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Different Atmospheres: Of Sloterdijk, China, and Site.

Nigel Thrift

‘I have recognised through my travels that those with views quite contrary to ours are not on that account barbarians or savages, but that many of them make use of reason as much or more than we do. I thought, too, how the same man, with the same mind, if brought up from infancy among the French or Germans, develops otherwise than he would if he had always lived among the Chinese or cannibals and how, even in our fashions or dress, the very thing that pleased us ten years ago, and will perhaps please us again ten years hence, now strikes us as extravagant and ridiculous. Thus it is custom and example that persuade us, rather than any certain knowledge’ (Descartes, 1994, p119).

‘Spatial cognition is a fundamental design requirement for every mobile species with a fixed territory or home base. And there is little doubt that it plays a central role in human thinking and reasoning. Indeed, the evidence for that centrality is all around us, in our language where spatial metaphors are used for many other domains, in the obvious cognitive utility of diagrams and tables, and in the special role of place in memory. The idea that space is a fundamental intuition built into our nature goes back at least to Kant, and the idea that our apperception of space is governed by cognitive universals informs much cognitive science.

But in some ways human spatial cognition is puzzling. First, it is unspectacular – we are not as a species, compared to bees or pigeons, bats or whales, particularly good at finding our way around. Second, human spatial cognition is obviously variable – hunters, sailors and taxi-drivers are in a different league from the ordinary city dweller. This suggest that many aspects of effective spatial thinking depend on cultural factors, which in turn suggests limits to cognitive universals in this area (Levinson and Wilkins, 2006, p1).

‘our flesh is earth and fire our desires, and the fire burns through the flesh, the water washes it all away. And what is left is air. And air rises towards heaven’ ... ‘this old stuff - it produces the right words. You just say what the old people would have said, and something is explained. Somehow it’s easier to hear’ (Ryman, 2004, p29, p366).

‘We shall have to make a beginning from our written characters, for we suppose these to be our earliest form of picture, and even their present form has not entirely lost the pictorial quality’ (Chiang Yee, 1960, p16).

Introduction

In this paper, I want to make an argument about the changing nature of space, place, and location, initially using Peter Sloterdijk's philosophical history of surrounding as a foil before subsequently turning to an alternative source of inspiration, namely classical Chinese civilization. Thus, I will argue with Sloterdijk that as surrounds are 'explicitated'¹ in new ways so the questions that can be asked of space vary and against Sloterdijk in that turning to other civilizations suggests that surrounds may be explicitated in ways that he seems unwilling to countenance, and that when such a move is taken the questions that can be asked of space change in corresponding – and perhaps more interesting – ways.

What I want to do is to conjure up a world in which new logographic languages are coming into being, based on a suite of technical, symbolic and psychic changes. These languages describe and therefore do space and time differently by producing multiple means of writing/situating events. It will be my contention that these languages are producing new forms of sensing the world which are being gradually inscribed on to our neural pathways. Logographic languages have been a staple of human experience but their importance has often been overlooked, not least because, in the West at least², writing practice has taken on a particular form which presupposes a very limited set of sign carriers (such as the book) and assumes that these forms of writing practice occupy an evolutionary pinnacle according to which 'true writing is alphabetic writing' (Mignolo, 2003, p77)³. The result is that pictographic writing systems have been allowed limited purchase or simply dismissed as so limited in their range and usage that they are not even worthy of the description of 'writing' because they move beyond the graphical recording of language to take in other aspects of the world (Boone and Mignolo, 1994).

To work my logographic thesis through, I will call on two main sources which in turn form the two main parts of the paper. One is the work of Peter Sloterdijk. I will use Sloterdijk's philosophy of space/spatial

¹ Though this neologism has been described as clumsy by some, I think it better reflects Sloterdijk's intent which is to describe a process of rendering things public. Indeed, Sloterdijk (2007) uses it.

² Such languages still exist in degraded form in the West, of course. Think of the pictographic language of traffic signs, for example, or standard map symbols, or various kinds of diagrammatic convention. And this is before we get to all manner of specialist notations, from musical notations, through choreographic symbols, to various kinds of formulae, to modern genetic codings, all of them based on spatial relationships in some measure (Boone and Mignolo, 1994). Yet outside this formal realm, we now live in a blizzard of semi-formed hieroglyphs, bearing down on us from screens with messages we can only partly read.

³ This is not to argue that alphabetic writing does not have its own complexities: it clearly does (See Ogborn, 2007).

philosophy as a foil: as a brilliant means of detecting what is at stake and as a flawed attempt at diagnosis. One of Sloterdijk's inspirations has been Eastern philosophy, an inspiration which he has shared with philosophers as different as Leibniz, Hegel and Schopenhauer⁴, and which forms a bridge to the next major part of the paper, an interlude based on the principle that 'the thought of the other remains inaccessible unless one is willing to rework one's own' (Jullien, 2007, p9). In the penultimate part of the paper, I then move to the example of Chinese classical thought to show, through actual examples, how logographic languages function and are able to produce very different kinds of world. In making this move, I want to understand the current shaping of the world in a rather different way from Sloterdijk. There is a brief conclusion.

But to start out on this journey, I want to begin by calling on a source which illustrates what is at stake: the work of Humphry Repton, the leading English landscape gardener of the Regency period, who took over that mantle from his mentor, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. Repton was the founder of what might be called the picturesque style. But he was more than that. As Daniels (1999) shows, Repton was a not just a shaper of site⁵, though he was certainly that. Rather, he can be seen as one of the inventors of a knowledge of disposition which we are only just beginning to realise makes more sense of the senses we have. That knowledge was able to integrate broad lines and detail in order to produce aesthetic/affective effects which were more than their parts. Though other disciplines could lay claim to prominence in this knowledge of disposition – architecture, theatre studies and dance, site-specific and installation art and land art amongst them – I want to argue that landscape gardening carries more weight in that it is concerned with sites that are consciously meant to shift and change and this evolutionary aspect of 'garden time' (Sallis, 2006) will turn out to be crucial to my argument. Equally, only a few landscape gardens contain truly iconographic programmes and 'even those are frequently meant to be evocative or polysemic rather than programmatic' (Elkins, 2008, p70) Their effects are ambiguous and largely semiconscious, based on a different kind of grip which oft times resists the illusion of an observing subject: 'the object isn't bound by our attention: it binds us' (Elkins, 2008, p69). To put it another way: 'If I step into a bath I am going to warm up: and perhaps gardens have that kind of control over our responses. On the other hand, it might be better to say that the reverie of gardens is only an inducement

⁴ Some have even claimed a relationship between Eastern philosophy and Heidegger, especially the later Heidegger. As we shall see, May (1989) argues that Heidegger borrowed some of the ideas for his philosophy directly from German translations of Chinese Daoist and Zen Buddhist classics.

