Foreword: ‘Time and space in two nineteenth century novels’


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This paper was originally written as a ‘coursework assignment’ whilst I was a student on the M.Sc. in Advanced Architectural Studies at the Bartlett, UCL, during the academic year 1975-6. In those days, space syntax analysis was at an embryonic stage (Hillier et al., 1976), so the course of study we undertook was broad, rich and theoretically challenging. Its syllabus included the history and philosophy of science, taught by Bill Hillier, which majored on the significance of space and environment for science and society, and a course on complex buildings, taught by Alan Beattie, that examined the relationship between organisations, building programmes and the architecture of institutional buildings. A third strand, taught by Adrian Leaman, traced the development of space and place in geography, social theory and urban design. This account of space and time in nineteenth century novels was undertaken as an assignment for that course. It led to an invitation to lecture on the subject at the Architectural Association in the autumn of 1976, and then to the paper that appeared in AAQ (Architectural Association Quarterly). I give this brief account only to make two points: first, all students are capable of invention and originality and should have the courage to aim high; and second, a varied diet that looks beyond the obvious and reaches out to cognate disciplines, stimulates the imagination and often leads to the development of new ideas.

Great literature affords the reader an opportunity to obtain insights into human motivations and to test ideas about reality, but the discipline of writing an academic paper on the subject of space and time in literature encouraged me to think seriously about spatiotemporal representations in media other than in architecture and to speculate about the frameworks that have been developed by other disciplines to represent, reproduce, distort, challenge, heighten or otherwise transform our everyday experience of space-time. During the 1980s, I developed these ideas into an undergraduate course that explored the visual and plastic arts as a system of transformations on everyday spatiotemporal experience. The course drew on a proposition articulated by Suzanne Langer (1953), that the practice of the visual and plastic arts such as architecture, painting, literature, music, sculpture, film and dance is underpinned by objective, formal, abstract and shared ground rules which make inspiration and experience directly transferable from one medium to another. The creation of virtual space is, Langer suggests, the primary illusion of all the plastic arts; primary not in the sense of being first but in that of being always established. Thus, drama can be regarded as the depiction of an immanent future, film as the creation of a perpetual now, music as a sound-shape for the ear and the novel as the simulation of an authentic history. If Langer is right, architects have the ideal excuse to indulge in all the creative media, which is that by so doing they will better-understand their own.

References
‘Time and space in two nineteenth century novels’.


ABSTRACT
This article discusses the notion of architectural space in two novels by Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy. Hardy was for a time an architectural draughtsman and a member of the AA (his name was removed from the membership list in 1872 after he defaulted in his subscription!). Austen’s primary interest was in people. As Pevsner says in his pioneering essay, ‘The architectural setting of Jane Austen’s Novels’ (Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes volume 31, 1968, p.404-22), ‘she is without exception vague, when it comes to describing buildings.’ Julienne Hanson’s essay is based on a study carried out at University College London, under the direction of Bill Hillier and Adrian Leaman.

It is possible to trace major structural changes in the form of the novel; Williams notes that one such development occurred in the 1840s, between the era of Austen and Hardy, which he relates to new forms of consciousness within society. Barthes traces similar developments in French literature of the period. One of the most striking of these changes, is the emergence of the milieu. From playing an insignificant part, time and space become manifest and significant to the narrative. It is proposed to explore the abstract issues regarding novels as social artifacts by focusing upon the more concrete problem of contrasting the categories of space and time in two novels by Austen and Hardy respectively, in the light of the hypothesis that Austen’s novels appear to be ‘mechanically solid’ in the Durkheimian sense, (the space/time continuum is suppressed) whilst those of Hardy appear to be ‘organically solid’ (the space/time continuum is highlighted).

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