CULTURAL CARTOGRAPHY, MATERIALITY AND THE FASHIONING OF EMOTION

Interview with Giuliana Bruno

Introduction

Giuliana Bruno is Professor of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University. She is author of Streetwalking on a Ruined Map (1992), Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film (2002), and Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts (2007), as well as numerous edited collections, articles, and catalogue essays. In this interview she speaks about her research and writing as it moves between visual, material, and spatial cultures. Here she concentrates on navigation – both thoughts as tools of navigation and how one navigates one’s way through thought itself. In focusing on cultural memory, narrative, cartography, and the imagination – and in taking us from the mid-seventeenth century map of Madeleine de Scudéry to the psychogeography of the Internationale situationniste – she also considers the archaeological and genealogical importance of Warburg, Richter, and Benjamin’s atlas, archive, and assemblage projects. Overall, Bruno draws our attention to cultural practices that mobilize thought and, in so doing, makes us all the more attentive to the materiality of the visual existence of life itself.

Interweaving Visual, Material, and Spatial Cultures

Marquard Smith (MS): I want to begin by asking you about your research and writing as it cuts across or reads between visual, material, and spatial cultures. You are one of the very few people mining and circling around this particular series of inter-disciplinary possibilities, and in very particular kinds of ways. I want to ask you some questions later on about the nature of the particular kinds of ways that you think about research and writing. But in the first instance, would you say something about the imperative to think across and between visual, material, and spatial culture?
Giuliana Bruno (GB): My work revolves around the relationship between architecture, visual arts, and film. As I grapple with sites of cultural geography, one could say that the centre of my research is space. I have a fascination for all things spatial but also for all things material, in the sense that space is usually a form of material reading, or, rather, a material condition. Space is not just simply created by architecture, which seems to have a hold on it; it is also created by the visual arts. I am interested in the space of the imagination and representation: the way in which we see things, we project things, and we imagine things in art forms as well as film, which have usually been considered not as spatial arts but as visual art. In my view, the distinction is not so separate. And when I say space, I do not mean necessarily only place but actually espace, in the sense that the French understand the word space. For me this is a landscape that also involves an expanse of time, which in turn involves memory and everything that is created materially as one lives through and conceives of space. The construction of memory space is a function of the visual arts and of cinema, as well as of architecture, for they all shape the image of our built environment. So for me the intersection comes from being able to look across and in between all this, to imagine and understand a form of production of space that involves a temporal fashion – that is, the very fabric of time – and includes the ruins of the way things work, and to think about how all of this represents itself materially. So material culture and design are part of this cultural mapping.

MS: I’m glad you’ve mentioned material culture so early. I think you are officially the only person in this collection who is engaged quite explicitly in what we might call material culture. It is one of those wonderful points where Visual Culture Studies as an area of inquiry slides into design and design history, bleeds into architecture, which in turn opens itself out to something we might rather clumsily call spatial culture.

Material culture is a strange thing. Certainly in the United Kingdom. In the UK there’s a real division between the scholars who, for decades, have been working out of design history and into material culture, and those who, much more recently, have been working in an expanded field of Anthropology that, by way of an ethnographic or empirical turn, have found themselves as scholars of (usually popular or vernacular) material culture. UCL’s Department of Anthropology is exemplary here.

A great deal of significant historical work has come out of the first trajectory. Here I’m thinking about research by the likes of Barry Curtis, Guy Julier, Pat Kirkham, Victor Margolin, Penny Sparke, Anne Wealleans (née Massey), and many others of course. (And it also seems to me that a subsequent generation of scholars sometimes working through or by way of design history and material culture have taken this kind of thinking to the next level – and here I have in mind for instance Anna McCarthy’s writings on televisualty or Laura Marks’

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work on the skin of the film, as well as your own cultural cartographizing.)

