Dwell the Threshold:
Encountering Otherness

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This paper offers a short reflection on the role of space in the act of the encounter with Otherness, which the authors view as a catalyst for a radical social and cultural transformation of society. The main argument ley in the fact that in between the Self and the Other there is a space, a gap – the Lacanian 'field of non meaning'- where different entities enter into relation producing a new hybrid one that transcends the initial.

This encounter produces a space of confrontation, a space in-between things, a threshold: a 'place where different worlds meet', a space that consents the reciprocal knowledge and recognition. To 'dwell the threshold' means to dwell that distance that separates such different entities. To 'dwell the threshold' becomes a practice allowing to perforate the boundary between the Self and the Other. By looking at the act of 'dwelling the threshold' as inherent architectural capacities, the paper illustrates its essence with three spatial methaphores: the Border or 'the zone of interaction among differences', the Circle or 'the space of play as catalyst of encounter' and the Interstices or 'fragments of different spatial orders'.

This framework, far from being normative and over-comprehensive, attempts to open possible paths of interpretation about exceptionality, and shed light over the spatial possibilities of encounters.

The Other and the Self

What do we refer to when we talk about the Other and what is its relationship with the Self? According to Lacan there is a close relationship between the Self and the Other: "the human being has always to learn from scratch from the Other what he has to do", a relationship "entirely produced in a process of gap" (Lacan, 1973: 206) which is circular between the subject and the Other. Lacan defines this 'gap' as Alienation, a 'field of non-meaning' (ibid.) in the joining between the subject and the Other, between the *being* and the *meaning* that has as its consequence a new entity that is "*neither one, nor the other*" (ibid: 211). As the Slovenian philosopher Mladen Dolar points out "the question of the Other brings forth not merely the numerical two, the second following the first, but the question of something of a different order, something that is not a mere extension of the first, but rather something that would really present two, count for two, the two heterogeneous to the one and recalcitrant to the progression of ones into infinity" (Dolar, 2012: 1). Accordingly, "the two that we are after is not the binary two of equal or different ones, extensions of the same order, but the two of the one and the Other" (ibid.). This 'irreducible gap' is what Lacan had defined as 'field of non-meaning' between the Self and the Other, characterised by a lack and a void.

What constitutes the mediation between the Self and the Other and what is the reciprocal position could possibly be elaborated and searched in the realm of liminality. As per Turner's explanation, "the attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space." (Turner, 1969: 95). What liminality implies is that "social life is a type of dialectical process" in which the passage from one state to another, for example from homogeneity to differentiation, creates a "limbo of statuslessness". "In such a process, the opposites, as it were, constitute one another and are mutually indispensable" (ibid.:97).

It is in the liminal zones of uncertainty and ambiguity between the Self and the Other that it is possible to challenge stereotype and fear of Alterity. Building on Lacan's concept of Alienation, and on Turner's Liminality and translating them into cultural terms, Bhabha argues that the encounter of elements belonging to different, even contradictory instances, produces a process of mutual hybridisation that overcomes the singular identities and creates something new beyond them, which is fundamental in order to produce political change. In this process a space is produced of 'indeterminacy of meaning' and 'slippage of the signifier' (ibid.), it is the space of translation, which opens up a site for negotiation of cultural difference. As Bhabha argues: "The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (Bhabha, cited in Rutherford, 1998).

Having defined the relationship between the Self and the Other as substantiated of a 'gap' where the confrontation among differences takes place, this paper will now focus on the role of space in the potential emancipating transformation of society embedded in the act of the encounter with Otherness.

The Other and Space: from 'heterotopias of difference' to spaces of threshold

In an exceptional lecture, Michel Foucault asserted that in every civilisation there exist spaces "outside all places" that function as realised, or materialised, utopia. He maintained that these spaces "have the curious property of being in relation with all other sites, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralise, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (Foucault, 1984: 24). Foucault's *heterotopia* would break and even subvert the logic ingrained in dominating spaces as they would expose an alternative to the status quo. Foucaultian *heterotopias* represent a challenging entry point to the spatial exploration of the relationship between the Self and the Other, towards the definition of the role of space in the process of encounter among differences and hybridisation of cultures.

