

Turning the corner

Description

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â??â?¦a turn in the drive; and suddenly a new and secret landscape opened before us.â?• This is Evelyn Waughâ??s account of arrival at the Brideshead estate in *Brideshead Revisited*. I recall something similar when I once approached Blenheim Palace from the narrow streets in the village of Woodstock. Turning the corner from the Market Square and Park Street you look through a gate at a landscape of an altogether different scale. Itâ??s a magic moment.

I like the description CS Lewis provides of something similar in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, as Lucy finds herself secreted in a wardrobe full of fur coats. As she ventures deeper into the wardrobe the fur coats become fir trees, the white mothballs become snow, and sheâ??s in Narnia.

Travel through less extraordinary landscapes also involves transitions from one condition to another â?? changes in mood marked by openings and turnings around so many corners. Pedestrians pass over the thresholds of doorways, cross over from the footpath to the road, from inside a building to the street, from one precinct to another, from an orientation at right angles to one parallel to the street â??





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Invisible lines

Not all threshold encounters are visible as lines, corners or marks in space, though travelers may detect their effects. There are zones of microclimatic variation, areas of light and dark, transitions into and out of the shadows.

The architectural historian and theorist Colin Rowe described urban spaces in terms of transparent overlays, in plan, elevation or section, that overlap and distort one another in the manner of the patches of colour and grain in a cubist painting, creating areas of ambiguity and richly textured meaning.

Not all such transitions are marked out in the fabric of the environment. Think of a town with buildings, streets, and public squares. In some parts of the town you will get clear vistas over to the town hall. At the same spot, if you turn to the right you will experience a clear view into the town square. Behind you will get a view to the forecourt of the library. If you move 200 meters to the left you might find yourself facing a small side street, that provides a much smaller area of view, that is, the extent of your view is reduced.

So the thresholds between areas of high and low visibility donâ??t necessarily correspond to doorways, entries, or changes in materials, but lines that cut across spaces. Such thresholds also move around, as doors are opened and closed, new structures erected, with changes in vegetation, and as the viewer stands or sits to adjust her height.

Digital thresholds

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Iâ??m interested in how mobile technologies further distort such configurations of views. Digital cameras can be held at arms length, high above your head to expand the range of view, as if a periscope. They also contract space. From my kitchen window I thought I saw a hawk perched on a neighbourâ??s wall. I photographed the blurry object with my digital camera on full zoom, and inspected it in detail on the cameraâ??s flat screen viewfinder. (It turned out to be a pigeon puffed up in the cold.)

Sonic thresholds

Urban overlays involve sound too. As Iâ??ve reported previously, acoustic thresholds are characterized by an even greater dynamism than the visual. In an essay on sounds in the city, Jean-Paul Thibaud calls on people to think of public spaces in terms of sonic â??thresholds, knots and configurationsâ?• (332).

In their study of everyday sounds in the environment, Augoyard and Torgue explain sonic thresholds in terms of the *cut*, which: â??is a sudden drop in intensity associated with an abrupt change in the spectral envelope of a sound or a modification of reverberation (moving from reverberant to dull spaces, for instance). This effect is an important process of articulation between spaces and locations; it punctuates movement from one ambience to anotherâ?• (29).

Leaky boundaries

The correspondences between visual and acoustic spaces are only loosely formed, and characterised as so many leakages across each otherâ??s thresholds. In a journey along a street the walker experiences the sound of someone revving a car engine in a side lane. The sound increases in intensity as she moves towards the side street and recedes as she continues on her journey. The sound is cut by buildings lining the streets in ways that views are not. Sounds dissipate, reflect, and leak. They also operate obliquely. You donâ??t need to face the side street to experience the sound. As with vision, the sound transitions can be abrupt, but unpredictable, and of unidentified source. Sounds can travel over

and around corners.

Limits to mapping

Sonic thresholds further highlight an important aspect of travel: the overlay of zones, spaces, fields, and thresholds. If such encounters can be mapped then they are maps overlaid one on the other, fading in and out of prominence, moving in and out of focus, and prone to interference effects between maps.

Occasionally the traveler reaches a â??calibration point,â?• where fields correspond, or there is visual corroboration or verification. We see the source of the sound, identify the tower of a mobile phone base station, hear the street vendor, and tune in to a location.

Travellers make thresholds

The traveller can be thought of as a disturbance in various fields, and a mobile creator of these fields. In this case the traveler is a catalyst, irritant, parasite, disturbance in the fields, a portal or permeable moment within a field: the creator, distributor, and perpetuator of thresholds. Of course itâ??s never the traveller alone, but a mobile army of movement. Think of â??waves of fansâ?• descending on a stadium, sometimes made obvious by costumes and coloured banners, as if fluid fields of disturbance, disgorged from busses and trains. Even independent travelers congregate. They arrive and leave, and follow the seasons: the ebb and flow of uniform seas punctuated by small differences.

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EEG thresholds

It seems that most lab-based research with EEG focusses on events: the changes in brain wave patterns that occur when thereâ??s a change in the stimulus: e.g. a change in a musical tone, a slip in the rhythm, adjustment in key, etc. Such changes register as peaks in a personâ??s arousal, or other brain states. Perhaps something similar occurs in a travellerâ??s transition through the environment. Itâ??s the â??ahaâ?• moment, the shock, the discovery, or other blip in emotional key, the shift in environmental stimulus, and the threshold crossing â?? as the aware pedestrian turns a corner, and registers as a significant change in mood. From then on itâ??s the recollection of that peak in arousal, and other lingering effects, that constitute a memorable, edifying, â??salutogenicâ?• or unpleasant spatial experience. Thatâ??s something to test at least: the importance of thresholds and the lingering memories of such encounters in the formation of the mood of a place.



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Notes

- I pursue the theme of spatial thresholds, sound and digital devices in Coyne, Richard 2010. *The Tuning of Place: Sociable Spaces and Pervasive Digital Media,* Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.
- Also see Where is that sound? Walking the line, Enchanted places, and blog posts tagged mood and EEG.



Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. brain
2. EEG
3. mood
4. place
5. threshold

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