

## **The narrative in space: Literature and geolocation**

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### **The concept of space**

There are different notions of spatiality, each of which is linked to cultural and historical scopes within which they operate. Each of these notions, affects how we represent space, but more importantly, how we experience it. Schematically, historically speaking, we might mention three main forms of representation of space: the symbolic form, the abstract form, and the relational form. In the first case, the representation of space is structured from a cosmogony where the axis on which it is distributed is related to the order of certain mythic forces that govern all things. Typically, in this type of representation we find a vertical axis that traverses and determines the horizontal space. The vertical axis has two poles that are normally characterized as an underworld at the bottom, and as the divine or celestial world, in the upper part. In between these poles is the horizontal plane, which is the world inhabited by terrestrial beings. As you can guess, this type of representation corresponds to the thought of antiquity, where space remains a symbolic aspect that can be embodied in different cultural expressions, ranging from architecture, to strongly hierarchical social relations. This space is a space whose meaning transcends man, while corresponds to an order of ontological character, where man occupies only one of its parts. In other words, the space is who organizes the totality of things.

The second form of representation of space, the abstract form, begins to appear during the Renaissance, and is linked to modernity and techno-scientific culture that emerged during this period. This form of spatiality is born under the determination to make every space a measurable space, and thus equivalent to any other space. The vertical and horizontal axis, are replaced by the Cartesian coordinate system, and thus is introduced the subject of knowledge, as an anchor point, from which the space acquires direction and order. We can see this form of spatiality depicted in Renaissance painting by the perspective; form of representation where the objectivity is achieved through the organization of space from a subjective point of view. But even more, we can find examples of this form of spatiality in the literature, where the author figure and the character's voice appear, whose functions are to establish a framework of coherence and meaning to the literary work through the perspective or point of view they provide. Obviously in the movement between the symbolic form of space, and its abstract form, it operates an inversion of values: If in the first case, we find a paradigm in which the reality of things could be determined by its correspondence and harmony with a general order which appears in terms of spatiality. In the second case, the reality is given in an abstract and objective framework, which is verified and updated through the subjective experience; bringing the space from organizing reality to be arranged through the point of view of the subject.

The last form of spatial representation, largely linked to several contemporary critiques to the abstract notion of space can be described as a form of relational representation. This form is characterized by having no fixed or stable points of reference, but built through internal relations, which occur ephemerally, between the elements of space. The best example of this type of representation of space, and at the same time central to this essay, would be the social space, which

is impossible to characterize, by either purely symbolic or abstract terms, and it is equally impossible to determine through its occurrence in a specific territory or physical space. The social space exists only through relationships that constitute it, shape it, maintain it, and even produce it in material terms. In this regard, Lefebvre says: "the social relations of production have a social existence as having a spatial existence: they project themselves into space, becoming inscriptions there, and in the process producing the same space."<sup>1</sup>

The three forms of space: symbolic space, abstract space and relational space, coexist in our everyday experience. However, as already stated, each one of them is characteristic of a certain period of thought, and in that sense, although we can find all these spatial forms in our relationship with space, we can say that normally last two forms that are predominant. This effect is particularly evident in modern cities, where growth of urban space is given increasingly programmatically, according primarily to economic determinations, which dictate that the space is understood in an abstract form, to enable that it can acquire an economic value on its equivalence and interchangeability with the capital.

From these notions of space, two images of the city overlap and appear in our contemporary field. The social space, the space where social practices are crystallized through reproduction, coexists with the abstract space that inherently, and in accordance to its logic, tends to erase history registered in the city. While the Social space is objectified through the construction of monuments, institutions and practices, that give meaning to the space, and give a sense of coherence and cohesion to society; Abstract space logic is responsible for constantly erasing the historical identities or marks, in a permanent move towards modernization, growth and standardization of the city. In one version, the city is a meeting place, originator of identities, and of a sense of belonging linked to practices that result in traditions and rituals that bind people. In another, the city individualized people to the point of achieving alienation that makes impossible empathy and social contact.

