

### **Negotiating Space: a Postgraduate Workshop**

This collection of papers is the outcome of a workshop that took place in June 2008 which was organised around the theme ‘Negotiating Space.’ The workshop was an opportunity for postgraduate students from the University of Nottingham to present their research and discuss it in an open forum. The decision to hold the workshop and publish papers online came out of a similar event that took place in July 2007 that was put together to allow the discussion of papers relating to the theme of ‘Space, Place and Landscape.’<sup>1</sup> The two workshops were arranged to coincide with two Leverhulme Trust sponsored visits as part of a Visiting Professorship to the University of Nottingham by W.J.T. Mitchell, a Professor of English and Art History from the University of Chicago. The ‘Negotiating Space’ workshop was one of a series of events organised during the 2008 Visiting Professorship all of which were designed to bring together strands of research from both within and outside of the University of Nottingham and stimulate dialogue. These included a public lecture by Professor Mitchell concerned with globalisation and visual culture, a multidisciplinary symposium, co-sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Landscape and Environment programme, dedicated to the discussion of landscape theory, plus day events concerning landscapes of conflict, 21<sup>st</sup> century anxiety, landscapes of performance, and critical engagement with interdisciplinarity.

Following from the broad-ranging interest shown in the 2007 workshop ‘Space, Place and Landscape’ it was decided that the 2008 workshop would offer similar opportunities for postgraduates to present work relating to their research on space and spatial theory. However, it was decided by the organisers that a different focus would be provided by the theme ‘negotiating space’. The selection of this theme looked to foreground research that considers how space can reflect a series of academic, ideological, historical, cultural or historical outlooks. As ‘space’ is engaged with in many different ways across the arts, humanities, and social sciences this workshop looked to bring together postgraduate research from the University of Nottingham in order to encourage discussion and exchange of ideas across academic disciplines. An

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<sup>1</sup> Papers relating to the ‘Space, Place and Landscape’ workshop can be found at:  
<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/landscape/publications.php>

interdisciplinary focus for the workshop was seen as particularly important because, although interdisciplinarity is widely promoted within academic circles, for postgraduates it is sometimes difficult to break out of disciplinary boundaries. The term ‘negotiate’ was chosen as the key descriptive word for the workshop to highlight the permeable boundaries that are navigated in research that focuses on themes of space and spatiality. Additionally, it was seen as an appropriate expression to highlight the interdisciplinary nature of the workshop, which was negotiating intellectual thought coming from a range of academic backgrounds.

In order to attract students with a spatial focus to their research a call for papers was put together, the rationale being to attract postgraduate students at varying stages in their study, including MA, MRes, MPhil and PhD students. Following the circulation of the call for papers work was selected from a series of academic disciplines covering cultural geography, environmental history, Canadian studies, English studies, and cultural and critical studies, representing both Masters level and Doctoral research. An important contribution to the workshop was also made by both staff and postgraduates from a series of schools and departments across the arts, humanities, and social sciences who participated in the proceedings of the day. Five of the papers presented are included in this online collection and are the focus for discussion in this introductory paper.

It is worth considering the rationale of drawing together a workshop for the specific purpose of discussing research that is concerned with ‘space’. The sheer volume of work that has been taken by this ‘spatial turn’ across subject areas in the arts, humanities and social sciences in recent years is undeniable.<sup>2</sup> As a critical term ‘space’ has long since left behind notions of fixity and cartographical location, instead we are taken into the realms of poetic space, spaces of memory, political and geopolitical space, imaginative space, contested space, ideological space and spaces of performance. The contexts within which attention to space offers further critical engagements is ever

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<sup>2</sup> Recent publications that cross disciplinary boundaries include: D Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005); Doreen Massey, *World City* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007); Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift eds., *Thinking Space* (London: Routledge, 2000); Neil Leach, *The Hieroglyphics of Space* (London: Routledge, 2001) Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, and Gill Valentine, eds., *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (London: Sage, 2004); Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies: Natures, Cultures, Spaces* (London: Sage, 2004).

widening: text, music, art, film, performance.<sup>3</sup> Such differing contexts are visible in this collection of papers not just with regards to the source material that has been used to draw together these papers (which include archival sources, novels, comics, and dramatic performance) but also with regard to the range of historical time periods discussed.

These papers cover the vast span of mediaeval York, India during the imperial Victorian age, post-war Britain, London in the Thatcherite era and modern day Vancouver. Yet this does not necessarily equate with a disparate set of papers.

In his discussion of the novel *Downriver* by psychogeographical writer Iain Sinclair, Daniel Weston argues that Sinclair's writing shows a strong political engagement and reaction to the spaces within East London, notably those areas linked to the symbolic Thames such as the Docklands which under the government of Margaret Thatcher were undergoing a rapid reconfiguration in terms of both political landscape and also physical geography. Daniel argues that in Sinclair's attention to alternative conceptions of space and alternative histories he is arguing for a more complex picture of London, a London in resistance to the homogenising neo-liberal project of the Thatcher-era. Instead of viewing Sinclair's work as a palimpsest which acts to overwrite and occlude that which has gone before his work is positioned as anti-palimpsest with the aim of highlighting that which was being erased by capitalist policies.

