

The Journey to (No-)where— Constructing Place in a Space of Placelessness

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Abstract

We live in an interwoven world of temporal relations where our lives are embedded in a ceaseless process of unforeseeable changes. As we engage in this matrix of evolving links and interchanges, we continually re-position ourselves. This paper argues that place materializes not through the forces of a Vitruvian firmitas, but in a continuum of temporal relations, where place is to be found in the notion of moving points, animated by different forces that interact with one another.

Keywords: place, non-place, space, transit

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We're on a road to nowhere

Come on inside

Takin' that ride to nowhere

We'll take that ride...¹

We live in an interwoven world of temporal relations where our lives are embedded in a ceaseless process of unforeseeable changes. Every single moment we encounter is suffused with ephemerality and uncertainty. In consequence, it is impossible to predict on which path this journey of life might take us. The only certainty we can be sure of, is that the next moment will arrive. Hence our being in this world is not fixed or immanent, but transitional and indeterminable. This perspective may be generalized into a core principle of reality wherein life, as the paleontologist Stephen J. Gould suggested, consists

of a series of stable states punctuated by unpredictable events whose occurrence helps to establish the next stable plateau. When translated into our everyday encounters with the environment, this theory implies that our engagements are made up of structurally stable moments in which we part of an evolutionary system of changing relations. Thus we constantly find ourselves in nascent situations that coincide with different spatial configurations—a procedure by which we transition from one state to another.

As we engage in this matrix of evolving links and interchanges, we not only transition from one moment to another, we also continually re-position ourselves—a notion by which our locale is to be found in the idea of moving points, animated by the interaction of different forces. From that point of view, the notion of place may no longer be considered independently from human interactions, or as something that is motionless and fixed to a

¹ Talking Heads, "Road to Nowhere", *Little Creatures* (1985):
<http://www.talking-heads.nl/index.php/talking-heads-lyrics/19-little-creatures>.

permanent location. Rather, place materializes in a continuum of temporal relations wherein an assortment of different energies converge. Within this process place should be considered a provisional aggregate—an emerging field—embedded between the interacting conditions of stability and instability. In other words, the process by which place appears originates in the differentiating restlessness of the *becoming of something* and the *fading away of something*. Only then, only between these two circumstances, can a location emerge. Therefore, what we require is the general insight that places are processes; they do not possess a single, immutable identity. Neither space nor place manifest immobile, static reality, but are subject to a reality that is generated and modified through interactions, narratives, and representations of different cultures.

However, this viewpoint does not correlate with our currently prevalent perception and understanding of place. Place is still entangled in a paradigm whereby its existence is conceived as being without any human interaction, as a permanent condition, confined to one of any number of demarcated and already established locations between which movements occur. Why is it that we still adhere to such a belief? Does this thinking result from the commonly held notion of place as an *a priori* condition of our existence? Or have we silently accepted our disengagement with place, incapable of acknowledging a connection between being emplaced and our ability to change position, both figuratively and abstractly? We may wonder about place as we surf the Internet or travel on an airplane, but by and large we presume this question to be settled, that there is nothing more to be said on the subject. Yet, on the contrary, there is a great deal to say on this, especially since we are constantly immersed in these countless engagements through which we continually (re-)connect points and intersect with our own sets of connections.

When the musician and songwriter David Byrne and his band penned the lyrics for “*We’re on a road to nowhere*”, he exposed us to a strange journey with an unusual reality. By taking away the option, or rather necessity, of arriving in or at any particular place, he not only challenges our perception of place as a

Vitruvian *firmitas*², but also our participation in it. This is certainly not an easy idea to comprehend, since place is a vital component of our existence. Aristotle acknowledged it, making ‘where’ one of the ten most important and indispensable qualities of every substance.³ To *be* is to be *somewhere*, and to *be somewhere* is to be emplaced. Obviously, we have no choice in the matter; there is no escaping it—even when we are traveling on a road to nowhere. Nothing we do is unplaced.