For Lefebvre "The social space contains - and assigns - [...] appropriate places for (1) social relations of reproduction [...] and (2) the relations of production"<sup>2</sup>, which we "can say that welcomes a multitude of intersections, each with its assigned location". In the same way, "the representations of the relations of production, which subsume the power relationships also occur in space"<sup>3</sup>. In other words, it is in the space that the objectification that allows social practices to have continuity and acquire historical character occurs, while it is here too, that relations of production express, in order to enable humans to transform their environment, from a natural environment to a cultural one. All practice ends up forming and expressing themselves through space. A dialectic is given between practice and space, where space coverts into the guarantee of the continuity of the practices, objectifying them through the consolidation of codes, social relations, power relations, and rituals that become tangible in spatial expressions. In its simplest form, this phenomenon, acquires the form of art pieces, in its most extensive magnitude it is crystallized in the city, a single space that shows the customs of those who inhabit them through its organic shape.

In short, space, regardless of the characterization made of it, is the horizon on which our experience of the world is built, and as such, is the stage of human cultural expression, both in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, *The production of space*, Blackwell, USA, 2012, p. 129

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, p. 32

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, p. 33

representation, as in factual terms, through the transformation exerted in space itself by modifying the natural landscape and turning it into the stage of social action.

### **Virtual space, hypertext and nonlinear narrative**

To the mentioned traditional notions of space, has joined in recent decades the notion of virtual space. Although the notion of "virtuality" has existed for centuries in Western thought, in the last couple of decades this category has taken a profound importance, linked to the revolution brought by digital technologies. In this context, the virtual "refers to a digital object without physical existence. [With whom] virtual links with a built simulacra effect, overturned from a landmark in the real."<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the virtual space can be understood as a universe constituted by data, somehow independent from the real world, where spatiality is constituted by the structure resulting from the possible interconnections between global set of different types and layers of information that exist in the digital environment. Although this space could be understood to some extent as a purely conceptual space, and in that sense, nonexistent; the reality of this form of spatiality is evidenced in its own performativity. Thus, we see that the logic and architecture of this space is socially established and naturalized by agents who inhabit and shape the digital world, so its existence is not subjective and purely mental, but actual and social; but also, we are aware of its existence by the strong influence that this space has had on the social transformations of recent decades. In short: the virtual space has completely transformed how we relate and communicate in physical space, through the way in which information circulates, and thus destroys the timing of the second space, turning all information instantaneous and simultaneous.

In contrast to traditional media such as book or film, where the temporal organization is prioritized, digital media tend towards spatial organization, which moves into the background the temporality of information. In virtual space, information lives at one time, and can be accessed simultaneously. This happens in two ways: First, the computer screen, and digital interfaces in general, are hinged so that the information is displayed in spatial terms through windows that allow you to query simultaneously a lot of information. For example, unlike the cinema screen, where one element is displayed in time; or the less traditional television screen, where sometimes we can see some layers of superimposed information as the pipe character or divided into tiles screens; the digital interface is characterized by the complete juxtaposition of multiple types of information, not always correlated, with which the user can interact. "In the computer, we can be in two (or more) places at once, in two (or more) time frames, in two (or more) modes of identity in a post-Cartesian fractured cyberspace."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the spatiality of the digital world takes on a deeper meaning, through the possibility for this type of media to build complex networks of meaning and referentiality, through hypertext. This capacity is the creation of reference networks, which are displayed horizontally through hyperlinks, allowing the contextualization of information.

Hypertextuality proposed nonlinear narrative models, where different types of information can be chained together to form a complex structure, which can be explored in great multiplicity of forms by the user, without necessarily see any of them privileged over the others. The virtual space would

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<sup>4</sup> Friedberg, Anne, *The virtual window*, MIT press, USA, 2006, p. 10

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, p.235

then become a navigable structure where "this space structured as a kind of architecture, and [it] provides a method of navigation. Each position within the space provides a conceptual standpoint, defined and limited by the surrounding architectural structure. Browse this structure presents the viewer with a series of views of space and its contents"<sup>6</sup>. In other words, this space is articulated through different methods of interaction and navigation that its own architecture proposes, and which links the information in a way that allows the reading of it from different perspectives, giving thus the possibility of constructing different interpretations or horizons of sense, for the same piece of information.

