

Disturbing Spaces (Systems, Operations and Disorders)

Eve Kalyva

In 1515 Albrecht Dürer presented an image for the newly discovered species of rhinoceros following the description of an explorer to the vast and unknown lands of India. Even though being rather far from current reality, Dürer's rhino was set within an internally and structurally sound system that had been twice validated textually and visually, and was widely reproduced and circulated for the next three centuries in treatises and encyclopaedias as Dürer's woodcut also meant easy and enduring reproduction. Then at any given moment, consequent copies of this curious creature after Dürer would not prove that that rhino was any more 'real' than any other, but would only corroborate the given order of things: 'lo and behold!', one would exclaim, 'my rhino matches Dürer's (after which I copied it) and *therefore* it must be true'. Still, if at any point we pause to make a critical comparison across other similarly constructed systems and realize that we ended up with a rather peculiar rhino in the room, we admit, at the same time, being in a position from which we can either entertain our reason by a 'lo! and behold' ratification of historical constructs, or we can reconfigure our provisional point of view to include the shifting products of turbulence. But of course, what we conceive as qualifying parts of a system are already thus measured against the degree to which they satisfy and accredit the system's governing rules and principles, while anything else is either excluded or simply ignored.

Understanding the behaviour of a system in disorder yields methodological and epistemological knowledge about that system. In a physical system of masses and vectors one would test structural turbulence against inertia – the resistance of a body to change. In theoretical and cognitive systems, tolerating disorder in real space and time tests the validity, and therefore measures the authority, of the premises and principles of such constructs vis-à-vis reality. Writing and reading disturbing spaces is of course a metaphor; but a metaphor first of all stands as a metaphor to itself, the transfer from one place (of presumably better knowledge) to another (of presumably indicative recognition). Distinctions in space are therefore distinctions *of* space, whether that would be of spatio-temporally embodied experiences and visual structures, of the mental space of reflections and rhetorical formulations or of cognitive operations already spatially understood. Likewise, if we acknowledge, and one easily does, disturbing spaces as a metaphor, we are also expected to qualify what is being transferred, by whom

parallax

ISSN 1353-4645 print/ISSN 1460-700X online © 2009 Taylor & Francis

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>

DOI: 10.1080/13534640903208826

and across what. Then disturbing spaces would not only characterize symptomatic displacement, but also the uneasy position of disturbing distance, difference and therefore discourse. The concern here is over the critical activity in and of disturbing spaces, of the impossibility of a coherent whole called 'space' that is understood as the result of disorder that in turn configures the order of certain space – an observation that not only entails demarcating that space if the operation is to be somewhat specific, but that at the same time confesses the need to maintain and preserve the grounds on which one stands for otherwise such activity would become nonessential.

In order to identify and perceive space, one requires a principal systemic framework that will qualify both the field of activity and observation. Still, it remains a foundational scientific principle that observation always interferes with the observed event. In other words, once we accept that a space of activity or reference can be set, we make the compromise to speak in comparison from a relative position that is already manipulated by our own localizing activity. Space itself cannot exist in one place and not another where it is potentially to be found, and therefore locating a space means to localize it, which is to position it within a greater domain and draw its limits. Considering, moreover, that space can be disturbed, which is to say acted upon, is to already assume that at the given point and moment of interaction the identified space evinces a structure with which one can interact. To put it from the point of view of application, any enquiry of working (in) space is already governed, albeit not exclusively, by the system's order and structural laws – in this case, of understanding any correlating event, and therefore by extension setting the modality of experience, in a corresponding typological systematization of constituent parts.

Speaking of turbulence, or more generally of disorder, within an ascribed field already entails comparison of events in space and time. In this case, both the *position* and the *mode* of disturbing spaces are relational parameters to one's localizing and one's own positioning activity. After all, disorder is a term relative to a system's structural ability to absorb change. It may be that constituent parts can behave differently in regions of turbulence, but they do so always in accordance with the degree of movement permitted by their *elasticity* – that is, the degree to which structural bonds can be extended without breaking and thus without causing internal damage to, or terminal collapse of, a system. Thus speaking of turbulence means that one must also be in a position to account, apart from origin and nature, also for its *effect* within the set system of observations and operations. Expanding then an interest on impact and its resulting reconfigurations, critical enquiry cannot remain autonomous, ontological or epistemological, without admitting to its own historicity across different categories and spheres of activity, their interaction and revision.