I have numerous colleagues at Kingston that work at the interface between design history and material culture: Penny and Anne, but also Trevor Keeble's writings on domesticity and Alice Beard's research on fashion and 'the new', and between them they've overseen and are overseeing a really interesting cluster of PhD students working on anything from nineteenth-century pub interiors to the profound superficiality of wood veneer.

The second trajectory, out of Anthropology, seems less interesting to me. And yet, despite the recent emergence of this trajectory, they're much quicker to claim the term 'material culture', in fact to the point where they've wrestled it away from its origins in design history and thus away from the ways that this discipline had carefully nurtured it.

Is there a question there? Maybe it has something to do with design history, material culture ... and fashion ...

GB: I do not look at visual culture as being only visual, a mere product of the eye. When you think of the visual arts as a field that is not only involved with the optic but has to do with the haptic – a space that can be almost in fact touched, that is apprehended not only by way of sight but by way of a certain form of contact – this space becomes a form of tactility, which is really the province of material culture. In this haptic sense, it becomes natural for me to think of architecture, design, and the visual arts as materially connected.

One of the things we know about objects is that they are there to be touched, used, and even ‘consumed’. If one thinks of this fashion of using space theoretically, space becomes a material form of living. If one thinks of 'haptic' in the Greek meaning of ‘coming into contact with’, something that is an extension of touch becomes also a form of communication, in a fundamental sense. And that communication involves a kind of closeness to the object in the way that Walter Benjamin, as a critic who did not have an aversion to architecture or design or objects, or even fashion, understood reception. All these forms of representation are connected and brought into the equation when we employ a different way of looking at the visual that acknowledges this form of haptic contact with the object. This form of material communication has become much more prominent in contemporary visual arts and contemporary architecture, especially when we consider how much design is involved in the intersection of both. But this material form of reception also goes all the way back to the origin of the museum, to the cabinets of curiosity, if you think about it. The objects of a collection exposed in the museum, what were they? Were they mere art works? Or objects, in the sense of objects of design? They were objects framed for vitrines, designed to put us in touch with their material existence. So collection is also a form of the recollection of things.

Objects, things, material things ... And fashion enters into the equation in many different ways. First of all conceptually. One of the things I like about the
English language is that you can say that space is fashioned. The way I think about space concerns the very fashioning of the space: space being made, fabricated, and having itself a texture, a fabric. So another reason why design enters into the equation of thinking about architecture, art, and film is because, to me, the visual has a texture. The more flattened the flat screen becomes, the more I think about this idea of the texture of the visual. When you think about texture in visual fabric, you think about the plasticity of forms. You become aware of all that it is involved in the making of the actual thing, in the fabrication of the object. But what is more important, you become sensitive to the fold of things. You expose layers and uncover strata, peel out coatings and veneers – that is ‘films’ – but you also look for such residue as a fabric of memory. In film, for example, it is the texture of light where this all comes into play. Thinking of the fabric of the visual in this way, one can relate the fabrication of film as an object and the making of an object in art to an actual object in design or in fashion.

After all, architectural space is akin to fashion as something we come into contact with epidermically. It is very clear, even from Condillac’s eighteenth-century idea of the senses, that as beings moving in to space we apprehend space haptically. And this is not just about the hands. Of course the hands are what touch the objects, the things, but it is the entire being that is in touch with space. Everything, even our eyes have skin on them. So the skin is our first coating, our first dress, and then fashion becomes our second skin. Fashion is the way we decorate our epidermic selves. As such a spatial ornament, fashion is truly a form of design. By way of dress we actually ‘fashion’ our own selves, which also means our identities; we design our stories and tailor the way we project ourselves onto the world. And then architecture becomes the third skin. Architecture is the third fold of space we come into contact with. It is an enveloping space, a tactile extension of this way of designing ourselves – addressing our identities as we are dressing ourselves. So architecture and fashion are to me very much interactive as a social form able to project and share an imaginary, and to communicate the making of the self across visual fabrics. It is not by chance that some of the great architects were interested in fashion. And today the two fields are very much connected, not only because there are architects who design clothes. Clothes designers such as Hussein Chalayan, say, make this connection clear when making dresses that are basically architecture, that are chairs, constructions, or things that move. His clothes are objects, literally objects of design, and they really are an extension of furniture, in a sense, on a woman’s or a man’s body. So the two are interacting in a way that is very visible in our culture today.

