

A Ten Point Guide to Disturbance in Landscape Architecture

A polemic ...

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one

This Ten Point Guide develops an argument to the effect that nature disrupts and destabilizes urban social relations, and through this interference contributes to the construction of new urban practices and values. It argues that when nature is excluded from urban systems, it parasitizes those systems and in so doing drives them to new orders of agency and vitality. The origin of this argument can be found in the figure of the clinamen, introduced by the 1st century Roman poet Lucretius (c.99-55BC) in his *De rerum natura* or *The Nature of Things*.¹ Lucretius describes the orderly system of the world as a laminar flow of atoms raining in the void. This orderly world is disrupted by the introduction of disorder. This is the disorder of the clinamen, of chaos or declination: the 'swerve' by means of which nature is introduced into the universe,² and by which Being becomes Becoming.³ The clinamen describes a nature that can renew itself precisely because it is rich in disorder and surprise. A powerful surge occurs in the nature of things, and now vitality, movement and systemic transformation are a dance of order and chaos.

two

Lucretius introduces the clinamen:

As the atoms are falling straight down through the void owing to their weight, at undetermined times and places they swerve a little with just the smallest change of direction.⁴

He then asserts the cosmological rationale for the swerve:

If it were not so, all would go on falling like raindrops through the infinite void, there would be no collisions and no blows, and nature would have created nothing.⁵

three

The clinamen is a disturbance unaccounted for in Newtonian physics.⁶ For French philosopher Michel Serres, the world of the clinamen is where trajectories are unstable and the irreversible unfolds – it is the open world in which, through fluctuations and bifurcations, things are born, grow and die.⁷ The world of landscape architecture, where, as Lucretius puts it,

...stars and meteors fall to earth
And the sun also from the height of heaven
Throws its heat out and sows the field with light.

¹ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947).

² Serres, Michel, *The Parasite* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). p. 99.

³ Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, "Postface: From Leibniz to Lucretius," in *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. Josue V Harari and David Bell (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). p.145.

⁴ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*. line 216.

⁵ Ibid., line 221.

⁶ Prigogine and Stengers, "Postface: From Leibniz to Lucretius." p.141.

⁷ See Serres, *La Naissance De La Physique Dans La Texte De Lucrece: Fleuves Et Turbulences*. and Serres, *The Parasite*., but also Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*. p.127.

Serres argues that this world is made of multiple interlocking systems that are not divided nature/culture, or global/local, but according to forces that circulate through all areas of human and nonhuman activity.⁸ The clinamen, reformulated by Serres as *the parasite*, is the event that introduces disorder into ordered systems and alters them in the direction of greater complexity, ensuring their continued existence.⁹ It is to be found in all landscape systems, rural, urban, riverine, lacustrine, tidal, liminal, ecological, artificial.

four

It is necessary, therefore, to rethink nature, not in terms of its laws and regularities, but rather in terms of perturbations and turbulences, in order to bring out its multiple forms, uneven structures and fluctuating organisations. Serres emphasises the occurrence of unexpected novelty. 'The parasite,' he asserts, 'invents something new ... It expresses a logic that was considered irrational until now, it expresses a new epistemology, another theory of equilibrium.'¹⁰ Through the operations of the parasite new things are made.

Thus the parasite first presents itself in a negative guise: it is viewed as a malfunction, an error, or noise within a given system, like a weed in a cultivated garden. Its appearance elicits a strategy of exclusion. Epistemologically, the system appears as primary, and the parasite as an unhappy addition that it would be best to expel. Such an approach, however, misses the fact that the parasite is an integral part of the system. By experiencing a perturbation and subsequently integrating it, the system passes from a less to a more complex condition. Thus the parasite ultimately constitutes the condition of possibility of the natural system.