Just as Daniel Weston discusses Iain Sinclair's alternative conceptions of London, so too does Oliver Dunnett point out the importance of considering overlooked histories in his paper on Britain in the 1950s. By paying specific attention to how Britain was 'negotiating outer space' at this time he highlights, firstly, how research on the concepts surrounding outer space have been relatively neglected within the context of Britain in the mid-twentieth century and, secondly, the role of populist publications in uncovering these forgotten histories. By studying the journals of the British Interplanetary Society and the comic *The Eagle* Oliver argues that 'there was an active British culture of space

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<sup>3</sup> See for example: Alison Oddey, and Christine White, eds., *The Potentials of Spaces: The Theory and Practice of Scenography and Performance* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2006); Julianne Piddock, *Contemporary Costume Film: Space, Place and the Past* (London: B.F.I, 2004); David Pinder, *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in Twentieth-Century Urbanism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Sheila Whiteley, Andy Bennett, and Stan Hawkins, eds., *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

exploration...decades before humans made the leap to outer space.<sup>4</sup> For an area that cannot be accessed or experienced as first hand (save for a tiny minority of space explorers) the way to engage critically with it is to study cultural sources.

In her paper Rachel Walls considers the art work of Stan Douglas in relation to his work concerning Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Like Daniel Weston, Rachel is considering city spaces and power relations, yet her argument pivots around Douglas's practice of photoconceptualism and how he negotiates between the artistic and symbolic to provide a commentary on a marginalised area and the influence of globalisation. In this way we are urged to reflect on the influence of artists on the production of urban space. Rachel critically frames Douglas's piece *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2001) as a performance piece that seeks to negotiate between past and present, drawing on filmic and theatrical tropes to provide an artwork that questions how marginal areas in cities are represented and considered as both commercial and living landscapes.

Clare Wright also considers notions of artistry in her paper that discusses the fifteenth-century mystery play *Christ before Herod* which was written to be performed in the city of York. Whilst acknowledging the importance of York's streetscape as key in the understanding of the reception of *Christ before Herod* Clare points how sound is inextricably linked to the understanding of performance space. In the hustle and bustle of a busy medieval street, in a carnivalesque atmosphere actors contributed to an 'audio chaos,' a distinct soundscape that juxtaposed noise and silence to convey the symbolic meaning of this religious drama. In this way space is a total sensory experience comprised of objects, smells, sights and sounds.<sup>5</sup>

Just as Clare Wright's paper is concerned with reconstructing past medieval performance spaces and soundscapes so Lucy Veale's is concerned with the idea of constructing space. She takes the example of Ootacamund Hill Station in India during the Victorian period to discuss how the British ruling class appropriated Ootacamund for horticultural and agricultural practices that sought to re-imagine the area as an extension

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Dunnett, 'Negotiating Outer Space – Britain in the 1950s', *Online Publication* (2008) p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce R. Smith, 'Listening to the wild blue yonder: The challenges of acoustic ecology' pp. 21-41 in Veit Erlman, ed. *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity* (Berg, 2004); David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (University of Michigan Press, 2003); David Matless, 'Sonic Geography in a Nature Region', *Social and Cultural Geography* 6 (2005) 745-766; Don Idhe, *Listening and Voice – A Phenomenology of Sound* (Suny Press, 1976); R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of our world* (Destiny Books. 1977)

of the British landscape. Home was being re-imagined and re-appropriated abroad and via practices of acclimatization – of people, plants and animals – the British were creating home space abroad. An important idea in such work is the concept of ‘imaginary geographies’ which Lucy discusses in her paper. As a concept that originated in the seminal work of Edward Said the term imaginary geographies provides a useful way of linking the papers in this collection.<sup>6</sup> Present throughout are examples of how space was being negotiated imaginatively by different parties, at different time periods and in different locations. For Daniel, Rachel and Clare the city is the key space for literary, artistic and dramatic explorations of space. For Oliver fundamental questions about the ability to explore the unknown ‘outer space’ relies on both technological expertise, plus imaginative leaps into the prospects for a future world where space travel has become an everyday occurrence. While Lucy Veale points out that despite the British population’s attempts to convince themselves that the Indian Hill Station was akin to a home from home, such imaginaries could never cover the fact that these ideas were deeply flawed. In all these papers we see how different types of spaces, be they urban, outer, horticultural, literary or artistic are being negotiated critically. Ideas relating to borders, territories, histories and performances are being re-examined and at the same time discussed with reference to a range of imaginary geographies.

At the close of the postgraduate workshop on ‘negotiating space’, Professor W.J.T. Mitchell concluded by drawing together some over-riding and recurring concerns of the day. Due to the disparate nature of the research communities, departments, eras, subject matter and media considered within this workshop, Mitchell began by summarising the different spaces passed through across the day drawing links between them through central and fundamental questions relating to all.

