
 music as the space between the notes
 tropic space
 space as metaphor and symbol
 Inuit and Asian-Pacific ideas of space
 Aboriginal space
 architectural and design space
 space as the place for new configurations
 space as the locus of subjectivity
 space and spatialism in literary theory
 space as an ethical position from which position and decision are negotiated
 space as the scene of cognition and thinking
 space as emptiness and space as something to be filled
 space as capacity and space as freedom
 cosmic space
 feminine space
 space as power

Postmodernism is not an end-state (nor will be whatever follows it, be it critical spatialism or whatever) but a cleansing, necessary transition from a Western world cobbled by centuries of hierarchical concepts of space: occupied space, ruled space. As Claudine Hermann writes:

[T]he disposition of space for man is above all an image of power, the maximum power being when one can dispose of the space of others ... (1981)

Critical spatialism reflects space that has been emancipated by the postmodern, twentieth century ideology of individual freedom (to do it *my way*, to have *got to be me*) but that now has been reconfigured by the addition of the infinite as a strong topographical marker, previously commonly missing - a benchmark in the original sense of being a surveyor's mark on an elevated point, which becomes a shared idea of reference. This marker cannot be seen, touched, felt; it is not physical but spiritual; it acknowledges the presence and needs of soul-space. It also acknowledges that it is the lack of soul space, and not a physical deficiency, that characterises the process of de-humanisation. This concept of the infinite relates in some ways to the concept of the *sublime*, which was first described by the Greek Longinus, writing in the first century AD, as transport and rapture (*ekstasis*), and the echo of a noble mind'

(Dorsch 1965, p.109). Longinus claimed that the greatest of works 'leave more food for reflection than the mere words convey', and that they make us feel 'as though we had ourselves produced what we had heard' (p.107). Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) concludes that while beauty is characterised by smoothness, delicacy and subtle variation, the sublime 'is inspired by ruggedness, irregularity, vastness, power and obscurity' (Harland 1999, p. 54); further, the sublime is linked to terror:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger ... or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime.

(Burke 1958, p.39)

Lyotard, engaging with Kant's philosophy of aesthetics and of the power of the subject unconsciously to create and synthesise what is seen, describes the sublime in postmodern terms as 'unpresentable'. That is, the sublime is the unknown power or element which always impedes complete understanding of the world, that pulls against theories of the universal, that mitigates against the idea of the master narrative. Further, it is the representation of this 'unpresentable' - or the effort towards it - that constitutes greatness in art.

In some ways, the concept of the infinite is similar to that of the unpresentable sublime, but there is one essential difference. The sublime is an aesthetic concept, related to ideas of beauty, power and awe; the infinite as I am proposing it here, although it is always greater than human understanding of it, is essentially an everyday theory of relationship. As indigenous people connect physically and spiritually to a communal world through their totem, Western micronarratives can reconnect to community through a shared sense of the spaces of the infinite. The individual is no longer the only reference point; there is a creative interplay - vertical and horizontal - between individual and the new sublime. Artists painting landscapes are taught to paint not the outline of the tree, for example, but rather to paint the light that is behind the tree; the tree is what the light shines through; the light gives it individual shape. Spatialism infers the light of the concept of the infinite illuminating the depiction of the undiminished individual; it also infers individual gaze that is infinite-focused. This idea progresses us conceptually and philosophically because it makes visible, as a palimpsest of all spaces of our lives, an architecture/genealogy/ or better still thread-like *filament or superstring* of beingness that is beyond our own space and time.

There have been many clues pointing to the development of an era identified by spatialism. In a lecture presented in 1967, Foucault stated that 'the present age may be the age of space' (1998, p. 175). Soja, commenting on this, writes:

The material and intellectual contents of modern critical social theory have begun to shift dramatically. In the 1980s the hoary traditions of a space-blinkered historicism are being challenged with unprecedented explicitness by convergent calls for a far-reaching spatialism of the critical imagination. A distinctively postmodern and

critical human geography is taking shape, brashly reasserting the interpretative significance of space in the historically privileged confines of contemporary modern thought. (1993, p.137)

The turbulent wake of postmodernism indicates its signature fluidity; indeed, it reflects a notion of continuing change. Caputo, discussing Derrida, describes deconstruction, part of the critical aspect of postmodernism, as follows:

If deconstruction were a theory, it would be a theory that nothing is safe, pure, clean, uncontaminated, monochromatic, unambiguous ... Deconstruction is a quasi-theory of undecidability, and it works very well for everything from architecture to literary criticism, from religion to politics. Deconstruction is an exploration of as many 'instants' of undecidability as it has time ... to study. Its 'solution' to the question of undecidability shows a trend; it always tends to say that the undecidability is permanent ... (1997, p.225)

Critical spatialism moves some way towards addressing the dilemma of undecidability and the problems identified by Lyotard and Wertheim. Undecidability, as ambiguity, is a strength, and a significant point of difference to modernism, which was nothing if not decided in its rejection of the traditional; expressions of what we could call the 'conscious unconscious' of modernism are well exemplified in the work of Joyce and Eliot. Undecidability is a prerequisite of cultural pluralism, and makes for a tolerant, inclusive, non-judgmental social environment. But undecidability has a downside as well - what happens when a decision has to be made? And what about Lyotard's comment about the necessity for a 'long, obstinate and highly responsible work'? This is reminiscent of Habermas's conviction that 'the project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled', but Habermas and Lyotard do not usually play bedfellows.