five

It has been said that the city of modernism, which reached its peak in the age of film noir in the middle of the 20th century, collapsed time and space.¹¹ Lefebvre argues that the complexification of space and the objects that occupy space cannot occur without a collateral complexification of time and the activities that occur over time.¹² 'This space,' says Lefebvre of the urban realm in general, 'is occupied by interrelated networks,' and is characterized by a tendency towards homogeneity (of logics, intentions, codes, values and systems) that is simultaneously disturbed by differences; 'subsystems, partial codes, messages and signifiers that do not become part of the unitary procedure that the space stipulates, prescribes and inscribes in various ways.'¹³ It is a space whose relationships are 'defined by interference.' For Lefebvre, the city is entirely relational – and parasitism is, as Serres says, 'the heart of relation.' The parasite, or noise, 'through its presence and absence, produces the new system ...'¹⁴ The modern city, then, is a space of transformation.¹⁵ Its metabolic processes move at varying rates, and the parasite is the cause of this fluctuation, it is the catalyst of metamorphosis.

⁸ This argument, essentially against a taxonomic arrangement of human understanding of nature, is also made by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* and Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern*.

⁹ Hayles advises by way of counter-argument that the introduction of disorder into a system does not necessarily imply a movement to greater complexity. See N Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990). p.196-216.

¹⁰ Serres quoted in Harari and Bell, eds., *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*. p.xxvii.

¹¹ Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967). pp.430-449 Mumford, *The City in History*. and especially David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989).

¹² Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). p.167.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.167-8.

¹⁴ Serres, *The Parasite*. p.52.

¹⁵ 'Space of transformation' is Serres' term for phase space. 'Phase space is mathematical jargon for an imaginary n-dimensional field in which phase transitions can be mapped ... information is maximised in a narrow zone at the interface of order and disorder. Here self-organising emergent behaviour arises from the turbulent interaction of the elements of an arbitrarily simple but energetically open system.' Adam Greenfield 1997 http://www.v-2.org/displayArticle.php?article_num=28 (last viewed 22 December 2004).

six

The parasite of the modern city is nature. The totality of the vast set of the whole includes the processes of the urban, social, economic, cultural, physical, mineral, organic. It includes all forms of matter, image, movement, light. We try to expel the whole, and it is through this attempt at exclusion that an infinite number of possibilities appears as the irruption of disorganization into the system. The modern city is therefore impossible of organization – despite insistent attempts on the part of planners, designers and political authorities to do just this.

seven

Urban theorist Edward Relph documents the decline of mainstreet as an organizing spatial program, and the subsequent rise of the plaza in the 1930s.¹⁶ The plaza, or urban square, which is situated at the heart of the modern city, is the inverse of nature. It is a degraded simulacrum of the open whole neutralized by democratization, reduced to what Lefebvre calls a 'blind field' where the urban simply becomes the industrial and *re-presentation* (such as that of fictive nature) dominates. The industrial city, he says, is 'a field of logics and tautologies that share a common space; the logic of surplus value.'¹⁷ Lefebvre argues that the logic of surplus value found in the industrial city denies nature. It rejects particularity and ravages anything associated with 'naturalism.' Thus, for Lefebvre, the urban square, the plaza of modernism, is the zero degree of multiplicity, where everything is part of an order that hunts down disorder with overwhelming repressive force.¹⁸

eight

Surplus value, however is a requisite for disorder – for, in fact, the gift of nature. The over-production of goods and services associated with the capitalist city entails, or necessitates, a differential urban space-time which is polycentric and contradictory, a field of tension that consists in the presence-absence of its openness and wholeness. We cannot see this field. We can only intuit its movement and its demands on human life. The organizational figure most suited to the modern city is not, then, the plaza. If there were to be such a thing, it might well be the dynamic labyrinth, a truly differential space-time conundrum whose constituent elements can only be perceived from place to place and moment to moment, never in totality. This urban realm is not mappable, it has no fixed coordinates or causes that can be easily traced. The modern city creates a milieu in which the public realm is uncertain and dynamic, a realm for which conflict, understood as disturbance and interruption, is the very condition of its existence. It is a force field of social and political, aesthetic and cultural, individual and collective 'intensities' which construct spatial orders and code, distribute and organize the flows of human desire throughout these orders. The labyrinth, 'a place of violent oppositions,'¹⁹ and found through-out film noir, symbolizes this city of modernism – decentered, multiple, indeterminate, open-ended and capricious.

nine

In his 1960 book *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*²⁰ Kracauer probes the gaps and fissures in cinematic convention, looking for contingency and indeterminacy particularly in the link between modernist cinematic form and spatial modernity. Kracauer does not discuss film noir specifically, but his text establishes the possibility of a reading that connects noir with the modern built environment as both an

¹⁶ Edward Relph, *The Modern Urban Landscape* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1987). p.85.

