

1

TRANSCENDENT

Introduction

transcendent *vb* that which is beyond our senses and experience;
existing apart from matter

1.1_Theoretical Premise

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It is my belief that we live to express. The whole motivation of presence is to express. And what nature gives us is the instrument of expression which we all know as ourselves, which is like giving the instrument upon which the song of the soul can be played.
(Kahn 1964: 19)

The first time that the author became familiar with the term 'dwelling' was during her undergraduate studies the day when Heidegger stepped into the lecture room with the echoes of 'Building, dwelling, thinking'; an essay that will perhaps forever rumble within the author's basic understanding of architecture. The knowledge gathered from those few lectures might have been rudimentary, but profound enough to bind the author's idea of architecture to something more than 'existence' only. This premise, although emphasizing the idea of dwelling, will not begin with Heidegger.

During her research, the author came upon some interesting writings on the American master architect, Louis I. Kahn; where within his work a 'theory' of architecture emerges. Kahn was engaged in a search for the structure of being parallel to Heidegger. It is certainly not worked out in detail, but the basic structure is coherent.

. . . Kahn thus takes the total 'Being-in-the-world' as his point of departure, and defines our human task as the uncovering of its structure. Thereby he indeed comes close to the philosophy of Heidegger, who was also deeply concerned with "beginnings." (Norberg-Schulz 1988:202)

As part of the preface to this premise, I want to introduce the notion of culture as opposed to art and communication, keeping in mind Kahn's expressionists theory, as mentioned above.

1.1.1 Art, Communication, Culture

From the dawn of humanity, mankind has made and been fascinated by a strange and unique concept: the idea of art. This phenomenon has no immediate, practical use; it feeds no mouths and protects no young. Yet even in the most primitive cave-dwellings of 30,000 years ago, we have evidence of artwork (Tindale & Lindsay 1963:18). Though these cave drawings may be completely different from the naturalistic masterpieces of the Renaissance, and those still very unlike the abstract images of today, all fit into the broad genre of art called painting. What do these have in common? Why do we call them all “art?”

At its most basic, art is a form of communication. Art is an expression of emotion, designed by a human as a means of communicating that emotion to other humans. (Edwards 1987:44)

Art is by far the most expressive form of communication that humans understand. The shading and colours of a picture, the moving lines in the body of a dancer, or the fluid harmonies of a song reach a depth that simple conversation never can.

In short, one can argue that art is representation through communication which in turn leads to a shared meaning or understanding. But this shared meaning or understanding is bound to culture:

Of all species of animals, the argument goes; humans are unique in that they occupy something extra, something that animals don't have. And it is precisely by this 'excess' that we are inclined to define the scope of our common humanity. (Ingold, 2000:89)

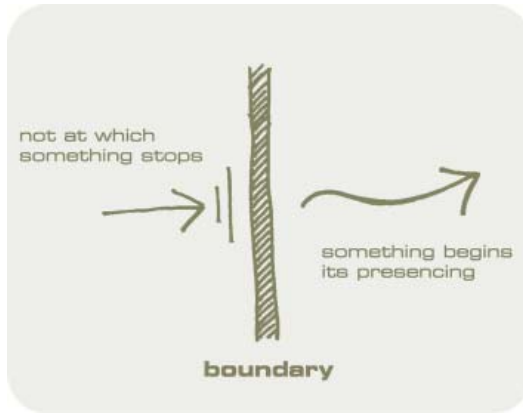
Richard Shweder (1990: 2) calls this something extra, 'intentional worlds'. Thus, within this world, things do not exist 'in themselves', as different objects, but only as they are given form or meaning within systems of mental representations. And this is not a new debate, because this additional factor – call it mind or self-awareness – is part of the knowledge we have of our identities, our feelings, memories, intentions and ourselves.

