

Transnational World: Imagining an Afterspace

Rowan Fraser

In our increasingly transnational world we are all made migrants by the eradication of place. The supremacy of the *now* over the fumbling *here* has remodelled our spatio-temporal set up. The result is a thin layer of *afterspace* and the constant duress of the present.

Transnationalism has a long history in the form of international migration. It is nevertheless being reconsidered in light of recent technological advances as something utterly contemporary. It now refers broadly to the networks, connections and ties that exist at present between individuals, institutions and corporations across borders, existing in *realtime*. This reticulation is facilitated by the globalization of capital and the spread of information and communication technologies. Telecommunications are integral to transnationalism.

Bataille sardonically argued that the purpose of modern science, and the sole criteria by which to judge its efficacy, was the extent that it “makes *impossible* a definitive image of the universe” (Goetz, 2001: 75). Einstein’s theories relativized and revolutionized our *definitive image of the universe*. The prodigious enlargement of this image and the incredible precision with which our universe is now studied move it into the unimaginable. We may never have owned a completely secure cosmology, but we have never lived under such an extreme absence of one as we do today. The destruction of our collective worldviews is not without repercussion. We can no longer hang meaning onto our fluid, hyper-defined world. Consequently we arrive at the paradox where the only certainty is that nothing is certain.

In the absence of meaning caused by the breakdown of absolutes, we have been asking ourselves *where are we?* It was the Greeks, Beaufret suggests, who “were the first to ask themselves where they were” (Beaufret, 1973: 164). What is remarkable is that this question of being was not asked in relation to essence (*what are we*) but in relation to locality (*where are we*). Being comes into question when we are no longer sure of the *place*, when the world becomes strange, incomprehensible. If we ask ourselves where we are it is because the nature of the place is not assigned. Tradition, myth and science are no longer authoritative in telling us where we are. Plato, in *Sophist*, states that philosophy begins when we stop telling ourselves stories. Philosophy brings with it the loss of orientation and the crisis of localization.

This crisis of localization is compounded and rendered more complex by the freeing of both culture and community from the traditional obligations of geographic locality. Indeed the deterritorialization of culture is in large part responsible for transforming our notion of what constitutes community. Community now assumes a more fluid nature and distance is no longer an impediment to it. The local is compelled to rethink itself. *Place* is replaced by an imagined or symbolic unity built around shared or individual meanings, and where historically this *place* has been spatial, or at least geographic, it now has become temporal. We

no longer rely on space as the platform for communication and culture-sharing but rather on time. For Mackenzie, “*all performance is electronic ... [and it is] precisely the digitisation of discourses and practices*” which is of interest (2001: 243).

In a transnational world where community and culture operate without regard for territorial boundaries, the sole requirement for meeting is time, and more specifically the *now*. Space, being overcome by telecommunications, becomes ancillary and contingent to time. Time is the agent of unification in the contemporary world. For telecommunications the greatest importance is temporal alignment: one needs someone in the *realtime now* with whom to communicate. Transnational community meets in the *now* but very seldom in the *here* (5.45 p.m. but never mind the place). In this manner *here* becomes subordinate to *now*.

This overcoming of space is certainly dependent on our technology. Throw it all away, and space resurges like a mistreated animal. The relationship between technology, society and the city is well established: a sturdy and weathered ménage à trois. In 1957, Wittfogel used the discovery of subterranean stone granaries in the Middle East to explain the mutual interdependence of technology, society and the city (167-78). These granaries dated from the third millennia BC and were used to store the surplus grain generated by the improved irrigation techniques of the farmers. Childe notes that the generation of surplus was critical in the development of the city, and of society, as it allowed for certain individuals to absent themselves from farming duties in order to specialize and acquire expert knowledge (2001: 4-8). Mumford talks of the way in which thought is made concrete in the form of the city, and how in turn thought is conditioned by the urban form that surrounds it (1938: 77). The city is at once an active agent in the technological output of a society and a passive three-dimensional canvas onto which socio-technological forces are printed. It acts and receives the action.

But how does the marginalization of space inform the contemporary city? Space, de-spatialized by the *now*, waits in the wings of the city. It is relegated to the banks of the rivers, wrapped up with the blue tarpaulins of the informal settlements. It waits to be beckoned from under the fly-overs. It is no longer necessary. It attends its own funeral in the epistemological parlour of the downtown. We might therefore call it *afterspace*, like an afterthought or an aftertaste. It is the afterspace of the city, and it coats like a façade the tower blocks and is plastered to the street signs in the suburbs. It is found down alleyways and in doorways, like the threshold of the city. Its defining characteristic is that it is derived from the present. Afterspace cannot exist beyond the present. Nor can it be invested with meaning, or loaded with data. It is non-memorial, instant now-space. Traditionally the present has come after something, namely the past. Afterspace by its intense presentism is, however, synchronic, simultaneous space. It is not at all independent. It is space without the spatial element, just a spatialized temporality, an instant, a crossing. It is a happening that is non-localizable and entirely contingent. In the city the general level of contingency is very high. Everything is waiting to be experienced and nothing happens independently. The individual is complicit in this contingency.