The word *heterotopia* consists of two parts derived from the Greek *heteros* (another) and *topos* (place). Foucault defines them as "counter-arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localisable" (ibid.). Foucault portrays them using the metaphor of the mirror. Even though it can be considered as an utopia, in the sense that it is a place without a place, "the mirror –he argues- functions as a *heterotopia*, since it makes the place that I occupy, whenever I look at myself in the glass, both absolutely real - it is in fact linked to all the surrounding space, and absolutely unreal, for in order to be perceived it has of necessity to pass that virtual point that is situated down there" (ibid.).

Because of their inverse relation with real spaces of society, *heterotopias* often accommodate differences. Through offering a shelter to "people who do not fit into the dominant social norm" (Cenzatti, 2008: 76), they constitute the place from where different lifestyles and cultural identities "emerge out of the struggle for recognition". In this sense Cenzatti defines as '*heterotopias* of difference' those places where "irreconcilable spaces coexist, but what constitutes irreconcilability is constantly contested and changing" (ibid: 79). This argument stands on a combination of Lefebvre's thoughts on space as being, rather than an inert support of social action, a part of the social action itself, and of Foucault's thoughts on *heterotopias* as making explicit the fragmentary, transitory and transformational nature of the production of space (ibid.). Building on these concepts, and on Cenzatti's argument that "confrontation between different publics is an essential element of plurality, since it is through disagreement and conflict that different social groups avoid isolating themselves or being pushed into isolation" (ibid: 83), we finally start to envisage those spaces that consent social confrontation as *threshold* spaces.

Thresholds represent the physical manifestation of what Bhabha defines 'the space of the entre' that "carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (Bhabha, 1988: 209). As he argues: "It is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this 'third space', we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves" (ibid.). The concept of space in-between, or 'third space', as it was first defined by Soja (1996) was also explored by Luke and Luke (1999: 234): "The third space is the site and moment of hybridity, of ambivalence, of reworking and renaming, of subverting and recreating identity from among multi-embedded social constructions of Otherness." A different nuanced notion of *threshold* was introduced by Stavrides, in his '*Towards the City of Thresholds*' as: "the spatiality of a public culture of mutually aware, interdependent and involved identities" (Stavrides, 2006: 1). Again, building on Lefebvre's idea of space participating in social action, Stavrides argues that "a rich network of practices transforms every available space into a potential theatre of expressive acts of encounter" (ibid: 2), creating opportunities for social and cultural change. Under this light, social action, through the direct involvement of people, has the power to activate "moments of encounter with socially recognisable otherness", and to catalyse the potential physical transformation of space as a result of this encounter.

Starting to analyse the relation between space and alterity from Foucaultian *heterotopias*, as they constitute a spatial arrangement that accommodates Otherness, the attention has been moved onto the space in-between *heterotopias* and their surrounding context, which they reflect, represent and challenge. *Threshold* has been identified as a spatiality that allows social confrontation to take place and, eventually, activate processes of physical transformation of space. Attention will be now focused on the very act, the praxis of dwelling as the condition for *thresholds* to catalyse social, cultural and physical change.

'Dwelling the *threshold*' as frontier of transformation

After having profiled spaces of *threshold* as those in-between, liminal zones of ambiguity, where the encounter among differences takes place, it is crucial to introduce the notion of dwelling as the practice that allows this processes of hybridisation to happen. In his *Poetry, Language, Though,* Heidegger considers dwelling as the very essence of the human being: "To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell" (Heidegger, 1971: 1ch), therefore building as a consequence of dwelling. It is dwelling the space what substantiates the act of building: "We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell" (ibid.). In other words, building implies dwelling.