Yet Byrne’s lyrics suggest our travels are no longer directed towards a fixed point of arrival, but the complete absence of one. A seemingly odd situation indeed, since we find ourselves moving towards a destination which is said to be located “*nowhere*” and, consequently, shows no signs of being fixed to a geographic location whence we might depart or where we might arrive. On closer scrutiny this perspective takes an even odder twist. Not only does this “*road to nowhere*” lead to a place that cannot be tied to a specific and permanent location, it also suggests that place can no longer be understood as something that actually exists prior to our arrival. Thus, as we travel through this world of temporal relations, place may no longer be perceived as a permanent or pre-existing entity, but as a state of being.

That place is not rooted or anchored to any particular location does not, however, imply that its existence or identity has been relegated to a non-place, as described in an essay and book of the same title by the French anthropologist Marc Augé. In this essay “*Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*”⁴, Augé compares places vis-à-vis non-places. He concludes: “...if place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place...”⁵ Therefore, “[t]he travelers space may thus

² The term ‘Vitruvian *firmitas*’ stems from the Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio. In his book *De architectura* (Ten books of Architecture) Vitruvius argues that a structure must exhibit the three qualities of *firmitas*, *utilitas*, *venustas*—in other words, it must be durable, useful, and beautiful.

³ Aristotle, *Physics*, transl. Robin Waterfield, Oxford 1996.

⁴ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, transl. John Howe, London, New York 1995.

⁵ Augé, *Non Places* (see note 4), 77–78.

be the archetype of non-place.”⁶ The journey Byrne invites us on is obviously of a very different nature. While Augé uses the term to describe a concrete place, mainly associated with transit- and communication-oriented uses like airports, highways, or supermarkets, Byrne’s description reveals place as a transitory state, in which its existence has been liberated from any particular location, use, form, or duration.

Yet the liberation of place from its concrete presence does not allow us to conclude that its existence is then utopian in character. Non-places are real places. They exist indeed, as Foucault concluded in his lecture “*Of Other Spaces*.”⁷ In this lecture Foucault establishes the concept of ‘heterotopia’—in contrast to utopias which, as he points out, “...[are] the preserve solely of things ... that in fact have no place...”⁸ These are the real places, he says. They are the contested and inverted counter-sites within every culture. They exist outside of all other places, since they “are absolutely different from all sites that they reflect and speak about.”⁹ But “...[to] make a difference in the social fabric, a heterotopia must possess a focus for the application of force”—a force however, that is nowhere to be found, “...but in the marginal location of the heterotopia itself.”¹⁰ Accordingly, non-places are not phenomena that only ever find expression on the periphery. Rather, they organize themselves heterogeneously within space as contextual marginal situations. These other places are in a constant state of flux and change, which as Byrne indirectly described, can neither be tied to a physically extant place nor ascribed to defined programmatic purposes. They embody generic places that appear everywhere within a culture in forever changing constellations. And, to use Jean Baudrillard’s words, wherever an attempt is made to “ascribe [to place] a function, all the others will take on the task of turning it

into a non-place, of changing the rules of the game”.¹¹ Consequently, every non-place is dependent upon potential opponents. By shifting their positions, it is they who create new conditions. In other words, by altering a functionalist identity they generate a non-place, an exterior that erodes the law of prevailing conditions.

This line of thought is also pursued by Foucault. In “*The History of Sexuality*” he examines how forces variously interacting within a social framework lead to the emergence of new game rules or power relations. Here he uses the central concept of the ‘Other’ to draw attention to the ‘exterior’ of these non-places.¹² The ‘exterior’ stands for a force that has no being other than that of a relation: it is an action that both stands in correspondence with other actions as well as exerting influence on them. Thus, for Foucault ‘power’ is composed from a plurality of forces that occupy and organize a territory: that of a game which transforms, amplifies and inverts the balance of these forces in incessant struggles and disputes. In other words, a multifaceted game that is entirely consummate with a heterogeneous and decentrally organized edifice of power.