Hypertextuality has operated a dramatic change in the narrative expressions that occur inside the digital world. In this sense, we can say, for example, that "if in relation to the art of Internet we can talk about some narrative form predominant throughout its history, it would be linked to the spatialization of elements, the spatial assembly of image hotspots, hyperlinks or destination addresses, shaping those associative chains we call << hypertext >> and where the story is nothing but a risky path by the user"<sup>7</sup>. We will see a reconfiguration, given by the hypertext, of the narrative practices, that allow authors to explore the possibility of narrating, not through time but through the deployment on how narrative appears in spatial terms. This creates architectures, maps, or navigable areas, in which the narrative unfolds as an itinerary built haphazardly by reader scans.

### **Locative media and geographic narrative**

As already mentioned, digital technologies have profoundly affected our experience of real space by the opportunity of abolishing time, thanks to the possibility of immediate and simultaneous transmission and consumption of information. However, this trend has become more apparent in recent years through the capacity provided by an ecosystem of mobile devices and wireless networks, which can include under the term locative media, to live within the virtual space outside the computer screen, displacing the digital world into the physical space. In other words, creating an hybrid space that connects both real and virtual space, and where a layer of digital information is juxtaposed and determines our experience of the real world.

We can find this hybrid space background in more traditional media such as paperback books. In this sense, one can say that the printing of the first copies of such publications during the nineteenth century "established the book as the dominant form of mobile medium."<sup>8</sup> Thus, the 'book' device, which for centuries had been tied up to fixed places of consultation, has moved to public space, determining (although still in a very limited way) our experience of space, as well as our reading experience. Read a book in the public space implies somewhat isolation from the world around us. At the same time, this also affects our reading, involving a lot of surrounding stimuli, while affecting our perception of space itself, moving to some extent the imaginary formed by reading to where reading occurs.

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<sup>6</sup> Rokeby, David, *Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media*, accessed online: <http://www.davidrokeby.com/mirrors.html>, 26/02/2015.

<sup>7</sup> Prada, Juan Martin, *Artistic practices and Internet in the era of social networking*, Akal, Spain, 2012, p. 130

<sup>8</sup> De Souza e Silva, Adriana y Frith, Jordan, *Mobile Interfaces in public spaces*, Ed. Routledge, NY, 2012, p.37

A similar shift has happened in the last five years with locative media: If the initial paradigm of digital media predicted a shift from real to virtual space, based on the consumption model linked to the personal computer; today we live in a paradigm in which the virtual world begins to move towards the physical world, thanks to the ubiquity of digital information, determining social relations, the form of cultural consumption, and the ways of interacting with data. More precisely, what locative media changed in relation to space is the possibility of linking specific locations with data, which is dynamic in every way; creating an hypertext structure that unfolds in physical space, where the links between different types of information are given by the location, and whose navigation is linked to the real possibility of moving through physical space. The location becomes a parameter that filters the universe of digital online information, and mobile devices interfaces become "symbolic systems that filter the information and actively reconfigure communication relations, and reconfiguring the space in which social interaction takes place."<sup>9</sup>

The location, in this context, acquires great importance, becoming crucial in the consumption of information. "Finding a location means no more to find their geographical coordinates, but also to access an abundance of digital information that now belongs to that location."<sup>10</sup> Through this process, the physical space is renewed and goes from being an abstract and objective space to a socialized space, individually experienced through the use of personal digital interfaces. And at the same time, digital information adds multiple perspectives through which to interpret the space, while the location can give context to the information that is consumed.

This new relationship between information and space allows to counteract the trend that the abstract notion of space has to erase the signs and marks of history and identity. Against a tradition that thinks the location as a mere objective and descriptive data to identify a point in an abstract space, the hybridization between physical and informational space allows to use the location as a fact, which contextualizes the information at the same time that transforms the experience of space. So, while the historical expression of the abstract notion of space results in the production of what Marc Augé characterized as non-places: that is, places with specific locations, but without history or identity and whose vocation is economic in nature; the current trend of production of hybrid spaces enables the recovery of layers of information that give meaning to space. The locations are transformed into places characterized by their connection to multiple types of information, which in many cases allows the re-registration of history in space.