⁵ Though we call the result landscape, I want to avoid that term where I can. It comes with too much freight.

to a kind of thought that is often dormant in our professional prose' (Elkins, 2008, p71). In order to ply his trade of unlocking potentiality, Repton invented several picturing practices to help him to design sites, sell his ideas for the sites to clients, and generally unleash a spidery quality of 'thereness'. There were the famous Red Books in which he set out before and after vistas (Rogger, 2007). There were site visits. And there was a proto-language of the picturesque – we might call it a set of logographics – including 'abrupt rocks', water in rapid motion' and 'steepness of ground' - all devoted to making the site more interesting by creating chained links of spatial propositions which were outside the full awareness of the spectator. This new science of dynamic site, of spatial association and mingling, of pictures of (e)motion, of qualculated reverie, had little in the way of canonical conceptual foundations, in the manner of painting or sculpture or architecture⁶, but that has not prevented it, since Repton's time, from becoming a large and thriving industry, using standard forms of logographics and computer design to ply its trade. Courses abound. Specialist products multiply. Enthusiasm for the charms of landscape gardens and gardens generally often seems to be unbounded. But the same core principle applies as in Repton's time: the production of sites through a logographic language⁷ which is composed of fundamental visual units (graphemes) which represent a word or a morpheme (a meaningful unit of language), and stands in contrast to phonograms, which represent phonemes (speech sounds) or combinations of phonemes. Logograms are composed of visual elements arranged in a variety of ways, instead of using the segmental phoneme principle of construction that is used in alphabetic languages. The fundamental point is that logographic languages make it possible to write space as a flow of life in ways which phonemic languages find difficult to express because they do not cleave to the principle of representing normal spoken words but instead develop notations which can take in other registers, and especially (but not only) those that arise from the human ability to 'grasp certain relationships visually at a glance but not to describe them with words with anything like equal precision' (Drake, 1986, p136).

I want to argue that the experience/knowledge of site is the sixth sense, if you like, an insight that is there in the work of Heidegger and other phenomenologists but that is too often overrun by a desire for authenticity which is poisonous to understanding. Given that writers of a phenomenological bent took much of their impetus from a sense of site I

⁶ So that a philosophy of gardening sounds faintly ridiculous - which is not to say that it has not been tried (see Cooper, 2006).

⁷ Sometimes known as "ideograms" or "hieroglyphics", which can also be called "hieroglyphs". Strictly speaking, however, ideograms represent ideas directly rather than words and morphemes, and no logogrammatical systems are, in fact, truly ideographic.

think it can be argued that they often used the wrong – phonographic – tools to engage with and describe what they were trying to get at⁸. For example, there is the case of Heidegger's beloved hut at Todtnauberg (Sharr, 2006), as well as his other home bases at Freiburg and Meßkirch. It is clear that Heidegger was trying to describe the efficacy of sites like these in both general and specific terms⁹ but very often the closest he is able to get to the sudden affective grip of a site is through the medium of poetry and he often bemoans the failures of given modes of thought, language and symbolization to capture the interest and promise of site (Clark, 2007).

I also want to argue that something has changed about site and how it is constructed. As Stiegler (2007) has pointed out, the environment is becoming what Simondon called an associated milieu, or a techno-geographical milieu. That is the world is full of machines that can convert the environment into a technical function and back again, over and over again. The question becomes 'the participation of human geography in the process of associated technical milieux' (Stiegler, 2007, p335), arising out of a combination of symbolic evolution, technical evolution, and psychic evolution. It is these three inter-related evolutions and how they permit new forms of knowledge of disposition to exist which allow experience to be recalibrated that I want to explore in this paper, but through the lens of another culture. The first evolution is in the nature of signs. Contemporary environments are crowded with signs, all clamouring for our attention. The issue therefore becomes how to produce signs that will grab that attention, usually briefly and nearly always semiconsciously, as affective torsions, through the design of environments that are themselves designed to function as signs. Signs are no longer written down and along but written in and through as recurrent chants or refrains¹⁰. They become landscapes in their own right (Ingold, 2007). The second evolution is in the nature of technical engines. By dint of developments in information technology, these are gradually becoming pervasive, spreading into and enlivening every nook and cranny of life with information about information which itself becomes an active player. The third evolution is in the nature of the psyche. This is no longer modelled on the individual psyche but on mimetic waves of sentiment which are able to move more and more rapidly through populations because of the previous developments I have outlined (Thrift, 2007). Association becomes more and more like the British weather,

⁸ There have been attempts by some authors to produce a pictographic language which can describe site, most notably Hägerstrand's time-geography.

⁹ One might even argue that he invents new cardinals in order to aid his cause (see Malpas, 2008).

¹⁰ The reference to Deleuze's work on the refrain is clear here, but I would want to historicize it.

changeable and open to all kinds of influence, a round of moods coded by the commodified genres of public intimacy that have sprouted since the eighteenth century and have now become general (Thrift, 2008c, Berlant, 2008, Roach, 2007).

The net result of these three evolutions is, as I have argued at length elsewhere, (see Thrift, 2008a, b, c, d) the rise of an art of writing suggestible environments, environments which are able to catch and amplify mood in the manner of gardens, allowing us to bathe in an affective ether of signs and thus produce an intensified everyday. The kinds of knowledge of heating up and cooling down affect generated by this ‘authentic capitalism’ (Gilmore and Pine, 2007, Thrift, 2005, 2008) depend upon making environments sufficiently explicit that they are able to produce reasonably predictable affective awakenings and immediacies which feel real - or real enough, anyway. Logographic notations are clearly a key part of the production of new norms of picturing practice (Clunas, 1997) since they produce different apprehensions of space which are able to fit more easily into the emplacement of each affective ‘now’; understanding, as Weber (2008, p175) puts it, following Benjamin, that this is space as both room or container and the stage for a play where something comes to pass, a ‘passage-way, perhaps, but one that is not going anywhere’.

But to be able to have and deal in such an art of the continuous means making space explicit in new ways and that, in turn, suggests turning to the work of the author who has done most of late to consider the acceleration of ‘explicitation’ of these atmospheres, namely Peter Sloterdijk.

Sloterdijk and Sphären

I want to begin this paper by briefly examining the work of Peter Sloterdijk on the history of surrounding or sheltering¹¹. I want to argue that, in many ways, Sloterdijk is a prescient thinker in that in his emphasis on inserting space into philosophy – hardly as rare a move as he

¹¹ In this paper, I am also implicitly making an argument that what we regard as social research is changing its form. Though I am sure that social science feels secure - at the peak of its powers in some respects - I think that there is every reason to think that it will fall on hard times, as its functions are taken up by other actors. These actors include not just the legions of knowing capitalism (Burrows and Savage, 2007) but also philosophers who, through the sheer range of what they do, seem to displace the social scientist’s role. I will want to suggest that work like Sloterdijk’s is symptomatic of that crisis and shows that social science must change if it is not to become simply a set of footnotes to the world. Equally, however, it seems necessary to me that social and cultural theory must change too. It cannot stay outside the fold of the norms of evidence that it implicitly appeals to.