And film fits into this fashioning of space, because it is also a ‘projection’. For one thing, film is an object already; it is used and consumed, and it circulates as such substance. This art form is deeply involved in the fabric of things and the design of the self. Film is actually a very material object that makes visible
something that is invisible, including our imaginary and mental space: atmospheres and moods. Through forms of light it basically creates and is able to transmit everything that belongs to the fashioning of everyday life. At the same time, it can be read itself as a textural surface. Equipped with a screen that used to be an actual sheet of fabric, it is a celluloid texture that absorbs things and can project all kinds of visual fabrications. If we look at it this way, we can see that at the root of the actual object of film is a kind of fashioning. We can even argue that the origin of film is fashion. After all, a film is a series of still images on a strip, which used to be cut and sewn just like dresses were cut and sewn. When you look at Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera* and you watch the woman editing the film, you realize it is very similar to making a dress. You have this form that you are putting together, that you are suturing really – tailoring – in the same way you would design a piece of clothing. There is much fashioning in the cinema, in many senses.

I am interested in cinema not just for the text of the film but also for the way the entire apparatus involves materiality, in the form in which it is made and projected. Film’s fashioning of space includes a spectator who lives in that space, becomes part of this imaginary site, and is transported by its moving fabric within the space of the movie theatre. Cinema becomes a part of you in the sense that you ‘suit’ your own self into it, in an inside out form, in a double movement. In film, you constantly travel from an outer landscape to an inner landscape, and you go back and forth and in between these two forms. So this idea of the inside out is very much about fashion as well. The one thing the fabric knows is the inside out. Hence it all folds together in this kind of architecture, for fashion, architecture, and film are able to refashion in visual folds and permeable textures the way we look at the world.

**MS:** And the same is true of language? The kinds of words that you have been using ... I don’t know where you pluck the words from ... but you manage to find a way of conjuring up an incredibly evocative and rich use of language that allows you to play around with words and phrases: ‘collections’ and ‘recollections’, ‘dressing and ‘addressing’, the ‘fashioning of space’ and the ‘spacing of fashion’. And tailoring. I think you used the word tailoring a couple of times ...

**GB:** ‘Suiting’ as well.

**MS:** Yes. So this is a question about the materiality of language, your use of the richness and texture of language ...

**GB:** Whether it comes directly from my inner thoughts, the unconscious, or from being a foreign speaker I am not sure. I think that the latter has something to do with it. When you learn a foreign language, when you are writing in a language that is not your mother tongue, there is a certain moment of pleasure that comes
when you can actually play with it. Seriously, I care for all things material, that is, objects, things, and material forms. For me, language is one of these. The materiality of the way one writes is very important to me. I make an effort when writing – and it is not easy writing in a language not my own – to convey thoughts by way of the form of language itself, by way of the flow of words and the sheer unfolding of sentences. I take pleasure in using metaphors as means of transport, in finding words that evoke forms or shapes, and in twisting them, even in making them up sometimes. I probably made a few up along the way. But English can sustain this game – it is a fantastic language to actually suit your thoughts in.

