

ARTICLES : SPECIAL ISSUE
A DEDICATION TO JACQUES DERRIDA - THEORY

A Note on Space

By Dirk Baecker*

With respect to space at least, philosophy is almost unanimous. A space comes into being as soon as a border is established and an observer looks at both sides of the border including at the border separating the sides. Without the border, no space, and the space has none. Without the observer, the same applies, even if there are only observers where distinctions are being drawn. Jacques Derrida was conscious of this. One of his questions is the perennial question of philosophy: what is space if, for a space to reveal itself, there is a boundary to be drawn, such that an observer may emerge looking at the space the boundary is brought forward in.

In this note, I propose to look again at Kant's concept of space, because he goes a long way toward putting it all together by acknowledging that space is a question of aesthetics. And aesthetics brings the observer in, even if only cautiously so by looking at the taste a subject is made to share with other subjects in order to be able to communicate its subjective view of the world. Aesthetics, thus, is a matter of observers being observed by observers, defining their respective places with respect to the judgments they share in order to be able to communicate that each one of these judgments is singular.

Immanuel Kant, in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (B 37-45), conceived of an aesthetic concept of space, which considers space as "a condition of the possibility of phenomena." Kant refuses to speak of a "notion" of space and instead sees space as "a pure idea *a priori*." Kant states that space is the condition of the possibility of the subject to imagine itself and objects as claiming to exist in different places in it.

* Professor of Sociology at the University of Witten/Herdecke, Germany. He is the author of two review essays on Jacques Derrida's philosophy: *Wir werden darauf zurückkommen: Die Sprache und die Hand bei Jacques Derrida*, 19 *ÄSTHETIK UND KOMMUNIKATION* 109-115 (1989); *Eine neue Internationale*, 20 *SOZIOLOGISCHE REVUE*, 21-26 (1997). Email address: baecker@mac.com.

Kant's concept of space is critical of the usual common sense understanding of space: that space is out there and, somehow, both supporting and receiving what we are doing. Yet, whatever it is that is out there, Kant rejects the label "space" because that would give it some objective necessity, which does not correspond to the actual realm of variation which space exhibits in its exploration by men. The concept of space should start with the acknowledgment of the degrees of freedom we discover while hitting on the restrictions we attribute to it. That is, space is not a cause of phenomena, but, as Georg Simmel in his *Soziologie* put it, "a form without effect *per se*;"¹ that anything is taking place *in* space, does not mean that it is taking place *because* of it.

The point in which I am interested is that to understand all of this we need a certain understanding of "aesthetics" that is close to Kant's. And we need to remind ourselves of a problem, which, from Plato to Jacques Derrida and G. Spencer-Brown, is taken note of under the heading of the concept of space.

A concept of aesthetics, which fits Kant's concept of space, is Kant's understanding of aesthetics minus its transcendental aspect. In a footnote explaining the title of his "transcendental aesthetics," (*KrV*, B 35), Kant lets it be understood that his concept of aesthetics refers to something languages other than German call a "critique of taste." That is, he is not referring to the "critical judgment of the beautiful by means of reason," which the "excellent analyst" Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten hoped for. Here, at least, he is critical of the taming of subjective sensuality, a move he will later reinforce by inventing the institution of a *sensus communis* with which all individual subjects comply when trying to communicate their aesthetic judgments (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 8). In this footnote to the notion of aesthetics in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, however, all rules, with which any critique of taste might possibly comply, are empirical. This is why I propose that we skip the reference to the transcendental to deal only with Kant's psychological approach, which today comprises psychology and sociology extending into the realm of cognitive sciences.

Receiving the concept of an aesthetics, which explores the condition of the possibility of phenomena, it seems to be conceivable that Kant's "critique of taste" might be transformed into a research agenda about taste in a complex world, relying on modern cognitive sciences informed by neurophysiology, psychology, and sociology. A critique of taste would, on the one hand, look at a conscious, and on the other hand, a social, construction of phenomena of the sensual world

¹ GEORG SIMMEL, *SOZIOLOGIE* 687-88 (1992).

brought forward by the double closure of *sensorium* and *motorium* described by neurophysiology: acting we change our way to perceive the world; by doing something we create something to look at; by looking at something we get the chance to discover ourselves looking, doing, perceiving, and acting. Think only of these poor kittens, which were put onto a small trailer right after being born and were literally shown the world without ever being able to touch it and play around with it: They never received the first notion of it and remained unable to act in it and on it.