makes out, but still rare enough - he poses a series of questions and answers that too many have disavowed or reduced to insignificance. Most particularly, he is willing to make way for an intellectual history which is not just a history of ideas but lets the forces of practice surge on to the stage as actors who are suddenly given voices and called into representation. In other words, he provides a history of different modes of subsistence, forms of 'ontological strangeness' (Rodowick, 2007) which concentrate on what it is to reproduce the world as a matter of 'explicitation'. Phenomenology becomes a moving anthropotechnic process of becoming rather than an intensified form of observation of what is there, a phenomenology in which consequences are more important than foundations. It follows that such a phenomenology is open to historical and geographical inquiry, able to be stratified by time and space. In contradistinction to much social science which has too often been obsessed by epistemology in the mistaken belief that this is what distinguishes scientific from non-scientific practices¹², his work is not. His emphasis has been and is consistently ontological. Then he is willing to countenance all manner of actors, up to and including 'nature-actors' like oil (Sloterdijk, 2007): 'being-with' is not just restricted to human beings. In other words, like Latour, Sloterdijk wants to populate the world with a much greater range of actors than is normally declared fit and proper in order to be able to identify the potentiality of new forms of life (Michaud, 2002). Then, he understands the fact that the world is made up of dark matter, all the unknown (that is unformatted and therefore supposedly inactive) entities that bind what is present but which we cannot detect¹³. Thus an impoverished view of the world can be a ground only because it is fed by all kinds of forces that announce their presence indirectly because they have never been made explicit. Finally, and most importantly, Sloterdijk works in many media. He is not just a philosopher. He is also a novelist, a writer of tour guides, even the host of a television programme. No surprise, then, that he tries to write in a way which escapes the grim piety and oracular heaviness of so much philosophy. In its fictive character, his work strives to be more than words, even as words are his main tool. And he is willing to use more than words. Take his most famous work, *Sphären* (Sloterdijk, 1998, 1999, 2004), a philosophical history of the spaces of space. Its three volumes are scattered with all manner of illustrations in a very un-philosophy-like manner. It always feels to me as though Sloterdijk, just like Heidegger, is striving to articulate a world in which site counts but he is willing to use a much greater range of means to achieve this goal than most philosophers.

¹² Whereas after several decades of work on the social studies of science, we can now be clear that what distinguishes science is the intermediaries that its agents are able to bring to bear.

¹³ Here Sloterdijk comes close to the Latourian reading of plasma (Latour, 2005).

As a result, he strays into all kinds of territories usually touched on only lightly by philosophers, including that domain known as social science.

In effect, Sloterdijk provides a history of thinking space that works out from the earliest times to the present. Space is understood 'gynaecologically' as a set of envelopes or surrounds or shelters, self-activated spaces that give their inhabitants the resources to produce worlds. His account of the explicitation of these atmospheres is relatively well-known and I will only give the barest of details of this phenomenology, therefore. For Sloterdijk all being is being-with; there can be no I without us to put it in a non-Heideggerian way. This extension of Heidegger which, incidentally, is common wisdom in much of modern psychology and neuroscience¹⁴, is made strange because Sloterdijk adds in a spatial dimension of being-with-in-a-world that is a sphere (whether the sphere is a womb, a home, a polis, a nation, an empire, or some other sheltering envelope), a move which allows him to picture pictures of what life might be when generated from within existence: 'Human beings are at bottom and exclusively creatures of their interiors and the results of their work on the form of immanence that is inseparable from them. They thrive only in the hothouse of their autogenic atmosphere' (Sloterdijk, 1998, p46). Without our worlds, in other words, we are nothing.

Moving out from this root account of environments as 'climatizations' formatted by their inhabitants, Sloterdijk offers a philosophical history of these hothouses, different forms of being there which exist because human beings 'have given them form, content, extension and relative duration when they inhabit them' (Sloterdijk, 1998, p47). He argues that Western history has taken place as three roundelays: a Greek-inspired notion of an ordered cosmic sphere that encompasses all of human experience, a period of globalization in which the earth becomes an object of active survey, open to travel and exploration in a 'free outside' which itself becomes an interior, and a 'post-historical' period of bubbling foam in which there is no unknown outside which produces a multiplicity of lifeworlds produce all manner of microclimates which communicate frantically - but in autistic ways.

But is this account right? I think there are three main problems. First, there is the problem of detail. Sloterdijk is writing philosophical history and commentary but with unusually high levels of detail, a strategy which produces inevitable tensions. Through the very range of evidence he

¹⁴ See, for example, the work of John Shotter or that strand of work inspired by the discovery of mirror neurons.

draws on, Sloterdijk can be seen as providing a bridge between philosophy and social science, but it is a problematic bridge¹⁵. Whereas in philosophy detail tends to work as an illustration of an idea, as a rhetorical device, or as an edifying moment, in social science detail can never be extraneous. Detail counts. It really counts. And Sloterdijk knows this perfectly well. Indeed, unusually for works of philosophy, the three volumes of *Sphären*, for example, are chockfull of dense and learned empirical detail drawn from a wide variety of sources – from literature, from history, from psychology, from anthropology, from the history of art and science, and so on – which is clearly there as something more than anecdote or illustration. One might unfairly parody Sloterdijk's work as Nietzsche plus Heidegger plus evidence carefully marshalled to show that 'images can make history' (Sloterdijk, 2008, p48). But how one interprets this evidence, partly because of its sheer range and partly because of a fictive style drawing on a variety of different sources of inspiration¹⁶, is something worth considering once it is deployed as something more than an ornament or example, as it undoubtedly is. This is not a trivial issue, given that Sloterdijk is trying to debunk what he considers fantasies and illusions which can have dire consequences because they are taken so seriously and he is clearly marshalling what he considers telling evidence that is meant, in some sense, to counter these fantasies and illusions¹⁷.

But this is where it is easy to get into hot water. With obvious exceptions like Walter Benjamin, the general problem for continental philosophy has been that too often it has equated the empirical with ultimately disposable details in a way that is ultimately very far from social science¹⁸. Sloterdijk occupies an uncomfortable mid-ground insofar as he provides an oscillating position between the hyperbolic claim and the revealing detail which is never really resolved (as one might argue was the case in Benjamin's work). That is both an undoubted attraction of his work in

¹⁵ As a corollary, philosophy should not be used as a set of empirical facts that can be harvested by social scientists or as an unproblematic arbiter of their woes.

¹⁶ Including the 'philosophical science fiction' of Flusser.

¹⁷ It could, of course, be argued that the conundrum posed by Sloterdijk's work is an extreme example of a more general condition. Continental philosophy often consists of stories which are implicitly claimed to be diagnostic accounts of the world with some claims to veracity. But when their status as an account is challenged, too often the critic is accused of either a Gradgrind or even a Bartsby moment.