In this, Foucault is evidently distancing himself from the disciplinary mechanisms he previously developed in “*Discipline and Punish*”, where he describes the object as the primary set of instruments for transferring ‘power’ onto the subject and thus permeating it. Here, instead, he argues that ‘power’ no longer instrumentalizes itself via the object, but acts as a productive force which is constellated in the relations among the subjects against the background

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Architektur: Wahrheit oder Radikalität*, transl. Colin Fournier, Graz, Wien 1999, 18.

¹² In Foucault, one has to distinguish between *exterior* and *exteriority*. Whereas the term *exteriority* is constituted through two interacting forms (such as forms of state), the *exterior* relates solely to force—a force, however, that must always stand in relation to other forces. And when a force stands in relation to other forces, these forces inevitably indicate an irreducible exterior that no longer possesses form. The force possesses no other object and no other subject than the force itself. It has no other being than that of a relationship: it is an “action that interacts with other actions”. Hence the forces he is describing here no longer operate within a field of forms but in a field of the exterior, where, as it were, place is a non-place and ‘history’ is in a state of constant self-renewal—in other words, a space open exclusively for change. Cf. *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. I: An Introduction, transl. Robert Hurley, New York 1990.

⁶ Augé, *Non-Places* (see note 4), 86.

⁷ Michel Foucault, “*Of Other Spaces*”, trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, 1, Baltimore 1986.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Les heteropias. Le corps utopique*. Published in German as: *Die Heterotopien – Der utopische Körper*, transl. Michael Bischoff, Frankfurt am Main 2005, 11.

⁹ Foucault “*Of Other Spaces*” (see note 7), 25.

¹⁰ Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place, A Philosophical History*, Berkely 1997, 300.

of a context. Accordingly, he no longer considers 'power' to be concentrated solely on the side of the object, but instead sees it manifested in the actions performed by subjects among one another and in their relationship to their immediate environment—an idea also pursued by Lefèbvre. He too associates the production of space with the experience of corporeality in the individual's engagement with other contexts. In other words, space is socially produced, but it is to like degree also the medium through which social relations assume material presence. Thus subjects are tied into a complex matrix of power which "is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations".¹³ In this context, one might then say, 'power' stands for the incarnation of ceaselessly self-regenerating forces whose constellations are the product of complex strategic situations in society. As such it amounts to an uncontrollable cluster of relations that pertains to no specific singular form (such as a particular form of state). It can neither be possessed, acquired, nor even removed—"it passes through the hands of the mastered no less than through the hands of the masters (since it passes through every related force)."¹⁴ Hence, 'power' is the multifarious interconnectedness of individual disparities among individuals. It is solely the sheer force of power that is capable of generating disruptions and discontinuities, and it is these, Foucault argues, that are required to change the prevailing balance of power. As a result, new tensions recurrently arise—tensions which, as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu points out, find expression in a terrain suffused with social interactions, where individuals can constantly reposition themselves.¹⁵ Thus each emergent field corresponds to a "potentially open space of play whose boundaries are dynamic [...] devoid of inventor and

much more fluid and complex than any game that one might ever design."¹⁶

Every game, as well as the demarcation and positioning of individuals, follows 'rules' specific to each field, which always culminate in cultural legitimation and social 'power'. Consequently, where there is 'power' there is also opposition. This opposition represents the apodictic counterforce within the prevailing balance of power that is capable of articulating, charting, and overstepping boundaries. Hence, every power structure requires its own 'oppositional' protagonists, border crossers that keep the social fabric in motion. They are the turning point (or "critical point", as Bourdieu has termed this phenomenon), infiltrating society like shifting ruptures and inducing transformation.

