Bordering on Infinity: Islands, Trains, and the Geopoetics of Space

Dr. des. Johannes Riquet, English Department, University of Zurich

In this two-part talk, I will draw on insights from two separate research projects to develop a set of questions revolving around (post-)phenomenological conceptions of space and, most importantly, spatial borders. I will discuss two spatial figures that have had a profound impact on modern views of space: the island and the train. Overall, my reflections will be guided by an awareness of what Derridean ecosopher Timothy Morton calls the “irreducible hidden dimension” of the environment (291), and what cultural geographer John Wylie refers to as the constitutive absences and distances structuring our experience of space (367).

In the first part of my talk, I will examine the island as a spatial figure articulating contradictory conceptions of the world which are closely tied to the problem of the island’s border. Islands have offered “the delusion of a comprehensible totality” (Tim Robinson) ever since what Tom Conley calls the “insular moment” of early modernity; they are often constructed as supremely bounded spaces. Yet there is a second story of islands which runs parallel to the first: they have simultaneously functioned as figures resisting geometrical abstraction and pointing towards fragmentation, diversity, dispersal and infinity. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of space and Benoît Mandelbrot’s fractal geometry, I will complicate the common conception of the early modern obsession with islands as a march towards visual control of space. Instead, I will argue that islands also challenged a cartographic view of space as clearly demarcated, mappable and traversed by clear-cut borders.

In the second part, I will reflect on the very different spatial figure of the train. If the emergence of the island as a key figure of thought is linked to the voyages of discovery of early modernity, Friedrich Nietzsche, writing in 1878, portrayed the railway carriage as paradigmatic of a specifically modern experience of space. While the regulatory and linear dimensions of the railroad have been well studied, I am interested in examining its disruptive kernel. Arguably, railroad fiction attains its force not (or not primarily) from the compartmentalisation of space and the regulation of time, but from the potential of their disruption. Albert Einstein and Henri Bergson both used the figure of the train to illustrate their conceptions of non-Euclidean spatiotemporality; as I want to argue, the fictional railroad gestured towards the abstract, the non-linear, the infinite and the contingent from its inception.

Albeit in different ways, both the train and the island are both spatial figures traditionally associated with spatial control and clear borders. I am interested in the potential of both to dissolve and complicate the borders they give seem to promise, and in the ways their aesthetic figurations can prompt a geopoetic engagement with space.