¹⁸ But this detail is at the heart of social science in the guise of the case. As Berlant (2007) makes clear what constitutes the case is a moveable feast but that does not mean that it is just anything to hand. Empiricism means that occasions are the theoretically important object we want to detect and metaphysical questioning arises from following the occasion, rather than vice versa. Empirical facts provide inspiration. But philosophy too often tends to homogenise as it searches for grand themes and syntheses. It tends to look for the big or it wants to dig down in order to hit the bedrock of an explanation that can take the world in (even as, in Sloterdijk's case, the opposite is often claimed through a general critique of totalizing views).

that it sets up all kinds of interesting tensions, unsuspected associations and revealing discrepancies, so generating all kinds of new byways for thought. But it is also a considerable challenge.

Then, there is another allied problem. The pronouncements become increasingly suspect as we reach the present day. In particular, Sloterdijk's depiction of a world of bubbling foam is not, I think, either original or able to provide much in the way of insight. It simply reproduces the same kinds of jeremiads as writers as diverse as Žižek and Bauman in arguing that what we now face is a public form of privacy which will drag us down into mediocrity, able to choose our obsessions but not much else. 'The statement that each man is an island has more or less come true for the majority of the populations of modern big cities ...' (Sloterdijk, 2008, p47). Co-isolated, it is true, but still isolated: 'multiplicities of loosely adjacent lifeworld cells' (Sloterdijk, 2008, p48) that declaim a state of 'egalitarian total inclusion' (Sloterdijk, 2008, p57). Based on a particular appropriation of aesthetics, these kinds of accounts of the horrors of public intimacy and empty choice often run uncomfortably close to the denigrations of mass culture by both left and right which were so prominent in the 1960s but which have now been comprehensively displaced by less passive and more nuanced accounts (c.f. Carroll, 1998, Berlant, 2008). There are three inter-related problems to cope with. First, such accounts work with a degraded notion of aesthetics which lacks any notion of the kinds of everyday aesthetics which structure so much of being, seemingly innocuous objects and environments which are the main part of a culture's calling (Saito, 2007). Not the least part of our dealings with everyday things is space, specifically how it is arranged and disposed. Such spatial sensibilities are key to how we go on and they are much more various and variegated than Sloterdijk allows¹⁹. Second, they are empirically unreliable. Most ethnographic accounts of consumption are simply at variance with these accounts. Sloterdijk's account is a set of stock conclusions, taken off the shelf of standard laments about the modern world. But there is no evidence from what is now a shoal of studies of consumers and consumption that the world is like this. These studies describe a world that is very different. Full of the alienation produced by commodity production but equally possessed by care, even love, expressed by and through these very same commodities. Things provide comfort and consolation, even balance, as well as the cold (Miller, 2008). Equally, the commodified institutions of public intimacy through which things are

¹⁹ Which is not to say that Sloterdijk is unaware of cultural differences in the qualities of space and spatiality. In particular, and particularly relevant to this paper, see the discussion of Chinese space in the second volume of *Sphären*. Oddly, he makes little of such differences.

now so often linked with human life have a long and subtle history which does not permit of gross generalisation and which leaves room for all kinds of forms of warmth and intelligence (Roach, 2007, Thrift, 2008c). In turn, the surrounds of surrounding are porous and fleeting, not so much like apartments and stadiums full of densely if differentially packed consumers, as new kinds of community with multiple allegiances which are communicating on a level which is both aesthetic and moral²⁰ Third, they also induce a quite unnecessary political quietism by producing an account of the world that does nothing so much as an echo of some of the new and pervasive forms of regulation that are now coming into existence. Miller and Rose (2008, p25) describe a new form of rule which has come into being over the last decades based upon the proliferation of little regulatory instances across a territory and their multiplication, at a 'molecular' level, through the interstices of our present experience. But they are describing a governmental project, not an accomplished fact. It might be more accurate to describe the new world we now face in this way - as contested terrain - rather than as the advent of a blockbuster 'post-history'.

But there is one more problem upon which I want to concentrate in this paper. That is an unwitting but potent Eurocentrism. It may be that the ancient Greeks set up a particular spherical world of the cosmos which became general in the West²¹. It may be that the second outward-looking phase of globalization can stand as a metaphor for all imperial and/or mercantilist adventures. It may be that the latest phase of globalization is producing, on the back of information technology and manic levels of travel, something like foam in some parts of the world. But other accounts are equally plausible, at least if take note of other parts of the world and their apprehensions of space.

Let us start with one of Sloterdijk's key philosophical patrons, Martin Heidegger. Both in concert with Heidegger's thought, and taking his thinking on as an 'ontotopology' of being and space, Sloterdijk argues that being in the world is always 'being-with' (the co-ordinate constituent of *mitsein*) but set within shared interiors which themselves constitute what that 'with' can consist of (Fuss, 2004). But what if the phenomenology of prepositions like 'with' and 'in' could be shown to be different in different parts of the world? What if different worlds could be shown to exist in which even these most basic of cardinals could be shown to vary?

²⁰ Thus referring back to the original meaning of aesthetics.

²¹ Although, as Lloyd (2007) points out, there was never just one ancient Greek worldview.

This is, of course, precisely what disciplines like anthropology, archaeology, ethology and psychology have been systematically showing over the last few decades²². In particular, they have overturned many commonly held views about space. To take but one example, the original and highly influential depiction of Hopi space produced by Whorf has been overturned by Malotki and others. More specifically, Levinson (2003, p20, p324) has shown that in most cases that ‘people who speak a language that favours one specific frame of reference will tend to think in similar terms, that is they use a co-ordinate system of the same underlying type in language and non-verbal cognition’. In other words, they use different cognitive styles which depend on ‘constructing culturally specific geometric analyses of objects in the intrinsic frame, culturally specific transformations of axes in the relative frame, or culturally specific fixed bearings in the absolute frame’. When language is written down, moving from the domains of mouth and ears to hands and eyes, it can undergo further differential development as new modes of learnability are introduced. Many decades ago now, Derrida (1967/1998) understood that alphabetic systems of written language were but one route that might be taken in representing the wor(l)d but he did not take his insight far enough in that he did not entirely escape an evolutionary model of writing which places alphabetic writing at a putative peak of development²³, not least because of his concentration on the critique of Western writing systems from within (Mignolo, 2003).

To summarize my argument so far, I have argued that Sloterdijk’s account of the modern world is hemmed in by propositions about the nature of evidence and cultural preconceptions about space²⁴ and to illustrate this contention I want provide another account of the current state of the world and how we might evidence it. In forging this account, I will stray into zones that are often kept apart - like theory, methodology, and history - in order to give another rendition of the current round of explication/explicitation and of the work of serial redescription that it entails and how this account can produce an alternative history of spatial practices from Sloterdijk’s, one that I will argue has at least as much credibility.

²² Famously, for example, they have debated whether certain tribes really do understand the mechanisms of procreation or other biological functions.

²³ More specifically, Derrida was concerned with the emergent idea of the sign divided into signifier and signified.

²⁴ Understanding culture as a habitus, a sophisticated system of dispositions, but only in the original more expansive sense found in Aquinas (see Davies, 2002) in which, rather than in the cut-down form that Bourdieu has made popular, habitus can make us able to achieve unforeseeable actions.