In the early twentieth century the sociologist Robert Ezra Park coined the term "marginal man" to describe this kind of figure who, as in Foucault's heterotopias, has located his existence "not on the periphery of one particular culture [but] in the transitional zone."¹⁷ Thus the "marginal man" is not an individual on the periphery but a figure at the center who commutes between different cultures. He is, as described in "*Human Migration and the Marginal Man*"¹⁸, the type of person who is mobile, transitory, and not anchored. This does not mean, however, that the "marginal man" should be considered a 'man at the edge' or a 'man on the periphery', as he is often erroneously portrayed, but a man '*straddling the boundary*'. As a migrant distinguished by his ambiguity, he strides through a cultural realm that reveals few or no attributes of its past or future condition. Since this personality type fits into no particular context but, as de Certeau argues, moves incessantly between exoticism (what is new) and the "Sabbath of memory" (what is past)¹⁹, he is forever located in a place which could equally be called a non-place. He

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Method, The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, transl. Robert Hurley, New York 1990, 94.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Strategies or the non-stratified: the thought of the outside (power)*, in: Foucault, transl. Sean Hand, London, 1988, 71.

¹⁵ Here, the social sphere of action is constituted on three levels: 1: Diverse, more or less autonomously operating domains which in this context can be described as fields of force or power. 2: The 'habitus', behind which stands an individual agent, whose social competence is made up of socially acquired dispositions. 3: The synthesis produced by the convergence of 'habitus' and 'field'.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Waquant, *An invitation to reflexive sociology*, Chicago 1992, 104.

¹⁷ Michael Makropoulos, Robert Ezra, *Modernität zwischen Urbanität und Grenzidentität*, in: Culture Club, Martin Hofmann, Tobias Korta, Sibylle Niekisch, Frankfurt am Main 2004, 54.

¹⁸ Robert Ezra Park, *Human Migration and the Marginal Man*, in: Sennett Richard, ed., *Classic Essays On The Culture of Cities*, New York 1969.

¹⁹ Michel de Certeau, *Spatial Stories*, in: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. Steven Rendall, Berkeley 1988, 129.

thereby occupies a non-attributable place without fixed address, from which he can relentlessly assume new positions.

In conclusion, one could say that Park's concept of the "marginal man" locates the 'placeless place' of the subject between the two processes of consolidating the subject through self-assertion and dissolving it through assimilation. In these terms then, "marginal man" is "a concept of subjectivity whose constructional principle [suggests] neither hermetic coherence nor open incoherence, but something one could describe as 'situatedly limited incoherence'".²⁰ Accordingly, as Rolf Lindner remarks, "marginal man" can be considered the personified "bearer of cultural transformation" and the embodiment of "modern subjectivity".²¹ Thus he lives on the 'subjective margins' of his own self, on the boundary of his own displacement.²² Consequently, those occupying the margins do not merely personify the boundary but also personify transition—transgressive migrants, as it were. Always on the move, always intent on change, they are constantly headed for new shores to forge links with their contexts. As such, the subject is analogous to the sea-borne ship described in Foucault's study "*Of Other Spaces*". Intended for translocation and ceaseless transition, the vessel pits itself against the infinite ocean—an ocean over which, in unflagging motion, boundaries are permanently redrawn and transgressed. And, as de Certeau observes, because these shifters never tire of charting new boundaries they assume the role of a transgressive itinerant who "is the primum mobile [...] from which all the action proceeds."²³

It is a similar commuting itinerant that Gerald Raunig has in mind when he invokes the figure of Charon for his study of the aesthetics of transgression in "*Ästhetik der Grenzüberschreitung*".²⁴ Whereas Virgil depicts Charon in

"*The Aeneid*" as a cheerless character whose task, for a small charge, is to ferry the dead in his boat across the river Acheron, the river of the underworld and the entrance to Hades, the realm of the dead, Raunig sees this ferryman as a translating entity who, like "marginal man", "does not [scan] the dividing line between this world and the hereafter"²⁵ but opens up a space of transition or in-between on the very boundary separating the two. This point of transit creates the difference that weaves a connection between entities and at the same time enables transformation to occur. This not only makes him the link joining the two shores, but also an "intermediary space located within a difference".²⁶ As the scintillating protagonist lodged between the formative systems, he occupies an operative interstitial space by means of which, as Homi Bhabha points out, various differences begin to oscillate in a transformative place of transit without any discernible hierarchy.