Every material object offers you the pleasure of touching it. Language has this ability too ... it really touches you and me. In English, we can say this – words are touching or pictures are touching. So if one wants to write about the fashioning of space and think about materiality and fabric, one has to look for a fabric in language suitable to conveying these sensitive ideas, and has to tailor one’s style accordingly. Furthermore, as a material object, language also allows you to go deeply into it, to excavate its mould. Another thing that I like about language is that it allows me to perform a kind of archaeology. This is part of my method, of the way in which I construct all of these connections: deeply excavating into words, I look for almost geological forms, strata of meaning that make ideas connect together. Language has this ability because it has a history. Sometimes in a word that used to mean something it no longer does, you actually find a way to retrace a notion and reinvent its meaning. I use etymology often this way, and sometimes doing this almost surgical operation on language has allowed me to find what I was looking for. There are moments of great serendipity, like when I was trying to express my ideas about a relation between motion and emotion in cinema, and it was the etymology of the word cinema that made it all evident, for cinema comes from the Greek κινεµα – well, the ancient Greek, long before cinema ever existed – and this word means both motion and emotion. It was perfect. This gave me the impulse to continue to play, of course. In the end, this kind of digging is more like an ‘archaeology of knowledge’: in the way Foucault talked about a genealogy, it is not about the origin or authenticity of the word but more about being able to make connections (Foucault, 1972/1969). It enables you to circulate meaning, to move with the fluidity of language, which holds strata of different knowledges within its history, and can therefore allow for multiple readings.

MS: And, like your example of the etymology of the word cinema, if it's already there, even better!

GB: Sometimes you discover things in this fashion, so to speak.

MS: It's that you have a sense, a feeling, that it might already be there without actually knowing. And if it's not ...
GB: ... then that is fine. It’s not like we are proving anything. It is up to you to use language as part of the interplay of creating a field of work; so using words, in a sense, is a way to move through things. If they have it within themselves so much the better and if not, reinvent them!

**Cultural Memory, Archives, Atlases, and Assemblages**

MS: All of this talk of archaeologies and genealogies and excavating puts me in a position to ask you a question about archives, and the role that they play in your research and writing. Archives are on my mind at the moment because of the conference I’m programming with Michael Ann Holly that’s taking place later this week at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute entitled ‘What is Research in the Visual Arts? Obsession, Archive, Encounter’. They’re also on my mind because I’ve been rereading your stuff in preparation for this interview. So, now, I’m thinking about layering, the ways in which you’ve been speaking about language, and the nature of the materiality of language, and the different ways in which this material is woven together, and that this weaving is very much like a genealogy, in the Foucaultian sense: an interlacing of contingencies, surprises and accidents, discontinuities, ruptures, truths and origins, facts and fictions, and of emergence [entstehung] (Foucault, 1977/1971). The idea of the archive has a really different role in this context. In your book *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* you go to/through a number of archival projects – from Annette Messager to Gerhard Richter to Walter Benjamin – as particular ways of thinking about what an archive is and does, and how an archive mobilizes thought ... (Bruno, 2002)

GB: I am very fond of this word and of the concept. But perhaps my work, especially *Atlas of Emotion*, is a place where a traditional notion of archive doesn’t work. I am attracted to particular kinds of archives, or certain kinds of methods, as it were, of collection – modes of collection that allow for different forms of recollection. We mentioned a few, and most of these are not conventional ways of thinking in certain quarters. But in others they are; it depends.

MS: It’s shocking, and I’m afraid to say they’ll remain unknown in these quarters.

GB: Yes, it’s astounding. The other notion that applies, that goes with these figures that you mention, is the atlas. And to me an atlas and an archive are not far apart, partly because I understand the archive itself as a form of cultural memory that has a materiality, and also as a form of collection that allows multiple ways of recollection, which is to say, as a form of passage. Like an atlas, an archive can be navigated. It contains things that need to be explored and discovered. And, just like an atlas, it encourages you to be guided through its terrain.
To me, an archive is a territory to be unearthed, to be discovered, archaeologically dug up. Those operations are not necessarily linear. Just as an atlas allows you to move in time and space, across different territories, my kind of archive does not entail a prescribed journey; it is something that is an invitation to journey.

MS: Aby Warburg employs the word *orientation*.

