Space, Place, Power: Week 3: Phenomenological Understandings

The very act of perceiving our environments is experiential. With experience, knowledge is gained. Yet, not only is it gained, it is also assimilated. The unfamiliar or the new becomes appropriated into the known, the memorable. Yet this is a tangible experience, rooted in the earthen actuality of our surroundings.

Places are inhabited, memorialized and interacted with through this rootedness (Basso, 145). This sensing of place, as termed by Basso, is at once universal as places are experienced by every community, but also deeply personal. The dichotomy is evidenced by the relationships between naming and place making. As Basso contends “we are in a sense the place-worlds we imagine”(7), and in this act of naming, a sense of belonging is established. However, this permanence is implicitly engaged with transience in the experiencing of places. When considered in light of Certeau’s understanding that a pluralism of “fixations constitute procedures for forgetting”(97) the active nature of the experience of place is caught. The nature of experience is momentary, a “nowhen” (97) which is temporally isolatable and individual, in the walk of a commuter for example. In this respect, the “doing” of the action renders its tracing or “the operation that made it possible” (97), forgotten and muted. To “enunciate” (98) and experience spatial elements, is a creative and therefore destructive process because the space in which to experience anew must be envisaged and actualized.

Yet rather than a totalizing forgetting or re-inscription, Rilke’s notion of “trees of gestures” (103) is more convincing. We are continually experiencing the ways in which we are rooted in places, even as we move through and misremember them or come to know them anew. Certeau’s argument that “to walk is to lack a place… the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” (103), is therefore not accurate to the nature of experiencing place, for even when one moves through them, one senses and is effected by them.

This is to refute Certeau’s argument that “memory is an anti-museum: it is not localizable”(108) as ethnographic information provides rich evidence for the contrary. The “sense of place…is not just something that people know and feel, it is something people do” (Camus 1955:88). In this doing places can be created, experienced and live on in determinate memories. But how does this active place making, “do” when it is not based on a tangible physical sense. Sherlock Holmes employs the mechanistic mnemonic of is “mind palace” to retrieve memories by organizing them in imaginary places. This was a particularly interesting feature of the explaining of place sensing by the Apache. Basso posits that because places are “visually unique they serve as excellent vehicles for recalling useful knowledge” (134). In this way, when new adversities arise, previous stories of overcoming similar situations can be consulted and therefore wisdom and knowledge of how to approach the new ones can be gleaned. This organizational power of place to order memories is therefore a key feature of the way in which places connect and root people.

It is this logistical power of place which organizes Apache history through the sense of place, in contrast to histories principled on temporal structures as with the Euro-American historical tradition (Basso, 33). However, while agreeing with this primal temporal rather than spatial contrast, I was unsure of Basso’s statement that Apache senses of place are “consistently subjective, and therefore highly variable among those who work to produce it…the idea of compiling “definitive accounts” is rejected out of hand as unfeasible and undesirable”. In the ethnography, while the accounts not definitive in terms of the places being perceived as unchangeable, their stories were “definitive” in their commonly shared and recounted details for example, so do not differ so vastly from other ways of creating history through place?

Example for class:

The creation of place through the phenomenological effects of the filming techniques in “The Revenant”:

-Sensory engagement: Only filmed in natural light, close-ups of ice melting and warm air precipitating. Immersive and visceral effect on the audiences creation of the place.

-Camera perspective: Long single takes, filming from the actors eye level, jolted shots of turning around to view new corners and action emerging from spaces.

-Rather than shooting on film, digital camera lenses from 12mm to 21 mm “allowed us to work without any noise of grain between the audience and the actor”, in the opinion of director Lubezki, which means there’s “no texture between you and the character”. This creates a personalized perspective of shared place between the audience and one characters negotiation of his environs and the knowledge of the possibilities for how it could be navigated.