Yet this existence in the in-between designates neither a space nor a place, but some third, interstitial entity, the non-place. This field is produced by boundary-crossing individuals whenever, in passing, they incorporate certain fragments of 'spatial language' while, at the same time, ignoring others. The subject in this process is neither here nor there, neither one nor the other. It positions itself, always subliminally, on a threshold—" [n]either excluded nor included [...] in the fuzzy realm"²⁷ of this blurred hiatus. The subject, then, is analogous to a liminal being which, as Victor Turner wrote in "*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*", is situated between the positions of law, tradition, or conventions. It inhabits a liminal space of passage, through which it repeatedly marks, transforms and negotiates new positions within an existing framework.²⁸

This is how we arrive at such strange journeys as the 'voyage in place'. On this journey the transgressive

²⁰ Makropoulos, Robert Ezra (see note 17), 54.

²¹ Rolf Lindner, *Die Entdeckung der Stadtkultur. Soziologie aus der Erfahrung der Reportage*, Frankfurt am Main 1990, 211.

²² Gilles Deleuze, *Twelve Series of the Paradox*, in: *The Logic of Sense*, transl. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, New York: 1990), 104.

²³ Michel de Certeau, *Railway Navigation and Incarnation*, in: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. Steven Rendall, Berkeley 1988, 113.

²⁴ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, transl. Sarah Ruden, New Haven 2008.

²⁵ Gerald Raunig, *Charon, Eine Ästhetik der Grenzübertragung*, Wien 1999, 109.

²⁶ Raunig, *Charon* (see note 25), 109.

²⁷ Michel Serres, *The parasite*, transl. Lawrence R. Schehr, Minneapolis 2007, 246.

²⁸ The term 'liminal' is derived from Latin *limen* and means threshold, also implying transition across a boundary from one state to the next.

migrants are motionless, but they are moving nonetheless. They do so regardless of whether they happen to be 'staying' on land, in the air, or on water. They 'stay' still as they keep moving. There, in this nowhere, is their place of residence. And since their home is tailored to match their passage, they are also no longer moving towards any particular place of residence. They convert each point along their journey into an absolutely local zone, a non-place—a line of thought that had already found application in antiquity.²⁹ So place is always present wherever transgressive migrants happen to set their 'soles'. Thus every place is situated at a particular point in space, but not in an attributable place. In other words, transgressive migrants are always in their place, but they cannot be tied to any specific place. It is for this reason that the individual also has the capacity, over and again, to connect with his context in a space which encompasses as many directions as it does orders. While Aristotle presumed that the body could arrive at its particular place through the influence of an outside force (or some higher and natural power beyond human control), the force envisaged in the notion of place discussed here, although still analogous to one that is 'externally' applied, should nonetheless not be confused with the exertion of force postulated by Aristotle. Instead this force operates as a productive energy that, independent of the power of nature, is constituted somewhere between individuals and their relations to one another, and their context. Each evolving power relationship thus relates to a highly varied set of power relations, which is formed from countless forces generated through the interaction of unequal movements.

Consequently, movements that occur can likewise not be treated as conventional movements. As described by Derrida in "*Point de folie—Maintenant l'architecture*", the movements of individuals are comparable to the possibilities in throwing dice: they create an "opportunity for chance, formal invention, combinatory transformation, wandering"³⁰, for nescience. As a result, this kind of 'roaming' means that each occurrence is both unpredictable and a

matter of fortuity. The individual is subject to a permanent process of reorientation; since everything is determined by accident, he is caught up in an uninterrupted process of letting go and taking grasp again. No individual is able to evade this dynamic of change, the development it engenders, and its transience. Being entangled with space involves being continually immersed in its initiation, the process of becoming.