Interlude

So what if we start from different premises about space? Throughout the history of Western philosophy, philosophers have turned to other thought systems for relief. The turn to these systems of thought has often been in conflict with the idea of a universal, common human nature but has been no less sincere for that²⁵. Take but three examples of this interchange. Thus, to begin with, there is the case of John Locke. Famously, Locke had an interest in the thought systems of peoples of other countries, most notably the Americas and India, as well as China²⁶. Then there is the case of Martin Heidegger who acknowledged the closeness of his thought to the Daoist tradition and to Zen Buddhism; ‘perhaps there lies concealed in the word ‘Way’, tao, the mystery of all mysteries of thoughtful saying, as long as we let this name return to an unspokenness and are able to accomplish this letting ... All is Way’ (Heidegger, 2003, p). He even collaborated with a Chinese scholar on a translation into German of the Lao-tzu, though they only completed eight of the eighty one chapters²⁷. Indeed, May (1996) has even argued that early on, as well as later in his career, Heidegger borrowed some of the major ideas of his philosophy from German translations of Chinese Daoist and Zen Buddhist classics, sometimes word for word²⁸. Finally, there is the case of Peter Sloterdijk himself. Sloterdijk visited Bhagwan Shree Rajnash in Pune in 1980 and is known for his references to Buddhism and Daoism (Sloterdijk, 1989).

But, for reasons that I hope will become obvious, I want to concentrate on Leibniz’s later work on China. Though he never visited China, Leibniz was a prolific correspondent and a number of his correspondents were missionaries with direct knowledge of China (Spence, 1978). His thought

²⁵ But tolerance should not be misinterpreted as anything other than that. For example, Spinoza was certainly tolerant to other thought systems but, at least in part, because he did not consider that they mattered. Consider this exchange between Burgh and Spinoza.

‘You assume that you have at length discovered the true philosophy. How do you know that your philosophy is the best out of all those that have ever been taught in this world, are at present being taught, or will ever be taught in the future? To say nothing of possible future philosophies, have you examined all those philosophies, both ancient and modern, which are taught here, and in India, and everywhere through the whole world’.

‘[Your question], I might with greater right ask you; for I do not presume to have found the best philosophy, but I know I understand the true philosophy. If you ask me how I know this, I reply that I know it in the same way that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles ... For truth is an index of itself and the false’ (cited in Perkins, 2004, p37).

²⁶ Though no one would say that this interest was disinterested, given Locke’s expansionist aim of extending civil order so as to guarantee the preservation of the law of nature (Mignolo, 2003).

²⁷ The traffic was not all one way. Famously, Japanese philosophy was influenced by Heidegger’s thought, most especially the so-called Kyoto School of philosophy (Parkes, 1987).

²⁸ Which conjures up the delicious thought that Heidegger’s thought is based on East Asian notions of time, space and being.

bears a close resemblance to early Chinese metaphysical views of the world and, though his writings on China were chiefly concerned with rebutting anti-accommodationists who argued that the Chinese were truly heathen²⁹, still the echoes are sometimes uncanny, down to the identification of the supposed isomorphism of the I Ching and Leibniz's system of binary arithmetical notation³⁰. Though it would be stretching things to say that Leibniz's philosophy was deeply indebted to Chinese thought, he certainly found a companion, even a consolation, in the interpretations of this thought he was offered by his correspondents and his wider reading and not just a tolerance of diversity³¹.

Most particularly, Leibniz, unlike, say, Spinoza, was willing to countenance not only that other peoples thought differently but that this thinking might make a difference. This is important when it comes to thinking about space. For what we now know is that different peoples can and do think differently about space and that this thinking effects what and how they do. But when I say thinking I am not meaning to imply a bodily and environmental infrastructure through which different kinds of thinking are able to flow free as water. No. What is happening is that body and environment are part of how this thinking happens, constantly interacting to enact a spatial representation which is part-learned and part-improvised. Human beings have a particular behavioural preference based on the place-based foraging strategies of the common ancestor of the hominidae which privileged foraging within a stable territory (Newcombe and Huttenlocher, 2000). Thus they use a spatial toolkit common to many animals that need to feed upon dispersed resources and therefore need the wherewithal of an 'intuitive physics' (Eilan, McCarthy and Brewer, 1998) to remember locations and how to find them, including dead reckoning of various kinds, knowing when to start and stop, and using landmarks (Healy, 1998). But, over time, human beings have been able to evolve a richer locational armoury as a result of needing to forage in novel environments (Haun, Call, Janzen and Levinson, 2006): they have added prostheses such as objects of various kinds and, of course, they can deploy language which may have primarily

²⁹ Equally, and relatedly, Leibniz had a heated exchange with Newton (through Newton's protégé, Clark) on the essential nature of spatial concepts. Whereas Newton insisted that space was an abstract envelope, all the evidence suggests that Leibniz was right when he argued that space was relational, that is the location or motion of one thing is described by its relation to other things.

³⁰ For example, it has been argued that Leibniz took the use of Chinese binary notation, which he discovered through studying the I Ching and hexagrams and converted it into a binary mathematics which is the foundation of the computer age (Bowker, 2008).

³¹ Note the word interpretation; Leibniz misunderstood some elements of classical Chinese philosophy, either on his own account or because of the biases and mistakes of his correspondents.

evolved as a response to the rich texture of human social life but could then be turned to other means.

The net result of this evolution is that human beings can produce a rich and diverse range of cognitive styles of practicing and thereby understanding space. This richness and diversity has probably increased (insofar as it is possible to measure these things) in that technical prostheses like film have provided a whole new overlay of ways of representing and experiencing space which have made it increasingly possible to think of oneself as ‘outside’, as one object amongst others inhabiting a map of some kind. Equally, it is probable that the sensory modalities by which we know and experience location have multiplied, both because they are better understood and more likely to be consciously worked on, and because of the sheer range of objects that are to hand. Finally, it is likely that, insofar as space and selfhood are connected³², more kinds of spatial subjectivity exist, in part because, to echo a classical Kantian theme, there are more ways of joining up experiences in such a way as to produce a particular spatial world and, thus, more ways of making sense of oneself (Bayart, 2007)³³.

To grasp the cultural richness of spatial cognition, I want to return to the disciplines of cognitive psychology and anthropology and especially to the work of Stephen Levinson (2003, Levinson and Wilkins, 2006). As I have pointed out, Levinson’s work shakes the idea of innate human cognition by showing how language and spatial cognition are tied together so as to produce widely varying practices of space and spatial thinking. Spatial representation is thus a fundamental aspect of the different cognitive styles – and biases - of cultures, an integral part of their demonstrative range. Languages distribute spatial information in different ways and there are very few hard and fast generalizations to be made but there is reason to believe that ‘there is a good case for supposing that language, and more broadly communication systems, are causal factors in inducing specific ways of thinking about space’ (Levinson and Wilkins, 2006, p2).

