

Spaces of Entanglement: Negotiating European Crossroads

Introducing European Entanglements

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This thematic issue is inspired by space: a complex concept of dynamic dimensions that cannot be captured yet imposes interpretation. Addressing ‘Spaces of Entanglement’ from the angle of the narrative impulse which underlies every interpretative act, the current collection of articles relies on tools and theories from literary and intermedial studies to establish space-induced signification as a writerly act in the Barthesian sense. The implications of adopting such a posture are not slight in the least, as the insights it generates automatically feed back into extant discourses on thematic and epistemological levels alike.

Advances in semiology and cognitive studies since the 1960s have demonstrated that our notions of what concretely constitutes either an ‘interpretation’ or a ‘text’ have gradually shifted from ‘single-track’ constructs to ‘multi-track’ meaning structures comprised of various semiotic codes (see Desjardins). ‘Reality,’ as perceived through the lens of human cognition, as such appears as complexly entangled, absolutely inaccessible, yet materialized at the same time, and hence solely to be accessed via an individually assembled collage of manifold constituents.

As one of the pioneering spatiality scholars in the humanities Gaston Bachelard posited in his *Poétique de l'espace* (1957), any ‘image’ is the fruit of a cooperation between reality and irreality (67), and hence a concretization of a signifying impulse. Studying ideas and phenomena alike, accordingly, becomes primarily an anatomy of the living, the elusive, the un-essentializable. But how does one study the throbbing liveness of elusive phenomena – concretized as they may be? How can we negotiate the tension between concept and

context, object and subjectivity without falling foul of the axiom of futility? In this thematic issue entitled ‘Spaces of Entanglement’ we seek to arrive at a rationale for a credible approach to the complex relation between spatiality and signification.

The artistic works and diverse cultural phenomena under scrutiny here arguably help stimulate what Trencsényi and Cochrane have termed “process consciousness” (xii). Precisely by exploiting the principle of ‘space’ in material and/or metaphorical sense, the articles we present in this issue effectively contribute to a re-routing of more traditional hermeneutics of understanding via ‘single-track,’ linearly progressing narratives, to a space-induced sense of simultaneity as organizing principle. All contributions thus stimulate a reconsideration of received conceptions of ‘meaning’ and a more layered awareness of the processes that bring them about. A brittle balance, in fact, between materialized complexity and processual logic that despite its paradoxical qualities allows to create order out of perceived chaos.

That the artistic cases, which are examined in the following, are heavily imbued in literary signification should come as no surprise. For if we break down the principle of poetic composition to its barest essentials, the one formal feature that strikes before all others is its spatial organization (see Richardson 69). Addressing literature or any other – indeed ‘multi-track’ – artform from its intrinsic convergence of entangled concerns and constituents arguably provides us with a clearer understanding of *how* a singular ‘text’ functions within a complex context. As Brazilian novelist and critic Osman Lins once claimed, “it is important to pay detailed attention, in a literary work, to the way in which that work understands *its own* space and time, or, more exactly, to the treatment accorded to space and time in the work” (76 – original emphasis; translation ours). After all, if we do not understand how an artistic ‘text’ communicates, how can we go on making contextualized presuppositions? And how are we credibly going to establish the junction between object and context?

Humanist geographer and theorist Doreen Massey most notably claimed ‘interconnectedness’ as key to understanding the reality of spaces and places since “space is a product in process [...] never something finished, nor is it a closed totality” (331). Essentializing any object under scrutiny, thus, boils down to killing the patient to examine their blood circulation. The whole so-called ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities in fact relates to this reasoning: from Martin Heidegger’s articulation of ‘Being’ as implying a conjunction of the abstract and the concrete (i.e. one cannot be without being located), over Casey and de Certeau’s space/place-debate, to Henri Lefebvre’s tripartite conception of overlapping concerns (‘perceptions of space’ / ‘conceptualizations of space’ / ‘spaces of representation’), the common thread is hybridization through human agency.

With this special issue we have chosen to underscore said principle of entanglement as stepping stone to studies of spatiality in the arts because we believe that highlighting their shared impetus of inclusivity allows for more layered assessments of the thematic issues broached in the following collection of articles. Along Chris Salter, author of the landmark monograph *Entangled* (2010), it so becomes possible to link traditional close-readings and analytical insights with:

- [1] an interest in enaction or doing;
- [2] a privileging of dynamic processes over static objects or representations;
- [3] an engagement with the temporal moment of the present;
- [4] embodiment and materiality;
- [5] immanent experience;
- [6] the effect of both human and nonhuman presence;
- [7] transmutation and reconstitution (see Salter xxiii).