Ingold (2000: 40) derived a definition for 'culture' from this same concept of humans as the divine creature:

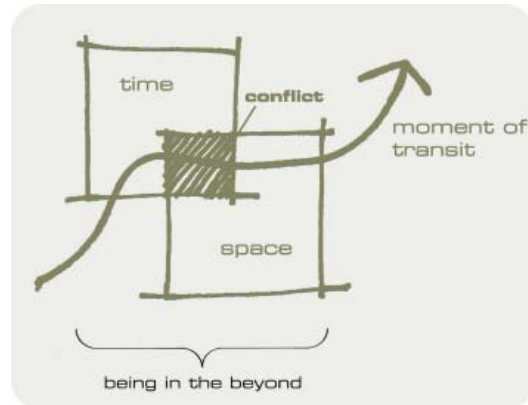
Thus, for such individuals (belonging to different 'intentional worlds') the same objects in the same physical surroundings may mean quite different things. And when people act towards these objects, or with them in mind, their actions respond to the ways they are already appropriated, categorized or valorized in terms of a particular, pre-existent design. That design, transmitted across the generations...and manifested physically in the artificial products of their implementation, is what is commonly known as 'culture'.

We hold mental representations that classify and organise the world (whether fact or fiction), people, objects and events into meaningful categories so that we can meaningfully comprehend the world. Thus, the conceptual map of meaning and language are the basis of representation; concepts organised, arranged and classified into complex relation to one another. It allows you to distinguish your own individual interpretation of the world, at the same time as holding similar views to that of other people in your culture.

We cannot express or communicate this meaning without the second system of representation, language. Language is the only way in which meanings can be effectively exchanged between people, as people within the same culture are able to interpret the sign of language in the same manner. The meanings become natural through the conditioning of culture.



(1.1)



(1.2)

Figure (1.1) and (1.2):
Illustrating diagrammatically
the concept of the boundary
and a moment in transit

1.1.2 The Art of the Present

A boundary is not something that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.
Heidegger – Building, dwelling, thinking.
(Hofstadter 1979:145)

It is the trope of our time to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond. Our existence these days is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival; living on the borderlines of the 'present', for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix 'post': postmodernism, postcolonialism, postapartheid...

The 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past. The 'beginning' and the 'end', is mostly just a myth experienced in the 'middle', but in the 'beyond' we find ourselves in a moment of transit, where space and time cross to produce conflict between difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.

We tend to convince ourselves erroneously that by living within this moment of transit, the 'beyond', we are in fact done with that which lies behind us.

'Beyond' signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future; but our perception of exceeding the boundary – the very fact of going beyond – is unknowable, without a return to the 'present' which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunctive and displaced. We fervently want to be surrounded by that which is familiar, for there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement with an indefinite sense of belonging. The question arises: Within the process of transitional discovery, how do we commemorate and brake with the past, and momentarily dream into the future?

Transition, within the context of South Africa, is the name typically given to this time of radical change following the undoing of Apartheid, connoting a shift from a political partition to universal acceptance and justice. It can additionally be seen as our existence 'beyond' our country's brutal past. But as subject of this research, transition is also a culture in its own right - with its own conflict, repressions, and unrealised potentials. The author thus aims to indicate transition as a culture of power and view it in its complex relation to the ways in which it articulates social change.

1.1.3 In-between the City

The conflicting emotions of apprehension and excitement are the heart of the urban experience. The city is a landscape of cultural diversity and subcultural differentiation, thus, a mosaic of social worlds. In its various 'real' and 'imagined' forms, therefore, it is at once dammed, tolerated, manipulated and celebrated.

Culture is an essential part of the conflict that can be experienced when different social worlds meet. Cultures are like underground rivers that run through our lives and relationships, giving us messages that shape our perceptions, attributions, judgements, and ideas of self and other. Though cultures are powerful, they are often unconscious, influencing conflict and attempts to resolve conflict in imperceptible ways. However, we need to move away from the primary conceptual and organisational categories of 'race' and 'gender'. We need to think beyond these narratives and focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These moments can be seen as 'in between' spaces, which initiate new signs of identity in the act of defining the idea of society itself.

I am part of my complete country. My hands neither ordering nor begging. Making the cross, liberation spiking my blood with belonging. (Krog 2003:31)

The idea of a space which can accommodate different voices and in which all South Africans can 'come to rest', raises the question of a national identity apart from a personal identity. Krog's text represents a special case of constructing an identity in a time of transition. In her case it happens especially by means of a confrontation with spatial concepts like space, landscape, land and country, presenting ample proof that space is indeed one of the important axes along which identity is constructed. Although there seems to be a desire for closure in the passion to belong, the project of re-constructing an identity is an ongoing process of transformation and change.

