

Space as Experience and Representation in the Long Nineteenth Century

Isobel Armstrong

This gathering of five essays for *19* originated in a series of seminars given at the London Seminar for Nineteenth-Century Studies on the theme of Space and the meanings of space in the long nineteenth century. The ‘meanings’ of space were necessarily expressed in the plural, for the idea of space, one of the fundamental categories of experience, has gathered prolific significance in a number of fields over the last twenty years or so, from cultural geography, philosophy, and phenomenology to the historiography of spectacle and cinema. The aim of the seminars, and of this issue of *19*, was to explore the implications of the ramifying field of space studies for the long nineteenth century.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty thought of space as a primordial encounter with being, and ‘being is synonymous with being situated’.¹ Space is ‘at the core of the subject’, he wrote (p. 254). To experience a perception independent of background was inconceivable, he argued. Space is, for him, the first humanly made experience. That all space is humanly made has become increasingly a presupposition of the many inflections of space studies, but one might want to posit two forms of this being-in-space. There is the primary lived experience of daily life — our ‘inherence in a world’ (p. 280), as Merleau-Ponty likes to think of it; and there is the impulse to double or reproduce this ‘inherence’ in artefacts, writings, paintings, spectacle, and film. I have used the word ‘representation’ in the title to this introduction, and in one sense the secondary ‘inherence’ in space created by art works is a re-presentation. But I think the intense effort to reproduce the bodily coordinates of spatial experience in different art forms, to reimagine situatedness in new ways, and to bring this mimetic mediation to new forms of awareness, is not fully portrayed by the smooth term, ‘representation’.

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), p. 252.

The project of reimagining space is common to the five essays here. Two of us have taken up the philosophical discourses of space and explore how theorized space is transposed to the practices of fiction. I consider the epistemologies of space developed by Kant and Hegel and the strategies whereby the nineteenth-century novelist creates situatedness in language. If we take away this almost miraculous verbal construction of space there is not much left to the novel. Mark Blacklock considers the scientific and mathematical debates, including the crucial contributions of Möbius, around dimension in the mid- to late nineteenth century. The fourth dimension, and the logical play with, for instance, incongruent counterparts, doubled images, and mirror personae in novels, encouraged by the concept of the fourth dimension, is his theme. These experiments are particularly fertile in the fiction of H. G. Wells. The later nineteenth-century novel is haunted by the possibility that two entities might occupy the same space, an idea that penetrates to the form and grammar of narration itself.

James Mussell brings astronomical space and the highly gendered institution of the Royal Astronomical Society together with pictorial space and the politics of the Grosvenor Gallery space of display. The painter and amateur astronomer John Brett, and his belief that the surface of the planet Venus was made of reflective glass, is set against Edward Burne-Jones and his conjuring of reflection in his *Mirror of Venus*. Mussell explores a debate about the way both men think of the heterotopia of the mirror through the narcissistic otherness of the reflected image.

John Plunkett and Laura Marcus take painting into the new visualities of the culture of spectacle. Both are concerned with the moving image, in the panorama and in cinema, respectively. For Plunkett, the panorama is moving in two senses. First, it dissolved binaries such as the regional and the global, the centre and the periphery, by literally being moved around metropolitan and regional spaces through a sophisticated logistics of transit and people management that saw the panorama penetrate to the most obscure country towns simultaneously with metropolitan showings. Its images, secondly, drew upon spatial links between, for example, Bristol and New York, as travel time shrunk. Laura Marcus links early cinema, 'the pictures', with a new 'pictorial' language of modernity, in which film, advertising, and text were linked. Two early theorists of the moving picture and its training of the eye to new pace and space, Vachel Lindsay and Hugo Münsterberg, are her exemplary figures. For both, the close-up, and its making strange of dimension was crucial. Together these essays form a contribution to the history and aesthetics of the spatialized subject in the long nineteenth century.