In many ways, critical spatialism is not just another new product - another 'new process' of thought. Rather, it offers a re-articulation - a computer-type 'Refresh' of the living page - of critical ideas that are part of existing philosophical and literary criticism, and that are part of the worldview of many indigenous societies. It is a conversation, perhaps part of the 'responsible' work that as a global community we must pursue. The difference is in the mix: ideas of physical and spiritual spaces and of the infinite spill into the postmodernist discourse of reflexivity, bricolage, quotation and repetition, fragmented temporal and spatial narratives. The postmodern Lear is an unwise leader, a tormented soul, a foolish parent, a corporate disaster; he is close-focussed on what he sees in front of him, and on words and actions of the here-and-now. However, if we review Lear through the optic of spatialism, the play becomes a study of disconnected spaces that are characterised by emptiness and barrenness, yet that are clearly conceptualised against a worldview of the infinite/sublime. Shakespeare's relevance remains because he, more than any other Elizabethan, goes beyond contemporary ideas of microcosm and macrocosm and represents human struggle in the spaces of physical landscapes and spiritual mindscapes, against a limitless infinite. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth waiting Duncan at the entrance of

their 'pleasant seat' are not bolded characters filled in against a hazy background of Scottish sky; rather the sky, castle, the 'delicate' air, where 'heaven's breath smells woingly', are depicted as the spaces of the infinite - with the infinite named here as heaven - and the now-space of the characters and actions are reflected (and constructed) as they appear through the light of that infinite.

Compare this to, say, a contemporary series/soapie such as *Friends*. Here there is no sense of a beyond - scarcely any sense of anywhere except a few tightly identified sets - the apartments, the coffee shop (Central Perk) and occasional work places, the city lights as a sweeping, fleeting panoramic shot. In fact, the real beyond is just out of view of the camera - the canned laughter and tele-audiences in front of which, in an appropriately postmodern fragmented way, the characters are playing out their lives. There is little sense of the spaces of the mind, of connection to the infinite; rather there is a representation of unlayered lives fully consumed and overtaken by the social and consumer exigent spaces allocated them in the everyday. What you see is what you get - there is little sense of the unrepresentability of the sublime here. What you see is pretty much all there is.

This is not so in the case of a film such as *The Shipping News*, where Newfoundland landscapes and Quoye mindscapes are inextricably multi-layered in physical and spiritual spaces. The film *Lantana* overtly uses images of tangled and meshed lantana roots as a metaphor for tangled and meshed lives. Two very different films, *A Beautiful Mind* and *Amelie* each restructure 'reality' into phenomenological mindspaces that make visible the generally unseen, a beating red heart in the case of *Amelie*, an heterocosm of imagined characters in the case of *A Beautiful Mind*. In one sense, *A Beautiful Mind* is an exegesis of what Jameson referred to as schizophrenic postmodernism. *Moulin Rouge*, the brilliant and phantasmic postmodern extravaganza, is a montage - patchwork - of seeable spaces, unbound by any constraints of history or possibility, abounding with multiple quotation, playing with Ricoeur's idea of time as a public space. Visually, it reveals all; indeed, as the camera flies across Paris it is as if the camera is the infinite and seeks to represent its own sublime, construct the whole world, past and present, as one immense *mise-en-scene*. In the melodrama of the story of fragile Sabine, however, there is some sense of the unseeable, some sense of an unseen infinite.

The idea of seeability is one that I have been working with for some time in relation to children's literature (see Johnston forthcoming, 2002, 2000, 1998). Discussing the nineteenth century aesthetician, Konrad Fiedler, Cassirer talks about the concept of 'seeability' as part of the activity of artistic production: language and art raise consciousness as the discursive thinking of language and 'the "intuitive" activity of artistic seeing and creating interact so as together to weave the cloak of "reality"' (Cassirer 1996, pp.83-84). Seeability provides a fruitful way of exploring how the apparently simple literary form of picture books produce, through words and pictures, images that generate intuitive artistic seeing of complex and sophisticated

human themes and emotions. At first glance, this may not appear to fit with the idea of the unrepresentable sublime; on the contrary, it is another expression of it. The Australian picture book *Fox*, by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks (2000), creates a rich textual 'understory' (Johnston 2001, p. 325) that imbricates ideas of friendship, fear, jealousy, love, temptation, loyalty, vengeance, treachery, trust, loneliness. The power of these ideas is that they are not local, but are 'seen' locally; they are expressions of abstract unseeables; they seek to represent the unrepresentable, without diminishing it; they implicitly acknowledge spaces that are immense and beyond representation, but that are points of human connectedness and community. Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* plays with ideas of fantasy taking control of reality, reconstructing social space, changing and bending it; it makes seeable the spaces and power of the imagination.