In short, in ‘Spaces of Entanglement’ we aim to move beyond those dichotomies that seek to underscore differences. Instead, all six authors were tasked with addressing precisely the

confluences of impulses and influences present in and spilling over the artistic works discussed here.

Rey Chow, other leading voice on cultural entanglements, historicizes this “topological looping together that is at the same time an enmeshment of topics” (1) back to the writings of Walter Benjamin on the estrangement techniques of theatre innovator Bertolt Brecht, to the mixing and matching of (post)modernist montage techniques along usual suspects Foucault and Deleuze, as well as the ‘aura-by-proxy’ of mechanized reproductions – another key Benjaminian concept. To Chow, this integrative reflex can be repurposed “as a thesis about the afterlife of the part and the partial” (4): ‘originality’ and ‘purity’ cease to be viable concepts, while what matters now is, again, how signification is constituted in a complexly entangled contemporary space.

Artistically as well as politically, this reasoning in our view finds no greater and more relevant platform than the European space – at once a crossroads of cultures and a contact zone of countries. The question of what exactly defines Europe as an ‘idea, identity, reality’ (Delanty) is a topic of ongoing debate. Is Europe a philosophical idea, a geographical concept, an imagined community (*sensu* Benedict Anderson), a chiffre for related issues such as modernity, democracy and nationalism? Is it defined by Christianity, white privilege, a shared memorial cultural? Does it equate with ‘the West’ (Occident)? How is Europe defined as a space? Where does it begin and end? Is it a continent? A feeling? A centre (of the world)? A fortress or El Dorado? How are we to account for the differences and continuities between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ Europe? And how exactly does the European Union (EU), which itself can be seen interchangeably as a peace mission, an economic undertaking, a bureaucratic mess, and a totalising project, relate to the more encompassing notion of ‘Europe’?

According to sociologist Gerard Delanty, Europe's ambiguity is a result of the fact that "every age reinvented the idea of Europe in the mirror of its own identity" (1). Delanty moreover attributes Europe's indefiniteness to the Eurocentric mindset, on the basis of which Europe acts as a centre that is 'othering' its peripheries but neglecting to define itself: "There are several studies on the idea of the Orient as a European construction while the idea of Europe itself as an invention has never been scrutinised" (vii). Not just historians "generally use it [the idea of Europe] in an unreflective manner as a foil" (viii); postcolonial scholars likewise tend to operate with a monolithic notion of ('old' colonial) Europe, as Frank Schulze-Engler has so forcefully claimed (cf. 659-671). Therefore, they often fail to reflect on the 'new' post-wall Europe and the open-ended process of European integration. Hence, Europe still poses a (geo-)political, conceptual, cultural, and imaginative challenge.

For one, Europe's borders are far from definite. This concerns in particular those of the 'new' Europe that has emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the downfall of Communism, and the end of the Cold War. By suspending East and West in enmity, the latter had established a clear borderline in the middle of Europe, dividing Germany in East and West, turning post-war Europe into a 'buffer' between the two world powers of Russia and the US. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing European integration, however, Europe's geopolitical extension changed dramatically. On 3 October 1990, BRD and GDR celebrated the German reunification which enlarged the EU without increasing the number of member states. With the Eastern enlargements of 2004 and 2007, processes of European integration culminated in the admission of no less than 12 new states to the European Union (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004; Bulgaria and Rumania in 2007). Since then, the only country being newly admitted to the EU was Croatia in 2013.

The enlargements brought the problem of borders to the fore – a problem that Etienne Balibar aptly describes as follows: “the European Union is in principle open to indefinite expansion without preestablished limits, while leaving outside or ‘excluding’ some territories historically considered ‘European’” (2009, 192). In his eponymous essay, Balibar identifies four conflicting policies for constituting ‘Europe as Borderland’ by way of producing strangers/foreigners, namely “the *clash-of-civilizations pattern*; the *global network pattern*, the *center-periphery pattern*; and, finally, the *crossover pattern*” (2009, 194; original emphasis). Of these four, the crossover pattern comes closest to the idea of entanglement put forward in this special issue. According to the French philosopher, this pattern is “a schematic projection of an idea that can be found in many contemporary critiques of the notion of ‘pure’ cultural identity” (2009, 200). The author identifies postcolonial literature, but also works (of art or study) which address the so-called ‘Euroregions’, i.e. the more than 200 often multilingual intra-European cross-border regions (including, for instance, the Baltic, the Carpathian, the Lower Danube, Silesia, Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino; cf. Durà et al. 31-43) or other ‘topological hotspots’ (see Habermann in this volume) as sites of such critique. Together, they reveal that even “in the very ‘heart’ of Europe all languages, religions, cultures are coexisting and mixing, with origins and connections all over the world. If this is a ‘middle’, then, it is not a center, but, rather, ‘a series of assembled peripheries’ [...]. There is no ‘center’; there are only ‘peripheries’” (Balibar 2009, 200). Consequently, for Balibar, “the Balkan patchwork” represents not so much “an exception and an anomaly [...] [but] rather an epitome and an allegory of Europe” (2009, 200; see Balibar 2002, 87-103; see also Hauthal in this volume). Given the general shift from the unreflective, monolithic and homogenizing notion of ‘old’ Europe to the more ‘glocalized’, hybrid, and open conceptualizations of the ‘new’ Europe, it should come as no surprise that the following