To illustrate the ways in which building belongs to dwelling, Heidegger uses the example of the bridge. He argues that it is the bridge, through connecting two banks, that reveals the banks to be banks: "a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge. The bridge is a thing". While connecting two different things, the bridge is a place itself, "only something that is itself a location can make space for a site". The bridge allows connecting places variously near or far among each other and from the bridge. It occupies the distance between the things, a distance, in Greek stadion, means the interval or intervening space between things. Also Simmel in his *Bridge and Door* looks at the bridge as the element that, both physically and symbolically, connects things that are separated. As he argues: "things must first be isolated from one another in order to be together. Practically as well as logically, it would be meaningless to connect that which was not separated, and indeed that which also remains separated in some sense" (Simmel, 1994: 66-69). Besides the bridge, Simmel also explores another element, the door. It shares the same nature of the bridge of allowing the connection between things but the door "represents in a more decisive manner how separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act" (ibid.). By transcending the distance between things, the door symbolizes separation and connection in a stronger way than the bridge. It represents the "possibility of a permanent interchange". Differently from the bridge, which is a line stretched between two points, therefore connects finite with finite, the door connects the finite with "the limitlessness of all possible directions" (ibid.). In synthesis: "the bridge indicates how humankind unifies the separateness of merely natural being, and the door how it separates the uniform, continuous unity of natural being" (ibid.). Bridge and door represent *thresholds* as they recognise the distance between things of different nature, and consent their spatial confrontation and negotiation of meaning. Being dwelling the essence of building, and *threshold* the spatial device that consents the encounter among differences, we explore '*dwelling the threshold*' as the frontier for social, spatial and cultural transformation. Stavrides points out the liberating potential embedded into the *threshold*: it becomes the means "to invent the future now, as new forms of collective self-determination create ambiguous forms of coexistence in space. To be able to approach otherness in its potentially liberating comparison to dominant regulating values, means to be able to invent passages towards Otherness. It also means to be able to understand otherness as a process rather than as a state" (Stavrides, 2010: 14-15). For this process to happen, on the one hand, identities need to be open, instead of fixated into rigid boundaries, as well as human beings need to have, "flexible borders offering meeting points with otherness" (ibid.), rather than no borders at all. Similarly, spaces should be simultaneously separated and connected through a porous membrane. As Stavrides argues: "a borderline, transformed into a porous membrane, separates while connecting bordering areas" (ibid.).

As explored earlier, through Bhabha, these flexible borders consent processes of engagement and hybridisation to take place. *Thresholds*, while symbolising and concretising the act of simultaneously connecting and separating, represent "the point where two different worlds meet" (ibid: 16), so to '*dwell the threshold*' means to approach the Other through a process of 'mutual awareness'. It means to dwell that distance that separates different entities by procuring not to increase it, thus transforming it into hostility, nor to eliminate it, which would lead to assimilation of differences: "encounter is realised by keeping the necessary distance while crossing it at the same time" (Stavrides, 2010: 16-18). Bordering therefore becomes the frontier for social and cultural transformation as it, like every limit, implies the possibility to be crossed.

'*Dwelling the threshold*' constitutes the practice of perforating, profaning such boundaries between the Self and the Other, which allows the encounter, translation of meaning and negotiation of identities among differences. In order to unfold the meaning of these spaces for encounter, this paper will now profile three features of *threshold* spaces, three different means to approach the spatial manifestation of thresholds. *Border, Circle* and *Interstices* are thus introduced as spatial metaphors, to visualize *thresholds* in space. It is through dwelling these spaces that the encounter with Otherness becomes possible.

Dwelling the *Border, Circle* and *Interstices*: spaces and practices of encounter

As a link between theory and practice, *Border, Circle* and *Interstices* act as spatial metaphors of *threshold*. Their theoretical potential will unfold through a journey into literary references. The aim of these three elements is to exemplify the practical dimension of *thresholds* rather than giving an exhaustive explanation of them. Their value is to act as interpretative categories of the different possible spaces of encounter among differences.

The *Border*, the *Circle* and the *Interstices* encompass a combination of spaces and practices. For example *Border* refers to the thick space at the margin between two different spaces while *Circle* is more related to a practice, for example as the space that is created when a particular ritual is performed. *Interstices* is again a space, or a network of spaces, where an alternative vision over urban space is created through dwelling.

By creating occasions of encounter among differences, *spaces of threshold* unfold their transformative potential through the act of dwelling.

Border: the zone of interaction among differences

The first element of the spaces of *threshold* discussed here is *Border*. The argument builds upon Clement's visualization of the *Border* as a thick space: "Think to the borders as a thickness, rather than as a line. Think to the margin as a field of research on the richness that arise from the encounter of different environments" (Clement, 2004: 62). The nature of this space is further explored by Zanini (1997) in his *Meaning of the border*, where he underlines that there is a substantial difference between border and frontier: "border means a common limit, a separation between contiguous spaces. It is also a way in which to pacifically define the property right of everyone in a contested territory. Instead the frontier represents the end of the land, the faraway limit to venture out of which means to go beyond superstition against Gods' will, beyond what is fair and admitted, towards the unknowable that would have set off their envy." Crossing the frontier means to leave behind what is known, familiar and reassuring towards the unknown and the uncertain. "This passage, to go beyond the frontier, also transforms the character of an individual: beyond it one becomes stranger, emigrant, different not only to others, but also to oneself. And not always to go back to the starting point makes us find everything that we had left" (Zanini, 1997: 10-11). If the border is a fixed space, an established reference, a "stable and absolute line", with a strong and straight foreword character, the frontier is the space where differences meet and influence each other in the process of transforming social identities. The frontier is unstable, in continuous transformation and evolution. To dwell the *threshold*, therefore, means to "dwell and build this third space whose centre passes within it and within us to become men of border ourselves" (ibid.: 14).