That this is can be so is able to be demonstrated by studying Leibniz’s beloved China. There, the spatial demonstratives that the culture can access are very different from those found in the West (Yu, 2004). Bodily stances and gesture, cardinals, and sound ranges all differ significantly. This becomes even clearer if we add in writing – a system of

³² Which is, of course, a contested thesis.

³³ In each of these cases, of course, we may also have lost ways of being but I do not subscribe to the idea that we live now in a disenchanted and thereby impoverished world.

communication which occupies a position between a material prosthesis and language. Not only is the system of writing very different, not least in the time acquired to gain the necessary skills and the innately spatial character of its layout³⁴ - a point to which I will return - but it also enshrines values that Western writing does not own to; for example calligraphy can be understood as an aspect of personality since the creation of written words is regarded as akin to a visual performance (Shi Bo, 2003, Lu Chi, 2000); 'in the present-day style of writing, though the original image has in many cases been lost, there is still a vivid enough image to move the reader's feeling and stir associations with other characters' (Chiang Yee, 1973, p35). I want to claim that the way in which these characters not only use visual means to capture affect but themselves become affective ciphers can provides a means of inspiration in the investigation of the mood-catching environments which are becoming the stuff of everyday life.

China Between Literal and Figurative

I have argued elsewhere (Thrift, 2007, 2008, a, b, c, d) that a new kind of capitalism has gradually been gaining ground in the West, based in capturing semiconscious flows of affect, up to and including not only minor affects like envy but even grand affects like love. Part of the armoury of this capitalism has been the derivation of new kinds of writing based, at least in part, on the rediscovery of the kinds of nondiscursive culture that typified early modern England in which literacy was a comparatively rare commodity but the recognition of all manner of visual signs³⁵ (including a scattering of words on walls and on everyday objects) was not; 'the early modern period had a way of understanding the relation of writing to the mind, and to the world outside it, that was not that of representation or reference' (Fleming, 2001, p164). In a culture which was alert 'to the appearance of writing in non-alphabetic forms and to the oneiric resonance that accompanies even a book-bound, alphabetic script' (Fleming, 2001, p153), there developed 'a mode of knowledge that simultaneously thinks through matter and accords it a sensibility of its own' (Fleming, 2001, p164).

At this time in history, we might understand everyday culture as again becoming based on these premises, not least because the meaning systems founded in only partially systematised but still potent logographs found in the picturing practices of increasingly informationalised moving

³⁴ Though whether certain qualities such as the incidence of left-handedness vary because of the nature of Chinese script, which is difficult to write with the left hand, is still a matter of contestation.

³⁵ As well as aural and tactile and olfactory signs.

images are proliferating³⁶ – whether in the shape of various media frames and conventions, icons like brands or celebrities, or even new forms of surface - and these are becoming distributed through environments as refrains in ways which themselves depend upon logographic means of expression to produce guaranteed affective effects. In other words, just as non-discursive cultures like early modern England were able to form a powerful apprehension of space and its relationship to affect through both phonemic and logographic means, an apprehension that was never simply a transitional form, so something similar is happening again as new semiotic trails are laid down. But this hybrid power is not based in the same technologies of representation. Rather, out of an amalgam of new materials and scripts, the apprehension of space we are busily rediscovering is one which is suited to a time of the construction of continuously generated suggestible environments driven by the paradigm of seduction within which we now live (Klingmann, 2007), in that it furnishes us with the arts and the means we need to both construct and to appreciate consciously produced mood-catching environments.

But in order to understand better this new world made up of scripts based on graphemes as well as phonemes which can be used to describe and produce suggestible sites on a continuous basis – scripts which we cannot always name but which are still creating tracks - I want to draw an analogy with another culture in another time, one that I will insist has much to teach us about where we are now heading. Taking my cue from the spirit of intercultural exchange promoted by Leibniz and other European thinkers as they struggled to find a place for different kinds of thought (Leibniz, 1994, Perkins, 2004), I will take as my leitmotif China, which was and is again becoming a key centre of the world (c.f. Brook, 1998, Clunas, 1991, 1997, 2007), and more specifically a set of accounts of the aesthetic norms of Chinese classical culture based on the findings of contemporary scholarship which have been able to uncover a remarkable technical, symbolic and psychic history (e.g. Barrett, 2008), in order to provide the beginnings of a description of how the world is currently being written anew by looking to a culture in which logographic apprehensions of space held sway.

There is no exact homology, of course. It goes without saying that classical Chinese civilization was a very different culture from ours and care needs to be exercised. To take just one example, classical Chinese philosophical thinking was based on a particular notion of how the world was present. Thus, in contradistinction to Christian-influenced Western

³⁶ 'Pictures in motion write our modern history' (Bruno, 2004, p24).

thinking, there was no notion of immortality and the distinction between philosophy and religion did not exist³⁷. Rather, the aim was to live a good and fulfilling life by amplifying the ‘vital nourishment’ of the body. This was not an activity meant to produce progress toward something so much as it was an attempt to achieve continual renewal through various mechanisms of modification and incitement and thus produce incessant reconnection with life, rather than allowing it ‘to cling and adhere – to some investment, some representation or some affect, as caring about things inclines us to do – and subsequently to stagnate and wither’ (Jullien, 2007a, p27). It follows that such a viewpoint was not concerned with the activity of knowing as such ‘which is endless and thus hemorrhagic in terms of energy and vitality’ but rather with concentrating ‘on man’s ability to use and preserve the vital potential vested in him’ (Jullien, 2007a, p15). Thus to study life meant not ‘to study what life is (as it would be if defined from the point of view of knowledge) or how to live (as it would be if defined from the point of view of morality) but to learn to deploy, preserve, and develop the capacity for life with which we are all endowed’ (Jullien, 2007a, p14). It is likely that this produced an unusual sensitivity to perception of the environment, albeit sensitivity of a particular kind. Equally, care needs to be exercised in taking classical Chinese culture on its own terms. So far as picturing practice is concerned, it is clear that the very definite aesthetic hierarchies which circulated amongst the elite were not necessarily owned by every citizen - the issue of reception remains largely unresolved. Whether we look to the emphasis on deixis, so much at odds with the Western tradition until recently, or the apparent emphasis on moving beyond representation, discarding any attachment to mimesis, again only recently taken up in the Western tradition, such aesthetic values were not necessarily taken for granted or uncontested but, that aid, such differences do provide useful and revealing signposts insofar as they provide models for what is now happening to space in the West, a means, to echo Jullien’s comment at the beginning of the paper, of beginning to rework our thought so that it can explain current conditions.

In particular, I will want to take four successive takes on classical Chinese culture in order to analogically illustrate what may be happening to space in the present. My intention is to use that Chinese experience – based in different means of scripting the world - to throw light on current tendencies, to teach us new ways in which we might see what is happening.

³⁷ Thus there is little concern with anything that might be considered to transcend the natural world.

The first take consists of writing an alternative history of the way in which the commodity form is currently evolving as a stream of experiences which form both biography and context (Lash and Lury, 2007) by understanding the way in which it has used what might be called non-discursive writing to communicate its charms by marrying together script and human body - recombining the word and the flesh - thus producing a means of modularizing affect.