A spatialist hermeneutic is a shake-up, rather than a radical change. It re-establishes the significance of soul space and of spatial perspectives beyond those of the subject, helping to name and identify many powerful expressions of spatial disconnection in literature: Holden Caulfield (*The Catcher in the Rye*), an adolescent seeking to impose his own kind of sense on the empty spaces of a ruptured and ambivalent world; Virginia Woolf desperately seeking the creative space 'of one's own'; David Malouf, particularly in *An Imaginary Life*, but also in *The Great World*, exploring mindscapes and landscapes conceptualised against a fully developed sense of the infinite. George Eliot composed her stories against the moral markers of an infinite sublime. Garcia's magic realism juggles simultaneous replays of the infinite layerings of human thought. With great integrity, Tim Winton's novels play out their stories in physical landscapes virtually undistinguishable from spiritual mindscapes. His picture book, *The Deep*, is a metaphor of the interweaving of physical and emotional spaces.

I noted earlier the idea of the infinite as filament or superstring. The scientific theory of superstrings provides a cosmic description of the physical world which, in the explanation of infinite physical space, is both inspiring and surprising. Wertheim's deracinated world is a literary conception of the physical; a *scientific* conception of the physical reveals a different picture. It confirms physical unity rather than postmodern diversity, physical connection rather than postmodern disconnection:

[A]ccording to string theory, the observed properties of each elementary particle arise because its internal string undergoes a particular vibrational pattern. This perspective differs sharply from that espoused by physicists before the discovery of string theory; in the earlier perspective the differences among the fundamental particles were explained by saying that, in effect, each particle species was 'cut from a different fabric'. Although each particle was viewed as elementary, the kind of 'stuff' each embodied was thought to be different. Electron 'stuff', for example, had negative electronic charge, while neutrino 'stuff' had no electric charge. String theory alters this picture radically by declaring that the 'stuff' of all matter and all forces is the *same*. Each elementary particle is composed of a single string - that is, each particle *is* a single string - and all strings are absolutely identical! Differences between the strings

arise because their respective strings undergo different resonant vibrational patterns. What appears to be different elementary particles are actually different 'notes' on a fundamental string. The universe - being composed of an enormous number of vibrating strings - is akin to a cosmic symphony.

This overview shows how string theory offers a truly wonderful unifying framework. Every particle of matter and every transmitter of force consists of a string whose pattern of vibration is its 'fingerprint'. Because every physical event, process, or occurrence in the universe is, at its most elementary level, describable in terms of forces acting between these elementary material constituents, string theory provides the promise of a single, all-inclusive, unified description of the physical universe: a theory of everything.

(Greene 1999, pp.145-146)

It is fascinating to compare a scientific explanation of the physical universe such as the above with the Australian Aboriginal idea of the Dreaming - their theory of everything. The Ancestors made a noise, the noise became singing, and the singing created land, landforms, and themselves as beings. 'You dream, You sing, It is.' This becomes even more significant when Greene goes on to discuss 'the music of string theory'. Here is a new thought expressing a very ancient one in a different paradigm. Here also is a picture of a physical world that acknowledges even as it seeks to express the unrepresentable sublime. As Stephen Hawking has said, many times and in many different places, the more we discover about the universe, the more we find that it is governed by rational laws: 'If one liked, one could say that this work was the work of God. Einstein thought so.'

It is not my intention to suggest in cultural terms a unified universe. Far from it. However, the analogy of string theory does open interesting windows of thought on the idea of spatialism and the representation of the infinite. It does suggest possibilities of connection and community. It does offer confidence in the possibility of human progress. Ultimate space - the infinite, that which can never be seen and which is beyond time, can never be certified or made certain - is immense and awe-inspiring - indeed sublime, but all of us, as particles of energy and matter, are at the deepest level connected to it, resonating with it as part of Greene's 'cosmic symphony'.

It is this sense of physical and spiritual connection and community - not of sameness or master narrative (we each have our own 'fingerprint', are each 'tiny pieces of vibrating string' (Greene 1999, p.146), are each *petits récits* - that postmodernism has disrupted and that critical spatialism seeks to articulate, and, perhaps, to sing into being.

Notes

ⁱ I have deliberately referred to Lyotard's later work, deceptively titled *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (1988). In the words of the French editors, it is only as children that we can 'approach an understanding of this Idea' (p.viii). The Sydney translators note that while this title is 'surely ironic' it is indeed necessary 'to approach the philosophical questions raised by modernity with patience and the mind of a child' (p.x).

ⁱⁱ I wish to express my appreciation to Dr Pam Johnston for telling me of the work of the Aboriginal artist, Kame.

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Associate Professor Rosemary Johnston is Director of the Centre for Research and Education in the Arts, University of Technology Sydney. She was Secretary of the International Research Society for Children's Literature 1997-2001, and is currently a member of five professional Boards, including the *Federation Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes* (related to UNESCO), the Montgomery Institute (Canada) and the Australasian Association for Children's Literature and Research. She has been published nationally and internationally and in 2000 was H. W. Donner Guest Research Professor at Åbo Akademi University, Finland, working with a project funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education. Her latest publication (with other authors) is *Literacy: Reading, Writing and Children's Literature*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

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