

**Modernity's Spatial Imperative
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Modernity could be appropriately defined by its urge to master space and to expose all reality to a shadowless light in a controlled space. Long before Armstrong treaded the moon and even before Sputnik's bip was broadcasted all over the world, modernity was the "space age."

Unlike other epochs, this age does not care to define its concept of the *summum bonum* as a graspable frame of orientation for action. It does not offer clues for decisions about ends, but for choices about means, and these means always imply free motion and shadowless vision in mastered spaces. All what our epoch considers worthwhile can always be reduced to a mastery over spaces, to vision and to motion in a manageable space.

Bridge builders do no longer say that, by uniting the edges of a cleft, they found a human site in the wilderness. They say that they remove an obstacle to a virtual flow of circulation. Traffic planners have adopted their language: in all that which opposes free motion in controlled space, they see a "factor of friction" to be removed.

"Circulation" and "speed"—the measure of its intensity—have become the axiomatic certainties underpinning a vision of the world as a collection of accessible objects and locations in space. Starting in the mid 19th century with the rapid propagation of the railroads, "space" has emerged into public consciousness as the ultimate substratum of reality. In the experience of speed, the landscape is experienced as an immutable space which frames ever changing images. This fixed receptacle of fleeting images makes the abstract coordinate-space of mathematics and physics seem

more real than the realities that “it contains.” This void, and yet more than real universal container has become “the real space of modern experience.” It is what commuters perceive as the “environment” in which they haste by selecting the appropriate signs along the highway, successively discarding sight after sight what E.V. Walter calls “the rubbish of perception.” Traffic landscapes are not landscapes in which one dwells but landscapes through which one runs by abolishing their sight. Symbolically, speed is the arrow that pierces all circles and removes boundaries as disposable obstacles.

Yet, circulation is not the only manifestation of our time’s spatial imperative. It is only one of several symptoms. From astrophysics to topology, from cinematography to poetry, there is hardly a modern discipline or an art which does not start as an initiation to rules of composition in real or imaginary spaces. Since centuries in the West, space is the medium of all visual representations. Yet, in the “real space” of modernity, representation becomes a simulation: an engineered deceit of the senses which abolishes the distinction between the image and its model.

The adoption of the heliocentric worldview led to a “spatialization” of the Earth. The container of all places was transformed into a rock or, as Romanyshyn says, “a corpse.” Barbara Duden sees the image of the fetus which—since a famous photograph in Life Magazine—haunts the modern imagination as the outcome of the ultimate spatialization of the body. Building on Panofski, Duden shows that it started with Leonardo’s pictures of the dissected corpses of pregnant women. From Leonardo to Hunter and to the sonogram, Duden documents the constitution of what she calls “the public fetus” as the result of a progressive “peeling away” of the maternal, caring body. In her book *Geschichte unter der Haut*, Duden contrasts modern anatomy—the art of piercing the skin and exploring the “obscurity beneath” to a reckless light—with the complaints of early 18th century patients to their physician, Dr Storch.

Speed similarly transpierces all limiting horizon and makes “the beyond” part of daily experience. In *No Sense of Place*, Meyrowitz has shown that the electronic media breaks down any possible distinction between familiar objects and remote, ungraspable realities. In the words of Michael Mooney, a participant of the “Commonplace Conference” in State College, we live in a world “in which the common is becoming uncommon and the uncommon common.”

An age which disposes of the tangible “flesh” of all things—of all that offers resistance to the hand and is therefore “haptic”—first makes the unexpected seem obvious and then, as Ivan Illich says, redefines it as “that which is demonstrable but remains unimaginable.” Modern man lives in a world of unimaginable *demonstrabilia* that techniques of spatial simulation have transformed into *visibilia*.