Let me explain this differently. Any observation at a single point in space and time can be taken to be our starting point (x_0, t_0) . Yet this provisional starting point is also, by definition, linked to all previous instances in other x 's and t 's for otherwise setting any starting point would be impossible (there would simply

be no ‘space’ for it to sit within) and illogical (the endeavour would be void of meaning). In any case, once set, we choose to put aside all other instances and look onwards from our own (x_0, t_0) . As such, the activity of localizing spaces already means that one is looking for particular qualifiers – an activity that distinguishes a space of provisions, laws and structures already formulated in mind, to a lesser or greater extent, even though at times one may not be fully aware of it or its implications. In the process, let us say force f_1 acts upon our system. Can we take this force to be something new as if there were no other points of origin beyond our own provisional starting point? If indeed so, the force we discovered after our *arché* actually comes before it. Upon this much-anticipated logical contradiction, we are faced with three options. First, we can acknowledge the presence of this external force by ascribing it with an internal systemic value of $f_1 = f_0$, which means that the system is able to structurally absorb change. Second, we can predate our own system (x_0, t_0) to a (x_1, t_1) in order make it inclusive of the original site of force f_1 , which means to expand our structural parameters towards more universal positions. The third option would be to reject our provisional (x_0, t_0) altogether. Given the linearity of time, any moment of action is such a moment of threat.

Quite often, the object, the agent and the stage of (dis)order are arrayed in front of our eyes in plain view. From Lewis Carroll’s ‘Mouse Tale’ tail layout and Stéphan Mallermé’s *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* where letters are variably spread on and around the page, margins, fonts and types have been historically manipulated in aesthetic tropes and theoretically systematized in periods and styles.¹ Yet language’s material existence serves as provocation, Johanna Drucker explains, as a set of clues and cues for the performance of the text that can be understood as a probabilistic field where meaning is being constantly produced and conventions immediately brought into surface when disturbed.² For Drucker, the text in its spatio-temporal expansion is therefore an event, not an entity – an event we can add, within the event of reading and writing itself. This takes place in a certain time and space, and is happening and has already happened for us to be aware of our navigation through it, and to trace the processes of (re)cognition and (re)connaissance that translate the familiar, now disturbed, into ad hoc systems that only appear to be neutral by set conventions that run through a ‘text’, its writing, reading and all the possibilities in-between.

Speaking of an outside, a periphery and a locus is a methodological device to chart out and deal with the field of knowledge, and to organize experience in certain ways depending on both the point of reference and the point of application. One way of doing, while at the same time undermining the presumed authority of a text’s writer, suggest Antonin Artaud’s writingdrawings, as Stephen Barker calls them, making no distinction between writing and drawing. Here, marking oscillates between projection and the space of the text that exists by being already disturbed; a subjectile (subject and projectile) gesture, Barker continues, that is never *on* the paper – it can be above, below or through, but never *on*.³ Another site of marginal possibility and disturbance present the incompatibilities between speaking and seeing. In such cases, Yve Lomax draws our attention, one can make speech visible,

not by metaphors that would tangentially bridge the distance between language and voice, but through a potential author, here understood as a non-teleological gesture of putting-into-play.⁴

Systematization leaves no neutral language, and disturbance can only work in comparison as either a conductive transfer of turbulence from one system to another and across different planes of activity, or as the result of a comparative activity aiming at exposing systemic weaknesses. Even though in both cases one speaks of relative autonomy and of parts able to act upon their systems in transformative ways, the problem is not conceiving how structural associations configure new objects and yield their own categories, but the discursive separation of such spaces as systems of reference and as sites of possibility for change. One instance of this problematic addresses Jonathan Dronsfield in terms of the space created by the camera's spatio-temporal fragmented transpositions and the discursive space of understanding technology's transformative capabilities.⁵ Thus, one may arrive at a disjointed critical stand by way of upsetting the order of things, yet this disruption of one's locality will also cause one to fall back to a provisional starting point – even architectural spaces carry their own embedded codes and hierarchies that can dissolve presumed social experience through cohesion and distortion, Mark Dorrian demonstrates. Indeed, architectural compounds can both set and distort points of view at a physical as much as at a conceptual level – the case here being the relation between democracy and transparency – by functioning as something other than what they should, creating spaces of vertigo where ground and grounding are disjointed.⁶

In other words, disturbing activities can produce new associative meanings, but they also betray systemic behaviour and the extent to which order, albeit agitated, remains in play as long as ventures in exploring and exploiting it need it to make some sense. I have, for one, already admitted a series of positions to help trace one's methodological, ideological, discursive and rhetorical movements. However, gestures are social and cultural practices, Brian Rotman reminds us. Opening up a space between the sign and silence, gestures may come before, alongside and inside speech as events that are interwoven with social speech; what then gestures 'communicate' is the fact and manner of their taking place.⁷