Within this, individuals are capable of perceiving the world only in fragments, but never in its overriding complexity; inevitably, as each person's range of vision is limited, every sensation and perception can only be partial. "The person who sees and the one who touches is not exactly myself, because the visible and the tangible worlds are not the world in its entirety."³¹ Or put differently, we do not see the world "behind the back of our 'consciousness', [...] but in front of us, as articulations of our field."³² Through which the itineraries of this journey to nowhere are constantly changing, according to the particular moment, route, and movement. Thus individuals are forever inventing new possibilities of organizing space, since by making short cuts, diversions or improvised itineraries they "privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements."³³ Accordingly, the creation of places resembles improvised bricolages which are assembled into a collage, and whose particular constellation cannot be controlled: they are articulated in their lacunae which are composed of shattered fragments of the world. One might say that individuals possess a kind of magnetic energy capable of attracting and reassembling "fragments of an exploded system", enabling them "to bind energy freely available within a given field."³⁴ With his capacity they exude an attraction which, similar to the application of a force, accumulates and amalgamates all that is disjunctive. Accompanied by place, transgressive migrants march forth, just as the

²⁹ There the equivalent was the 'genius loci', the spirit of a place, which resided in each person as a protective force.

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Point de folie—Maintenant l'architecture*, essay accompanying the portfolio Bernard Tschumi, La Case Vide, La Villette 1985, London 1986, 70.

³¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, transl. Colin Smith, London, New York 1962, 216.

³² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The visible and the invisible*, transl. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston Ill. 1968, 180.

³³ Michel de Certeau, *Walking in the City*, in: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. Steven Rendall, Berkeley 1988, 98.

³⁴ Derrida, *Point de folie* (see note 30), 73.

Roman fetials kept “ahead of social practices”, always with the task of opening up new fields.³⁵

The transgressive migrant thus ‘only’ needs to ‘look’ ahead and concentrate on locally encountered signs and symbols. “The waterpoint is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is a relay and exists only as a relay.”³⁶ Hence the traveler loses what he has just gained. In the light of the conditions described here, place as a self-contained or territorial entity holds no further significance; of significance, instead, is its production, in other words its perception, appropriation, and attributive materialization. Consequently, place no longer corresponds to that of an object and its figure/ground placement. Rather, its existence is bound to a non-placement located at the convergence of object and subject. In the course of this event, the non-place makes unpredictable appearances in constantly changing guises. In other words, whenever a subject or a group of subjects correlate with an object, for the brief duration of a moment a transitory non-place occurs.

Seen against this background, the individual can also no longer be considered a passenger or traveler passing through, someone who in Augé’s terms has gone to stay in a non-place for the duration of his journey. Rather, the individual assumes the status of a transient who, as long as he continues to act, is in transit and thus located in a non-place. Being in transit is therefore not a choice—it is a necessity! With this understanding, individuals are no longer at the mercy of the interplay of places and non-places, as Augé argues in his essay—they actively participate in their production.

Hence space can be characterized as the pragmatic intercourse with a place, made visible in the image of the transient who by means of his actions transforms the road, which is geometrically defined as a place, into a space or a non-place. What transpires is that, as a constellation of fixed elements, place undergoes a shift towards space as the stimulation of these fixed points, when one of the itinerant subjects changes location. Actions evolve in space, and space is generated through actions. Hence space is neither stationary nor static, but a social construct suffused with actions, one that is constituted via individuals and their power relations among one another. As a network of moving subjects, space is defined through interaction and activity. This field of tension between subject and object creates an environment of discovery, nescience, and uncertainty—a place no one knows. So what else can we do but continue to forbear the security of a fixed location, of staying put, which would safeguard the criteria of solid ground, and face up to change, development, and transitoriness?³⁷

³⁵ In ancient Rome, establishing a new field of relations was still dependent on priestly officials known as ‘fetials’. Before declaring war, a military expedition, or a new alliance with another nation, fetials were dispatched to establish contact. Making contact happened in three stages: first within, but near the border; then on the border itself; and finally beyond the border on alien territory. This ritual procedure preceded every civil or military operation. In other words, the approach made by the fetials initiated a kind of intermediary space for military, diplomatic, or commercial activities due to be undertaken outside the country’s borders, which was commensurate with the terrain on which the battle was to be waged.

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *The smooth and the striated*, in: *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, Minneapolis 1987, 380.

³⁷ Translated by Matthew Partridge