Space, Place and Power – Week 3

Phenomenological Understandings of Space

1. Phenomenology concerns itself with the way in which objects are conceived and perceived; a phenomenological approach to space, then, endeavours to make sense of the ways in which space is conceived and perceived by persons. Here, I develop the idea of travelling space, and in particular that created by the railway revolution of the 19th century, to understand how this element of modernity has altered the ways in which space is perceived and conceived, both at the moment of its creation and today.
2. *Space and Travel*. Above the *Gard du Nord* in Paris, built in the mid-19th Century, one can find eight statues representing the major European cities accessible through this specific station. Placed above the entrance, they give the traveler the impression that the station itself is a point of entry into each one of these cities, in a way that is reminiscent of Schivelbusch’s observation in *The Railway Journeys* that the birth of railway travel in the 19th Century has caused ‘a collision of separated spaces’. Travel has indeed both destroyed and created space: although the space between two points has effectively disappeared, condensed in the short amount of time spent by the traveler in his compartment, transport space has been expanded through the addition of new destinations for the traveler – or indeed, the Parisian. New spaces and new commodities – the products of these spaces – become available in the city through train stations, shops and markets.
3. Simultaneously, the development of railway travel and the diminution of travel time that goes along with it have irremediably changed the experience of travelling itself. In fact, one could argue, as Schivelbusch seems to make the point, that travelling is no longer an experience, as it no longer concerns itself with the time spent within the train compartment – focusing instead on the act of going from a point A to a point B as rapidly as possible, a process through which the train becomes ‘a projectile’ and its passengers ‘parcels’ that are unable to perceive the landscapes that surround them. Although it does seem to me that this may have been the way in which railway travel was perceived by those who experienced this ‘revolution’ in the late 19th Century – Turner’s *Rain, Steam and Speed* (National Gallery, 1844), with its GWR train almost invisible, blurred by speed, seems to perfectly illustrate this idea – I argue that the dissolution of the outside landscape has contributed to a new kind of experience within the train compartment. As the space around the train disappears in a panorama – a succession of images that come and go two quickly to be truly experienced – the traveller’s attention moves inwards, possibly to an ‘imaginary surrogate landscape’ situated in a book, newspaper, or in his dreams. It is no longer possible to comment the passing landscape with the person sitting next to you; instead, the travellers’ relationship to one another has been irremediably altered: reading has become a surrogate for communication.
4. Today, it seems that rather than train travel being a different kind of experience – where one must avoid the interaction with one’s neighbour at all costs, by reading newspapers in order to make sense of the blurred space surrounding them -, it has in fact become continuous with our daily lives. Besides sitting down, people no longer alter their behaviour in a train – they eat, play, call friends, read, work; in sum, they act exactly as they would if they were in the office, the living room, or the school. The train has thus become another place in our everyday lives, allowing us to continue our tasks uninterrupted whilst changing spaces. In a sense, it has become a space in which travellers dwell whilst moving, in which they *move toward the other without being other*. The space of the train compartment, then, places itself at the opposite of walking, an action through which, as De Certeau describes in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, one truly experiences their surroundings by making their own path through inhabited spaces and existing places to which memories are tied.