Recognition safeguards originality in and deviation from a by-now falsified norm that only as such can allow for an enabling reminder of how one could nullify one's own logo-semantic limitations that have already taken place. This circular rhetorical device that reconfigures space by disturbing its order can be sustained through moral and universal routes, or can be dislodged into a progressive spiral as part of a critical programme. Deviation then can either be compromised or manipulated into something that the old order of things could not provide, namely, a view at its limit. Not to mention that moving across different systemic localities and qualifying given systems creates what can be understood as an intra-actional scene that in turn must be negotiated. Amelia Jones considers the cultural and social visibility of the body, and how wounding in a performative art context can function politically within the spatio-temporal particularity of the event – a moment that performative wounding as a mode

of signification can potentially exceed by making the body real for others and therefore affecting intersubjective relations.⁸ In this way, even though speaking from within the conventional systems one wants to criticize, ‘critique’ can defer becoming yet another structural parameter if the distance between experience and articulation sustains such a self-reflective operation.

The question whether such critical operations can create a new space, reconfigure the same space anew or remain in a meta-space of activity already becomes a rhetorical device that can only be relatively answered by retrospectively identifying the possibilities and strategies of the process. Yet in this case, one cannot uncritically rely on a ‘look for meaning in use’ resolution.⁹ As Daniel Blochwitz astutely exposes, what one ‘sees’ and consequently ‘uses’ may not necessarily be the same as focal points shift through their own conveniently fragmented every-day narratives.¹⁰ At the same time, any systemic products are still cultural objects that also have a temporal dimension, even a potentially infinite surplus of time as medial signs, Boris Groys explains, where they become empty signifiers that cannot be saturated with meaning or confirmed by experience.¹¹ In that sense, locating gestures within set orders that are being manipulated as they are being disrupted causes a negative moment of recognition, or at least a parallax shift of relative view which in any case can, and should, be measured. If there is no order there is no disorder, but this does not necessarily entail a change in hierarchies, since one can equally, even with greater ease, permit order to transcend its appearances of criticism through a phenomenological instability caused by pliant systemic disorders within allowance. Turbulence then sets, as much as it uncovers, undercurrent conventions in contingent descriptive vocabularies that monitor the configuration of systemic inertia. At this point, strategic differentiations cannot repose on admitting and indicating norms. Rather, what qualifies talking from ‘inside’ the system or from a ‘meta-space’ of criticism is not a logical either/or operation but a *choice* – a choice to manipulate the shifting object or wilfully ignore how conditional our systems are, where we cannot control anything further than our indulgent rules and lenient principles that can easily be disturbed within their own spaces of operations, within their own provisional applications.

Notes

¹ Carroll’s tale first appeared in the manuscript of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, c.1864 and Mallarmé’s poem as a double page spread in the periodical *Cosmopolis*, no.17, London, 1897. For a substantial effort to systematize visual design, see Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2006).

² Johanna Drucker, ‘Entity to Event: From Literal, Mechanistic Materiality to Probabilistic Materiality’, this volume, pp.7-17.

³ Stephen Barker, ‘Subjectile Vision: Drawing On and Through Artaud’, this volume, pp.18-32.

⁴ Yve Lomax, ‘To Not Happen’, this volume, pp.33-44.

⁵ Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield, ‘Before the Camera’, this volume, pp.94-106.

⁶ Mark Dorrian, ‘The Aerial Image: Vertigo, Transparency and Miniaturization’, this volume, pp.83-93.

⁷ Brian Rotman, ‘Gesture and the “I” Fold’, this volume, pp.68-82 (p.69). Quotation marks in the original.

⁸ Amelia Jones, ‘Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect and the Radical Relationality of Meaning’, this volume, pp.45-67.

⁹ After Ludwig Wittgenstein's response to the logico-linguistic dichotomy by looking for meaning in use; see his *Philosophical Investigations* [1958], trans. G.E. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), §43.

¹⁰ See Daniel Blochwitz, throughout this volume.

¹¹ Boris Groys, 'The Time of Signs', trans. Carten Strathausen, this volume, pp.107-15. This text forms the penultimate chapter of Groys' *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of the Media* [2000] forthcoming in English by the Columbia University Press, 2010.

Eve Kalyva is currently working towards a PhD at the University of Leeds on the relation between image and text in conceptual art and the social semiotic.