Thus space is to be considered as both product and precondition of *aisthesis*. Few concepts seem to be more improbable or even impossible. Yet surprisingly, not only philosophy, but mathematics and physics as well, finds agreement on this point. Each of these fields consider the nonexistence of absolute space; and all of them struggle to find out what that kind of action and reception might be able to bring space forward.

In Plato's *Timaios* (51a-53b) space, or *chôra*, is considered to be a third genre, and more precisely that genre which receives like some kind of matrix the first genre of the being and the second genre of the becoming. This third genre is devoid of any design to begin with, yet it gets form and forms via design and via number, even if this is only carried out by God. Jacques Derrida, in his paper "Chôra," puts Plato's concept of space down to the idea of a "*lieu d'inscription de tout ce qui au monde se marque*."² *Chôra*, to be sure, presupposes its own *chôra* the very moment it gets marked, thus producing the concept of spaces entangled within spaces.

This concept of space is close to G. Spencer-Brown's understanding of it in his *Laws of Form*, in which he states that "a universe comes into being when a space is severed or taken apart."³ Considered this way, a possible notion of form follows easily: "Call the space cloven by any distinction, together with the entire content of the space, the form of distinction. Call the form of the first distinction the form." This means that the notion of form is introduced to propose ways of looking at the coupling of marks in spaces, the mark being itself the manner by which a coupling is produced. Italo Calvino in his story *Un segno nello spazio* in his book *Le Cosmicomiche* (Torino 1965) showed in a very charming way how this may be understood.⁴

² Jacques Derrida, *Chôra*, in POIKILIA: ÉTUDES OFFERTES À JEAN-PIERRE VERNANT 278 (1978).

³ G. SPENCER-BROWN, *LAWS OF FORM* (1969).

⁴ Italo Calvino, *Un segno nello spazio*, in *LE COSMICOMICHE* (1965).

Reading John von Neumann's and Oskar Morgenstern's *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*,⁵ a comparable set and game theoretical formulation of this concept of space may run like this: A space is a *partition* in space, which preliminarily announces via the phenomena received or the distinctions being drawn that further information is yet to be given at a later moment. Space, for Kant again, is an "infinite *given* measure" (*KrV*: B 39), that is, it cannot be determined nor distinguished, but it is the place where boundaries are to be drawn and distinctions to be crossed. As Martin Heidegger in *Sein and Zeit* puts it, space is the place where de-distanciation (*Ent-fernung*) and alignment (*Ausrichtung*) take place.⁶

Such an aesthetic concept of space takes note of a fundamental condition of the possibility to order and describe, to remember and forget, to soften and to strengthen sensual experiences via their separation and distinction both consciously, that is via self-observation of the individual, and socially, that is via cultural conventions of society. For that note to be of any use, only one condition applies, which is that separation and distinction are seen to construct content via relation, or identity via control. That kind of space exhibits a structure, albeit a playful one (to honor Jacques Derrida's paper "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"⁷), in that it self-similarly (or fractally) repeats itself the very moment a boundary is drawn or a distinction crossed. The organization of experience produces a space where distinctions are to be drawn.

It is worth noting that a mathematical notion of space, understood as a set of elements featuring a structure,⁸ corresponds with such an aesthetic concept, provided that space is not confused with that structure but conceived of as the result and condition of its contemplation. Even the physical notion of space is compatible with an aesthetic concept if space is considered the result and condition of the emergence and effect of a field.

The concept of space in philosophy and cognitive sciences as well as in mathematics and physics puts an end to absolute notions of space and to spaces to be described ontologically. Without the contemplation, that is distinction, of a space as the product and condition of a phenomenon and its distinction, there would not

⁵ JOHN VON NEUMANN AND OSKAR MORGENSTERN, *THEORY OF GAMES AND ECONOMIC BEHAVIOR* (1944).

⁶ MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *SEIN AND ZEIT* § 23 (1926).

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, in *THE LANGUAGES OF CRITICISM AND THE SCIENCES OF MAN* (R. Macksey and E. Donato eds., 1970).

⁸ R. H. ATKIN, *MATHEMATICAL STRUCTURES IN HUMAN AFFAIRS* (1974).

be any space. An aesthetic concept of space owes to a critique of taste what today is received as the art of deconstructing, that is observing, an observer, thereby discovering, to be sure, ourselves as unknown to ourselves.

Reading Derrida, I am inclined to believe that this, among other things, is what he would have liked to let us see.