¹⁷ Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*. p.35.

¹⁸ This spatial order is classical in its stylistic strategies and thematic obsessions. It utilises a regime of visual representation that encourages the subject to look at the world as a picture, at the same time as it is constituted to appear as a picture.

¹⁹ Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of George Bataille*. p.69.

²⁰ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960, reprinted 1997).

agent and a reflector of spatial discourses. What Lefebvre calls the 'problematic of space' is apparent in the representations of public spheres of social activity that emerge in noir films. These films both formulate and transmit the socio-spatial dynamics of modern urbanism. They demonstrate the ambivalent, dysfunctional topology of 20th century urban space.²¹

This demonstration occurs by way of a disruptive movement. A civic construction of urban space as a seamless elaboration of democratic virtues is radically displaced by a violent event, which in turn leads to the (usually temporary) disruption of social structures hitherto rendered transparent or unproblematic. If sex, murder and darkness are tropes of nature, they enter the spatial framework of the noir film as natural parasites of the quotidian. Violence and intrigue become the noise that through nature's sudden presence and intermittent, equally unpredictable absence, produces a new oscillation of cultural flows. The demon of criminality becomes the transcendental condition of the constitution of urban space. Powerful social forces attempt to expel the parasite, in the interests of the communication of the effects of that power. These forces, however, cannot overcome the parasite's own command which, because it is not fixed or essential, but relational and multiple, always upsets the equilibrium of the system. Harmonious urban space is an abstract ideal that can never be reached. The parasite can never be excluded. It is necessary. Nature is always present, in all fields, at all levels. The Many inhabits the One.

ten

Writers such as Williams, Lefebvre and Serres separate the city from nature. They are explicit about this. Serres says the city is founded on the exclusion of nature. Thus when the garden does appear in the city it is as a sign of an absence. Like the garden, the essential operation of the city is that of sacrifice, the sacrifice of nature. For nature to appear in the city, then, it must become artifice. Olmsted underlines the artificial character of the park when he justifies Central Park as art.

But nature is always already in the city. Natural process is the 'infrastructure' of the city. Human beings, for instance, are natural, and if, as Lefebvre says, 'there is a production of the city ... it is a production of human beings by human beings.'²² The city depends on that which it excludes. This dependence takes the form of a continual renegotiation of its relationship with nature. Nature therefore is the parasite of the city. It is the noise in the system. But because the city itself is naturalized, this nature cannot be seen. The city appears denatured even though it is permeated by representations of nature. Therefore it must be revealed. Urban landscape architecture is thus a matter of revelation. Landscape architecture, however, has given away the key to the revelation of nature under the guise of human accommodation. Is this not the same reason that, despite the existence of the parasite being the condition of existence of the city, we try to expel the parasite?

Public space plays a critical role as the location of social representation – it is in public space that the most powerful representations of nature are staged. A theory of multiple, competing and mutually exclusive public spheres provides a framework for urban space that opens it up to alteration and revision. That this can be achieved through disturbance is demonstrated by film noir. The noir film acts as a parasite that distorts the relationship between civil society and the people who participate in that society. The film noir occurs in public space (the cinema), is generally about public space (the city) and helps construct public space (as uncertain and dynamic). It is a noise which disturbs the even communication of 'citizenship values' from the state to the people, and this helps redirect the cultural politics involved in shaping civic spaces.

²¹ As attested in many books over the last 20 years: Arida, *Quantum City*, Stephen Barber, *Projected Cities* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), Michael J Dear, *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000), Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard university Press, 2004), Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), Relph, *The Modern Urban Landscape*.

²² Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*. p.101.

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