Afterspace could be considered the spatial home of the transnational. Certainly it is the contingent *here* of the supreme urban *now*. Our bodies still occupy physical Newtonian space, but the space of culture and the development of our community occurs in the despatialized situation of *now*. It is exactly this openness to plurality that transnationalism demands and this is the great freedom to be

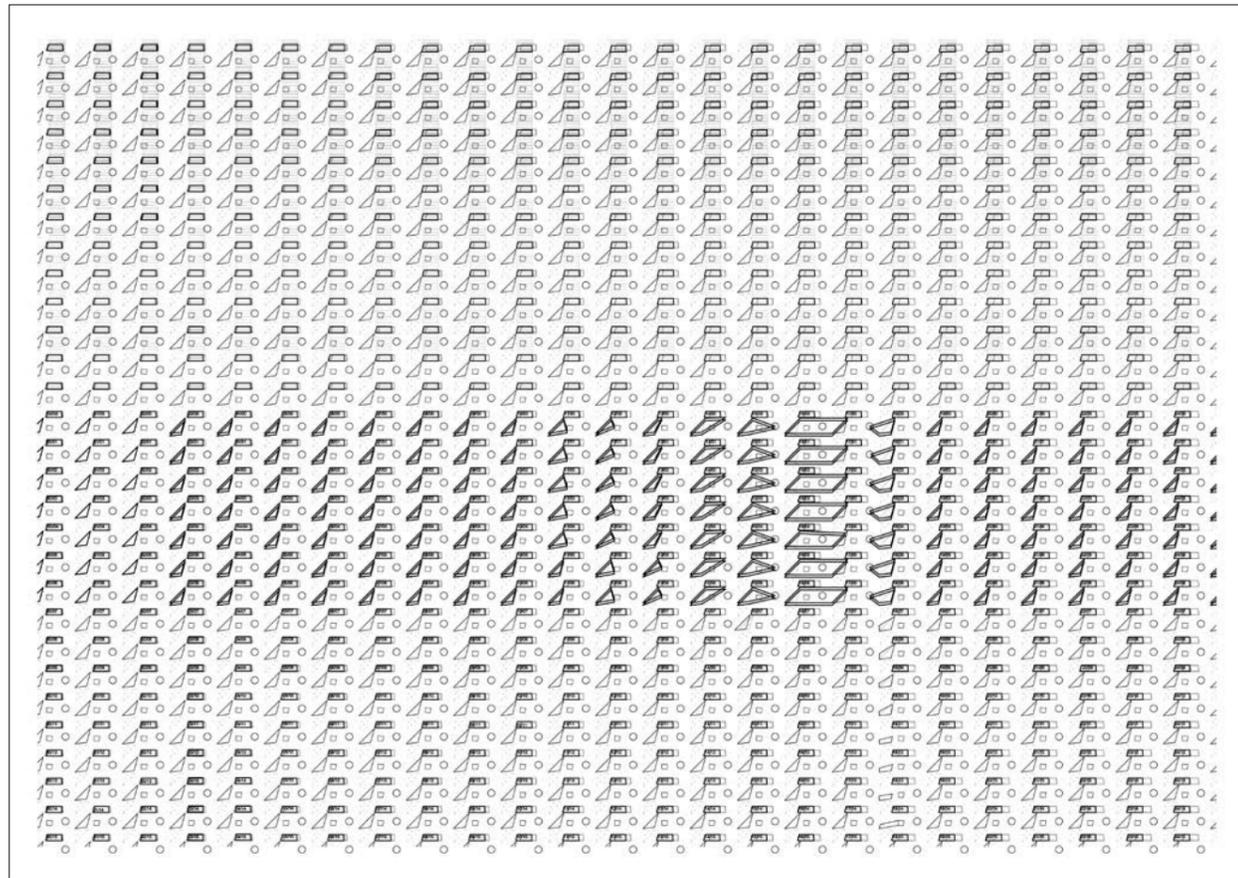


Fig. 1: Afterspace 1. Drawing by Rowan Fraser.

found within a globalized world; the opportunity to entertain a pluralist existence. But it is a voluntary pluralism with which we engage as we choose. In response to the *where are we* of the contemporary migrant, and the *where are we* of the floating transnational, one must answer that *we are now*. As migrants in a placeless world we exist only in the *now* supported by a vagrant afterspace.

New Zealand's bi-culturalism has been criticized from the perspective of multiculturalism. However multi-culturalism itself still demands certain qualities of social construction which transnationalism has done away with. Afterspace as a transnational product is not concerned with cultural protectionism; rather it advocates a freer exchange of culture. It is in favour of cultural swapping, sampling and upgrading. It is a spatial server from which we distribute culture. Thus it adheres to a general and controversial digitization of culture in which the city as a site of cultural generation is lodged squarely as a structural facilitator.