contributions turn to the notion of ‘entanglement’ to approach the representation of European spaces across a wide-ranging corpus.

This issue, the fruit of the 6th Research Day of the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings hosted at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel on 10 November 2016, brings together five articles related to European spaces of entanglement. The first article by Ina Habermann starts by presenting the reader a substantial theoretical framework centring round the concepts of ‘space’, ‘cultural topographies’ and ‘topological hotspots.’ Emphasizing points of contact, liminal spaces, crossroads, and border zones, the author proposes to add the notion of ‘entanglement’ in order to study the interconnectedness of these spaces within Europe and their relation to the global perspective. Focusing on the topological hotspot of Gibraltar, Habermann illustrates her theoretical findings through an analysis of the novel *The Escape Artist* by the Gibraltar writer M.G. Sanchez, in which ‘the Rock’ emerges as the epitome of British-European entanglements, which have acquired a renewed relevance in the era of ‘Brexit.’

Janine Hauthal also takes the 2016 British vote to leave the European Union as her cue. Her contribution analyses the play *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015) by Scottish writer Zinnie Harris in order to illustrate how British theatre proactively dealt with social and political factors that may have fed into the Brexit vote. Hauthal’s exploration of the play demonstrates that both Harris’s strategy of reversal and the magical-realist aesthetics of her dystopia can be linked to the notion of entanglement and, thereby, contribute to re-imagining Britain in/out of Europe.

Annelies Augustyns and Arvi Sepp investigate the experience of daily life in the city of Breslau under Nazi rule as depicted in the German-Jewish diaries written by Willy Cohn and Walter Tausk. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s theory of ‘heterotopia,’ they show how, in the diaries, the cemetery, the library, and the synagogue emerge as the last safe places for

Breslau Jews. The authors go on to argue that these places can be seen as spaces of entanglement, where a material and a metaphorical sense of space is combined, because not only do they function as spaces of refuge but also as spaces of reflection, introspection, and remembrance. Ultimately, the temporary appropriation of these spaces by the Jewish people can be understood as a tactical form of resistance (*sensu de Certeau*).

The last two contributions are dedicated to the European spaces of Belgium and Brussels. In his contribution, Christophe Collard exposes the concept of entanglement in Belgian architecture, where building projects are intermingled with a culture of compromise. Via a discussion of the mockumentary series *Journal des Travaux Inutiles* (1986-2012) by the RTBF-journalist Jean-Claude Defossé, the author deals with the entangled conceptions of space, myth, and writing as complementary constituents of a re-routed history.

The final contribution by Ronald Geerts compares the filmic representation of Brussels and New York in the work of Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman. The author maintains that a contrasting presentation of the two urban spaces shows in the predominance of private interiors in scenes set in Brussels (and in the ‘fictional’ character of these scenes) as opposed to the accentuation of exterior public spaces in Akerman’s more ‘objective’ portrayal of New York. In addition, by exploring the biographical foundations and functions of the oppositional construction of narrative space (and of the fact that Paris, Akerman’s principal abode, remains curiously absent) in this filmmaker’s early productions, Geerts reveals how the two cities emerge as entangled spaces.

Due to the thematic variety of the contributions here presented, this issue shows that the concept of ‘entanglement’ can be used to analyse ‘space’ in different literary genres. It builds an interesting departure for further research on the idea of ‘spaces of entanglement’ in a European context, or further afield. Ultimately, writing about Europe as a crossroads of entangled spaces does not just have the potential to challenge received notions of Europe, but

itself imposes intrinsically entangled writing practices and, accordingly, expands the theoretical toolkit of literary and intermedial studies while simultaneously broadening their reach and relevance.

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