In this context, geolocation technologies allow the restoration of the city as a symbolic and relational space, facing the prevailing abstract notion. "The urban fabric is not only now made of stone, bricks and mortar, but also includes code and connectivity. Invisible geometries around us, information architectures that indicate that the space in which we live [...] is and always will be an indistinguishable combination of both"<sup>11</sup>. The streets, colonies, architectural buildings, squares, parks and monuments, acquire the ability to reset their narrative, linked to real or fictional stories that strengthen the link between citizens and their space, and thus its relationship with social space as an expression of that narrative.

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<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, p. 4

<sup>10</sup> De Souza e Silva, Adriana y Frith, Jordan, *Mobile Interfaces in public spaces*, Routledge, NY, 2012, p.9

<sup>11</sup> Prada, Juan Martin, *Artistic practices and Internet in the era of social networking*, Akal, Spain, 2012, p. 221

Geo-notation practice, or spatial log, becomes a form writing in space, which creates links between geographic space, and digital information. Although throughout history there have been various expressions of inscription in space, ranging from the creation of monuments, graffiti, or even artistic practices as landart; digital notes differ in several respects. "New forms of urban annotation using mobile technologies [...] are seen as new cartographic practices, tagging, linking and sharing that expand both the possibilities and the participation of urban registration"<sup>12</sup>. So on the one hand, this kind of inscriptions allow participatory and collaborative dynamics, where any person with a mobile device equipped with GPS can appropriate the space, and create annotations in it. On the other hand, this type of annotation, while virtual, allows dynamic information nonaggressive with the space. Finally, this type of annotation, as mentioned above, allows the creation of hypertext location-based networks with a grid of digital content that is spatially deployed through the association of location and information. In this sense, "if hypertext generally undermines our inherited notions of stability, firmness, and authority of print text and the reader, then the real-time hyper-narrative goes further, allowing an author to create dynamic stories and sensitive to the temporal context, reacting to current events in time"<sup>13</sup>, which the geographic narrative ends up accentuating and increasing, by allowing the deployment of a spatial dimension, adding the relation to the geographical space, and the involvement the physical body within the narrative.

A practice of geo-notation is thus established. Writing in space, consist on the creation of links between a particular location, acquired via a GPS device, and some digital information, which may vary between different media, such as text, audio, image or video. Such annotations are articulated through applications that enable users to navigate the space as a way of exploratory practice that allows them to discover the different types of information embedded in it. Through the set of geo-notations, narratives can be articulated. Such narratives can be traveled in the form of a linear route, as well as a hypertext and non-linear structure, which allows to discover the narrative in a fragmentary way, insofar the space is traveled. This feature forces the reader to physically locate inside the narrative and inhabit it. Thus, "[t]he act of storytelling is in fact an act of registration. It is a deed of place, identity, and relationships"<sup>14</sup>. This features are enhanced by requiring that both the act of writing, as well as the act of reading are located in real space, and thus related to the stage of the narrative. In this sense, "when inserting the body in an empathetic way, history becomes something that is built by imperfect human perception rather than simply be a series of events that are narrated without body or agency"<sup>15</sup>. Finally, this breaks with an abstract and objective notion of space, and instead space appears as lived, experienced and narrated. The city becomes field of references, from which a narrative is articulated, that allows new links between inhabitants, urban space and the social space. New meanings emerge in places that once seemed emptied of content. The place is narrated, and a narration comes through the place. The space is again symbolic but not in the traditional sense, but in a way that produces meaning through personal and subjective narratives that surround it.

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<sup>12</sup> Farman, Jason, *Mobile Interface Theory*, Routledge, NY, 2012, p. 121

<sup>13</sup> Greenspan, Brian. *Songlines in the Streets: Story Mapping with Itinerant Hypernarrative*, in *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age*. University of Nebraska Press, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Farman, Jason. *Mobile Interface Theory*. Routledge, NY, 2012, p. 118

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, P. 126