That is precisely what classical Chinese civilization achieved, not least because writing and painting were not distinct terms in classical Chinese civilization. Both writing and painting were carried out with the same tool (the brush) and Chinese ideograms were much closer to pictorial markings whose form is determined but not fixed – indeed, the art of writing concerns breathing life back into these markings (Jullien, 2007b). Chinese script is based on finding a middle way between boundless individuality and the extremes of reduction based on a module system in which combinations can be constructed out of interchangeable building blocks. What is remarkable about Chinese script is that it has almost fifty thousand characters³⁸ and yet out of such a complex system of forms it is possible to produce distinguishable units. This is because Chinese script is built from a system of forms which form a hierarchy of levels of complexity, from the eight basic brushstrokes (element)³⁹ through a building block (module) through a single character (unit) through a coherent text (series) to all existing characters (mass) (Ledderose. 2000). The script has evolved over time but it still bears many resemblances to the script of two thousand years ago, helped by the much earlier invention of printing⁴⁰. In other words, the script is a cursive which is designed to allow duplication and cloning but through graphemes rather than phonemes. Of course, many ask why the Chinese did not develop an alphabet which is far less cumbersome for the user and correspondingly easier to write and to learn. The answer is because Chinese characters are symbols of meaning and not sound, held together by a module system which makes it possible to both design and remember them, and a means of developing and learning them which is always embodied:

‘the human body provided the metaphors through which the the script, and hence culture itself, could be valued and validated. Good calligraphy has ‘bones’, its ‘sinews’ are taut; weak calligraphy is ‘flabby’, ‘fleshy’. The separation of Flesh and the

³⁸ Though only about three thousand signs are in common use.

³⁹ Not surprisingly, there is argument about the exact number of basic strokes. There may be up to a dozen.

⁴⁰ Woodblock printing was invented sometime in the seventh century AD (Barrett, 2008).

Word might be a central image of those cultures clustered round the Mediterranean, or at least a key belief of Christianity, but it is their oneness that came to the fore in China over the millennia since the tomb of the First Emperor was sealed (Clunas, 2008, p38)

The second take is to consider the way in which producing the commodity as an affective efflorescence unfolding in time changes how materiality is understood. Here I will draw on the work of François Jullien (2007b) on the absence of the nude in classical Chinese representation as a means of understanding what is happening to the spaces of affect through the medium of a developing armoury of logographs. Why the lack of a cult of the definite form in classical China, embodied in the nude, that is a constant of Western art? The classical Chinese artist did not depict the nude for several reasons. First, the artist considered all things to be imbued with energy-breath (*qi*). Thus rocks are ‘cloud-roots’, with a denser and more solid concretion than clouds and anyone who wants to paint them must be aware of this fact. Those beings with constant form – human beings, animals, houses, tools - are obviously easier to paint than those beings like rocks or clouds since observers know their prescribed form. An error with regard to a constant form does not adversely effect the work as a whole - all the artist has to do is to compose the same prescribed form - whereas a fault concerning inconstant forms like rocks or clouds can threaten the integrity of the whole work. Second, and relatedly, the nude produced a template which made improvisation difficult. ‘By being enveloped within its form, the nude stands out. In this it satisfied perfectly the Greeks’ liking for boundaries (Jullien, 2007b, p74). Form and informing are coincident, definite, distinct, settled. But this is utterly alien to the Chinese artist’s notion of a constantly changing world and to the Chinese artist’s mission of depicting the often barely perceptible moment of change from one state to another, of what Jullien (2007b) calls trans-formation with all its undecidedness. Third, the Chinese did not depict nudes because they denied the division between subject and object. Art arose ‘at the point of meeting and fusion between interiority and the world and the process ... of art is born of a continuous interaction between the two’ (Jullien, 2007b, p80). Thus classical Chinese art did not capture the human through representation of an objectified body, an exposed object commanding attention by its presence, ‘folding space around itself, saturating it and creating a surrounding vacuum’ (Jullien, 2007b, p81) in which all other things are but accessories to or enhancements of the nude. Classical Chinese art arises, instead, at the meeting point between interiority and world. A mirrored image is anathema. The notion of

mimesis is unknown⁴¹. A disdain for formal resemblance is everywhere. Fourth, Western art has a whole series of technologies of immobilization. Traditionally, action and movement are depicted through a succession of poses, each illustrating the integrality of form. The advent of photography only underlines this theme. But Chinese art is based on the idea that poses are to be avoided at all costs. Such fixity means that all capacity for variation is lost: all that is left is a statue of wood or clay⁴². But for the Chinese artist the goal is to work on the new world now coming into existence, on pregnancy rather than presence, on a 'possible' from which nothing is necessarily excluded.

Thus, the Chinese artist had to be trained to improvise;

In order to render a character well, his image must be captured at moments of spontaneous, unstudied reaction: when he suddenly changes position, starts moving forward or backward, begins to gesticulate; when he is shouting, singing, recovering his breath, smiling, starting to reply, frowning, yawning, hurrying. In short, a lively rendering requires grasping the fleeting moment of real life; not contemplating the subject face to face, but observing him obliquely so as to capture what his features cannot help letting through, unbeknownst to him. Having taken all the time necessary to absorb his expression, 'I close my eyes and I seem to see him before me'; and 'when I suddenly give my brush free rein, it is as if he were there beneath it' (Wang Yi); and then, as though in the throes of inspiration, one encapsulates the critical feature. A number of anecdotes tell us that rather than looking directly at the model, the artist would prefer to reproduce the shadow cast upon the wall, whose outline, unburdened by matter, has greater powers of suggestion. This is a far cry from the modelling of the nude' (Jullien, 2007b, p79).

It seems to me that aspects of modern life are gradually swinging towards a notion of art and culture not so very removed from classical Chinese notions of art, based upon tapping into characteristic automatisms which can be represented by a vocabulary based on new kinds of non-discursive script that bear an uncanny resemblance to the notion of the Chinese ideogram in their degree of spatial potency. These developments have arisen from a heady mixture of technical, symbolic and psychic changes,

⁴¹ Remember that the classical Chinese had no knowledge of the theatre (opera is a recent invention) nor, consequently, of the stage upon which action is displayed and upon which all eyes are focused.

⁴² Indeed, when the Chinese first discovered Western painting they thought of it as sculpture.

each one enabling the other. They are, in effect, a means of modularizing affect through the invention of nascent logographic languages.