My throat feels thick and ostracized, my chest hurts with the indescribable intimacy of belonging and loss. This is my place. Place that in a way never really wanted me. Place that bore my love so fruitlessly. For its veld. For its sky. For its spruits. For its grass and trees. For its horizon, which carries every other horizon I have dreamt of. A love that longs for land. They can sell it, take it, divide it, pawn it, waste it. That will be all right. If only, until I die, I can come and site here. So quite, so here. So completely dissolved into where I belong. I will never lay claim to it. Ever. (ibid.)



(1.3)

Figure (1.3)

The concepts of interstices
presented as rock and soil

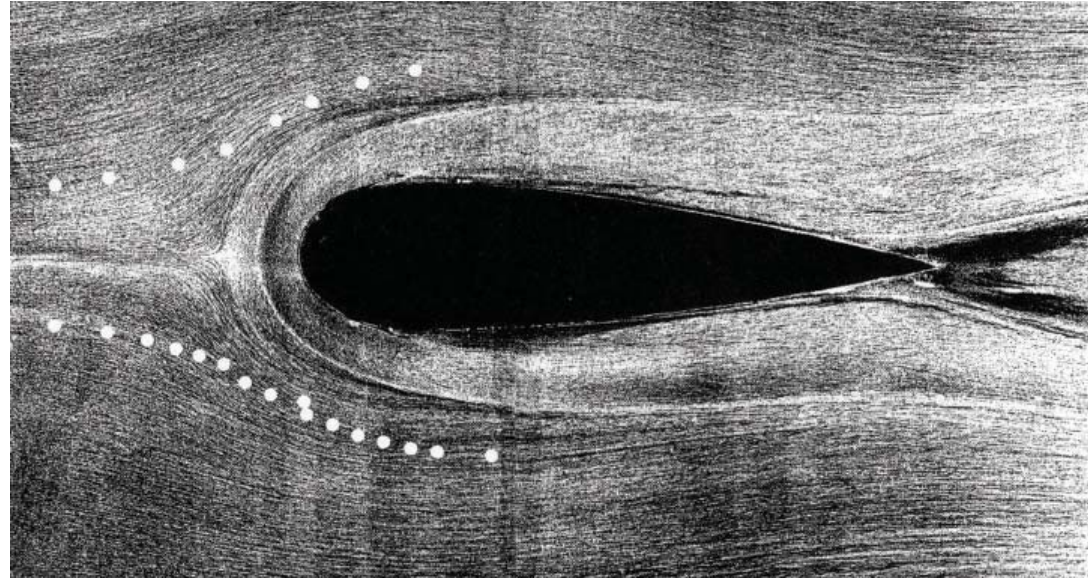
Krog felt compelled by the process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to construct a new identity for herself. This she does by reacquainting herself with and re-assessing the spaces, places and landscapes that previously constituted her identity. Trinh T. Minh-ha has written: 'Identity is a way of re-departing. Rather, the return to a denied heritage allows one to start again with different re-departures, different pauses, different arrivals' (1990:328). Re-visiting spaces, places, landscapes and the country she has known all her life enables Krog to use the South African 'landscape as a shifting strategic source of identification without implying the adoption of ... a fixed, natural, or inherent identity' (Nash 1994: 239).

It is in this sense that the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond that have been drawn out:

'Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks.... The bridge gathers as a passage that crosses.'
(Hofstadter 1979: 145)

Social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition; they take you 'beyond' yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the conditions of the present.

Being in the 'beyond', then, is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell 'in the beyond' is also to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to re-describe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; to touch the future on its hither side. In that sense then, the intervening space 'beyond', becomes a space of intervention in the here and now. To engage with such invention, and intervention, demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It can not simply recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not nostalgia, of living.



[1.4]

Figure (1.4)

"There is a place where there is no change and the transition envelopes the whole."