Moving through the papers chronologically he reminded us how Lucy Veale’s paper uncovered the truth that in some cases regional place is not fixed but can be transplanted both imaginatively and figuratively due to political processes and subjective

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Derek Gregory, 'Imaginative Geographies', *Progress in Human Geography*, 19 (1995), pp. 447-485

aspirations. However, we are still held encumbered by spaces which remain resistant to transformation, which hold onto place specifics that create this resistance, never allowing ‘place’ to become instated as the more fluid term ‘space’. Alongside the deliberations over place, we were reminded how Lucy considered the individual and how people and bodies inform the specifics of the space. The question was also raised as to whether some things resist this human assignation, such as acclimatization.

Mitchell gave the working example of the British Empire, how people took their own sense of nationhood with them: Britishness travels with British people; there is no way to extinguish that element of each individual and the dynamic link they have to the nation they belong to. This element of community building is linked to specialized spaces and the active community found in such places. With places such as ‘District Six’ the title can often bring with it certain connotations; as Mitchell described, it is ‘more and less than its title.<sup>7</sup> It is a space, like other powerful spaces, that is constantly accumulating and active. People bring relics of their own life and experience (clippings and photos) to deposit in the space, creating a patchwork of mismatched events and occurrences that adapt and create the space. On the other side of this Mitchell drew our attention to the importance of absence in spaces. Sometimes the best memorial is no memorial (here we are reminded of the crater-like gash of the World Trade Center) where a footprint is left in the new design; memory is memorialised through absence.

The paradoxical expansiveness of specific sites seen in the previous paper is related to Oliver Dunnett’s paper. Mitchell highlighted the interesting media Oliver uses to relate this other world to the iconic. Mitchell also related the notion of empty space as opposite to the impression of wilderness in America, a similarly esoteric mass that is satiated with other implications. Outer space does, however, retain one aspect of American character: promise. The dream-world of the outer-world promise is contextualised in relation to America through Oliver’s utilization of the comic books and the innocence and possibility of childhood imagination in story-building.

The impact of unusual media in relation to spatial negotiation arises again in Rachel Walls’ paper and the diversification of different types of panorama and the visual/pictorial representation of space. Within this artwork the limits of the two-

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<sup>7</sup> District Six is a museum in Cape Town, South Africa named after the municipal area it is located within.

dimensional art-piece are overcome by the representation of the whole street and the feeling of movement that is created. It is a tracking shot which involves the movement of the audience as well as the camera; again, a method for relating the general to the specific and contextualising unknown spaces.

Mitchell connected Rachel's paper to Clare Wright's focus on mediaeval drama through the issue of performance. He picked up on the nature of performance and how depth of performance space comes through an acoustical focus and the coercive nature of sound. When talking about space it must be in multi-dimensions. In the same way as he discussed Rachel's paper, he established a correlation between performance and photography through the distinction between visual and pictorial space: one being three-dimensional, one as flat that can be framed.

Mitchell then referred to the palimpsestic nature of Daniel Weston's argument over Sinclair's *Downriver* and particularly how the palimpsestic novel over-determines narrative. We have a sentimentalised view of what is over-written as forgotten; the past is memorialised as what should be remembered. Again the focus is on overcoming the limits of prescribed conventions, negotiating new ways of analysing tropes through spatial boundaries.

Mitchell noticed a question that links all papers: they expose something that is not quite accessible. What happens when space becomes the object? Space of theatre is always uncanny - it is always transformed, always double, always shifting. We are here watching, we are taken to the streets of York and we are taken to the time of Herod. The vocabulary of space links to a whole other vocabulary: property, community, the role of public and private and the transformations between them, scientific concerns, environment, biology, or ecology of place.

Space studies require a synthetic understanding – text, picture, performance - that is not available when you look at the text on its own. All papers presented here respond to the limits and liberation that comes with an understanding of contextualisation.

From the conference Mitchell uncovered that different meanings come from the word 'negotiation':

- 1) Negotiation can mean the conflict between two parties, fighting against each other and coming to some kind of settlement, or being left to

continue in conflict and war. We question what is the relative power of each party? Are they negotiating as equals? How does the occupier negotiate with the occupied?

- 2) Negotiation can also mean finding one's way. We unconsciously use it trying to understand a foreign or unknown space: the individual in relation to the un-negotiated world. Negotiation occurs between the individual and the space. The space is antagonist. It is about distancing; losing and finding yourself: the itinerary of space.

These two ideas predominate when considering the negotiation of space, and appear in all papers represented here. Mitchell's concluding remarks helped to formalise and reformulate questions that dominated throughout the workshop from papers that appeared to be diversified through many negotiations of texts, media, visuality, abstraction, politicisation, but were fundamentally all related to the concept of the individual, the community and the many negotiations appropriated through both daily life, and within imaginary contexts.

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