The advent of affective engines based on a logographic script which allows environments to be designed to produce particular kinds of mood is what I want to examine in detail in my third take. For what is now happening is that these engines are being written into life. To apprehend this process, I will cheat a little and move from an exact emphasis on China, though not too much. In the novel Air Geoff Ryman chronicles the story of the last rural village to be incorporated into 'air' in a place that bears many resemblances to a remote Chinese province, thus both tapping simultaneously into Sloterdijk's atmospherics, and referring to a new telecommunications system – air - that uses quantum technology to implant an equivalent of the Internet in everyone's mind - 'TV in the head' - so linking all of the village into a system which bears most resemblance to the current ideal of pervasive or 'cloud' computing. Ryman's novel is a story of this new atmosphere and the loss of a certain kind of individuality it imposes in which the memories of people become superimposed in each other through the medium of air so that quite different forms of individuation start to appear: I and us are mixed in new ways that simultaneously add and wash away, form and burn, as a kind of healing takes place. Site becomes a living palimpsest of all kinds of sites, interlinked through new geographies. Ryman's novel also takes up another of Sloterdijk's themes: the story of how the last 'human beings' react to the new atmosphere and the story of the way that new human beings came to have shape and what that shape is in a reloaded zoo of their own making.

The point is that a world is coming into existence which bears some of the characteristics of Ryman's fictionalised Chinese province (Thrift, 2005, 2007, 2008). Thus, to begin with, objects and events are becoming much less able to be separated. The meaning of what we mean by being reliably there - probably the main characteristic of an object - is changing as objects transmute, becoming more open to extension and more likely to have varying temporal signatures and qualities of succession. The world is becoming Whiteheadian in the sense that it becomes a series of forms of process, rather than a form of process. Then, the world increasingly becomes the production of tokens of numbers in order to produce simulations of environments. Logograms are much more suited to this world (Rodowick, 2007). Finally, Ryman's story chimes with the ontological turn in film and television theory. As Cavell pointed out many years back, the creation of a new medium requires the creation of new repetitive automatisms – forms, conventions, genres - which add

up to a new mode of existence as their potentiality is realised, not least because they circumscribe what subjectivity is or can be. Logograms are able to unleash a new series of automatisms which attest to what can be discovered in the world in new ways.

Finally, in my fourth take, I want to suggest that these processes are producing a bio-cultural redefinition of space, the result of the evolution of new neural pathways. The move to logographic ways of proceeding begins to re-groove the brain. Thus, recent research suggests that Chinese ideograms have produced a particular arrangement of the brain: not having an alphabet causes the brain to arrange itself differently, etching the flesh in an alternative way, so to speak. When a Chinese reader scans Chinese characters different areas of the brain are activated from those found in the brains of those who use alphabets; ‘a brain wired to read Egyptian hieroglyphs or Chinese characters activates some areas never used to read the Greek or English alphabet, and vice versa’ (Wolf, 2008, p217)⁴³.

The sheer effort involved in learning Chinese characters by writing the characters over and over again (in distinction to learning alphabetic systems which require much less writing input), coupled with the traditional system of learning itself, which often begins with ‘writing in the air’ by ‘motioning the characters with sweeping gestures of the arm and hand, naming each element of the character as it is formed, and then pronounc[ing] the character at the end’ (Ingold, 2007, p135), means that words are remembered as gestures - and so written into the body through movement as much as vision. This kinetic etching activates both hemispheres of the brain, and, in particular, those parts of it which involve motoric memory skills. Thus, learning Chinese characters calls on right hemisphere areas known to contribute to the spatial analysis needed to make sense of logographic symbols, as well as parts of the brain involved in object recognition, suggesting that the new non-discursive languages are calling on different parts of the brain (Wolf, 2008). This kind of cultural grooving of the brain – shaping not dictating - should not surprise us in a time in which we know just how fast genetic change can take place leading to at least minor changes in evolutionarily double quick time, even in the brain⁴⁴. At the same time, it starts to expose some of the mechanisms by which culture becomes engrained in

⁴³ It may be that certain neural conditions like autism and dyslexia are born, at least in part, out of lack of adjustment to alphabetic systems of writing since they seem to involve thinking in pictures rather than words (c.f. Grandin, 2005, Ferguson, 2008).

⁴⁴ Thus it took about 10000 years for the skin of the first Europeans’ skin to whiten and 8000 years for the gene for blue eyes to appear. But changes in the vascular system and fingerprints have been happening over the last 80 years (see Smail, 2008).

space and space becomes engrained in culture. We can indeed be wired for site.

Conclusions

What I have attempted in this paper is to produce an alternative account of the contemporary spatial condition to that of Sloterdijk, one which demands a range of responses and, in particular, the construction of an experimental, even improvisatory, attitude rather like that found in the canons of classical Chinese art, one based on a body of training and discipline which will allow the moment to be captured in different and more expansive ways than those that are currently on offer. This new art will have to be based, at least in part, on greater critical understanding of the various logographic traditions that now circulate in the West⁴⁵, and how to question them, rather as the well-known Chinese artist, Xu Bing, has been attempting as he interrogates the technics of Chinese script and its apprehensions of the world by producing characters that have no meaning – and yet do (Erickson, 2001, Zhang Zhaohui, 2005, Silbergeld and Ching, 2006)⁴⁶.

Let me end where I began – with landscape. In the 1930s, a Chinese poet, author and artist called Chiang Yee (1933-1977)⁴⁷ travelled through classic British landscapes – the Lake District, London, the Yorkshire Dales, Oxford and Edinburgh – commenting on his responses to them and illustrating each of the works with exquisite sketches that rendered them according to Chinese landscape traditions⁴⁸. The calligraphy and form are clearly Chinese⁴⁹, but the subject matter and the framing are English. My argument in this paper has been that something similar to this act of translation is now taking place as space becomes message and medium. Space is being rendered anew according to logographic traditions so as to better capture and even produce affect. Of course, this is not to say that

⁴⁵ I am well aware that I could have drawn on different traditions of logographic interrogation than the Chinese tradition, such as some kinds of visual poetry. For example, think of Brazilian concrete poetry and its emphasis on playing with form, as found in the works of Haraldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, and Decio Pignatari.

⁴⁶ Though I am sure that Xu Bing was playing with all kinds of moments of critique, drawing on both Eastern and Western influences (like Warhol), what I think is interesting about works like Book from the Sky is the way that they dislocate a certain perception of the environment in which characters can themselves be seen as participants.

⁴⁷ Chiang Yee left China in 1933 and subsequently worked at the University of London and the Wellcome Museum of Anatomy and Pathology before crossing the Atlantic to become a lecturer (and ultimately Emeritus Professor of Chinese) at Columbia University, with an interlude when he was Emerson Fellow in Poetry at Harvard University. He returned to live in China in 1975.

⁴⁸ After the Second World War, he travelled farther afield, producing books on New York, Dublin, Paris, Boston, San Francisco, and Japan.

⁴⁹ Chiang Yee wrote two books on calligraphy, as well as an interpretation of Chinese painting.

the cultural wiring of Chinese culture is simply being translated across into different contexts. After all, even Chiang Yee has sometimes been accused of a particular modernist bias in his apparently traditional renditions. Rather, I am arguing that some of the kinds of motivating principles with which Chinese culture worked are now becoming general as a result of the current reworking of space. To the extent that the West lost a calligraphic/logographic tradition (Drogin, 1994), this is now being resurrected or simply reinvented, but in an electronic format, one that is awakening us to new possibilities. To that extent, I agree with Sloterdijk: new atmospheres are being created.

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