Circle: the 'space of play' as a catalyst for encounter

The second element of spaces of *threshold* unfolded is *Circle*. It is through what De Cauter and Dehaene define as 'space of play' (De Cauter and Dehaene, 2008) that it is possible to explore the *threshold* dimension of the 'transient moment' of the performance and the event as a catalyst for encounter among differences. In the same way in which *heterotopias* interrupt the continuity of space, public performances and events interrupt the continuity of time. We consider *threshold* to be a space where Huizinga's (1938) 'homo ludens' can meet the Other, the stranger.

Huizinga's interpretation of play defines it as closely related to space: "the act of playing not only creates space, but also requires a space and a time entirely of its own. The magic *Circle* is the basic spatial gesture that defines the space of play" (Huizinga, 1938: 10, 20-1). It is a *threshold, a temenos*, in the sense that it is a "cut-out, a space set aside from the 'common' fabric of the world." It creates a distinction between who is inside and who is outside the *Circle*, and requires "some sort of initiation into the rules of the game" (De Cauter and Dehaene, 2008: 95-6). The act of playing has the capacity to create a sense of community. The 'space of play', the space inside the magic Circle, can be described, using Victor Turner's term, as a "liminal space: a space that, in its formal separation from the rest of the world, presents a realm of instability and possibility. That space which is seedbed of culture, its condition and possibility -from ritual to theatre- provides a clearing within the conventional order of society, sheltered from the normalizing forces of the everyday" (Turner, 1982: 20-60). The 'space of play' becomes threshold, therefore frontier for transformation, when the identities that take part to it are open and their boundaries are flexible, and, as long as the rules of the game are respected, dwelling the *Circle* has the magic potential of creating social and cultural transformation.

Intertices: 'fragments of different spatial orders'
The third and final metaphor of *threshold* are *Interstices*. What is particularly relevant is their heterotopian dimension as "fragments of different possible spatial orders" (Cenzatti, 2008: 75). The notion of *Interstices* can be drawn starting from Clement's conceptualisation of 'Third landscape' (Clement, 2004). The 'third landscape' refers to a spatiality composed of "undecided spaces, without function, which are uneasy to name", that are situated "at the margins". Clement visualises them as residues, deriving from "the abandon of an activity" (ibid: 18). From their biological dimension as fragments of landscape that "constitute a territory of refuge for diversity" (ibid: 10), residues gain the political dimension of representing a "shared fragment of collective consciousness" (ibid: 26).
The biological and physical dimension of Clement's residues, meets the philosophical and cultural notion of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomes. Rhizome is an "a-centred, non-hierarchical, non-signifying system without a General and without an organising memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 23). What is important in a rhizome is neither the beginning nor the end, but what is in the middle: "coming and going, rather than starting and finishing". "A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, inter-being, intermezzo."(ibid: 27)
What unites residues, as undecided fragments, and rhizomes, as connected, heterogeneous, multiple segments, into the notion of *Interstices* is their *threshold* capacity to refuge differences and to create non-hierarchical, a-centered spaces of encounter in-between other things. *Interstices* represent spaces where informal practices are the expression of the potential of cities to defend cultural difference in the production of the urban space, through a process of recognition and inclusion.

'Dwell the Threshold'. Towards a plural and multifaceted urban culture.
What is the role of space in the potential emancipating transformation of society embedded in the act of the encounter with Otherness is the central issue this paper has explored. Starting from Lacan's concept of Alienation to describe, in psycho-analytical terms, the 'field of non-meaning' substantiating the relationship between the Self and the Other, and translating it into spatial terms through Foucault's *heterotopias*, *thresholds* become the spatial reference developed as condition of possibilities for the a real confrontation of meanings performed through the act of dwelling. By dwelling the *Border*, the *Circle* and the *Interstices* of the *'espaces autres'*, it is possible to reformulate the relation between the Self and the Other and to create space for new, hybrid identities deriving from the encounter. Hybridity in this sense has the potential to overcome stereotypes and static hierarchies among different entities towards the creation of a plural, multifaceted urban culture.

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