These developments are deplored by some. Virilio et al, in a sort of *noir* urbanism, shout geriatrically from their chairs (Hubbard, 2006: 139). People rightly complain of Virilio's relentless negativism and his moral approbation is tiresome. But society is not being eroded by new technologies, rather it is being recreated – the *ménage à trois* has purchased a digital toy. His are the pessimistic outcries of an older generation, their jackets lined with Victorian felt. Despite them, however, we are rushing headlong into an enamoured *Gesellschaft* whose backdrop is a neo-spatial afterspace and whose temporal enacting is the continual, exacting, urgency of the *now*.

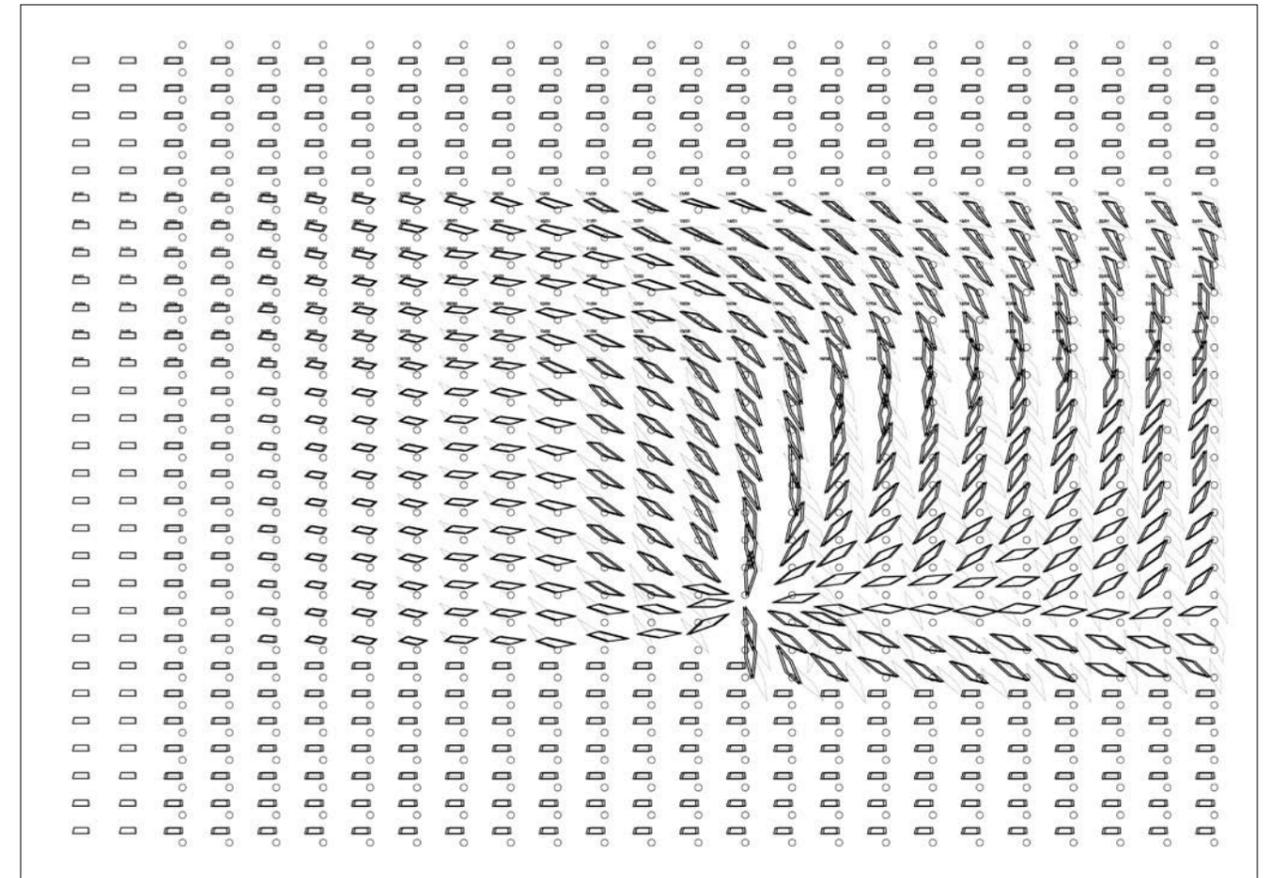


Fig. 2: Afterspace 2. Drawing by Rowan Fraser.

References

- Beaufret, J. (1973). *Dialogue avec Heidegger*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Childe, V. G. (2000). The Urban Revolution. In M. Pacione (Ed.), *The City: Critical Concepts in the Social Science*, vol. I, (pp. 1-14). London: Routledge.
- Cooper, J. M. (Ed.) (1997). *The Complete Works/Plato*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Goetz, B. (2001). *La Dislocation*. Paris: Les Éditions de la Passion.
- Hubbard, P. (2006). *The City*. London: Routledge.
- Mackenzie, J. (2001). *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. London: Routledge.
- Mumford, L. (1938). *The Culture of Cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Sassen, S. (2000). *Global Cities*. London: Routledge.
- Wittfogel, C. A. (1957). *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.