GB: Orientation is a perfect word. Warburg is probably the main methodological influence in this way of thinking, especially his *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Warburg, unpublished), which is fantastic. Conceived towards the end of his life, his unfinished atlas of memory was very visual and very material. Here was an art historian who was in a sense making assemblages as he constructed a montage of disparate images, ranging in subject from art to science to the everyday, that were to be exhibited on panels. His kind of archive documented the relationship between states of mind and corporeal expression and made a geographic history of visual expression. In a way, these were collections of pictures that were in his mind, inner images being projected outwards for exhibition, and recollection. Before anyone was thinking about this notion of visual culture, Warburg was able to put together visual documents and material representations of the movement of life. His assemblages of life in motion, for example, would have exhibited on the same panel a great piece of artwork alongside the physical movement of a person, the flow of a dress, an image of travel, or the design of a room. His version of ‘elective affinities’ was inventively wide-ranging. As he surveyed the entire spectrum of vital kinetic manifestations in different forms of representation, he paid particular attention to affects. Warburg searched for ‘the engrams of affective experience’, and pursued a ‘pathos formula’ to be able to map living experience. So the sort of communication established across these different forms in the atlas would touch upon the materiality of the visual existence of life and its very fabric, which was living in his archives. And the trajectory of art historical knowledge inscribed in this heterogeneous assemblage did not shy away from the emotional involvement of empathy. This archive was a living museum.

Walter Benjamin is another ... I mean I still love him. There are all these incredible ideas in his work that you think you have read and then you go back and rediscover them in a different way. Take the *Arcades Project*, his unfinished work, a real endless archive (Benjamin, 1927-40/1999). His form of archive is infinitely fragmented, a montage made of a palimpsest of quotations, segments and fractions, pieces and sections, all fluidly rambling. The fragmentary nature is important to me, probably because this idea of the assemblage of fragments in a way comes from film. Film is the most fractured form because it is nothing but a language of fragments, shots where time and space are compressed into units that are assembled in sequence. And Benjamin’s arcades project is like an enormous movie.
And it is also the kind of book you can open at any point and stare at a sentence or two and then connect it to an entirely different part of the work, as if you were a film viewer. It is an object, like a video object, the book that allows you to flip through it and relate in your own way. Benjamin’s form of writing is truly a conceptual image of modernity. And of course his archive of knowledge included a pioneering understanding of cinema, of the city, and even of fashion. All these modern manifestations are displayed in *The Arcades Project*, which is a veritable gallery of modernity’s visual culture.

And then there is Gerhard Richter, an artist who has made another type of atlas, an ongoing work that began in 1962, consisting of photographs, collages, and sketches mounted on panels (Blazwick and Graham, 2004; Richter, 2007). Richter’s *Atlas* is his own peculiar type of archive, which again is not an encyclopaedia. I like the fact that this kind of archive is always unfinished and does not wish to be all-encompassing. It gives no definite form to the knowledge it presents. Here, there are fragments set in motion in an orderly fashion but with no systematic or systematizing logic. The work is boundless, and yet bound. New images are constantly incorporated; and they can change the form – the territory – of the ever-growing atlas. Given its nature, this work can be endlessly disassembled and then re-assembled in another way, and so it is always exhibited in different forms and permutations. This also allows for multiple voyages of interpretation, which become an actual traversal of the terrains of the atlas, whose fragmentary trajectory includes the viewer.

If the figure of the fragment is always present in this kind of archive, I think it has something to do with ruins, and with loss. The fragment is melancholic by nature. I am very attracted to ruins – fraying fabrics of history. It started way before *Atlas of Emotion*, with my first book, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* (Bruno, 1992). This was basically written on a ruined landscape. For one thing, there was nothing there but fragments. I was exploring a territory that involved the work of a woman, Elvira Notari, who made sixty feature films and over a hundred documentaries between 1906 and 1930, of which only three remained. So there might have been no book to write, except that I am always attracted to being able to figure out how you can piece together the few remaining traces of a suppressed culture. So I went on a series of inferential walks through Italian culture, interweaving examples of cinema with architecture, art history, medical discourse, photography, and literature to render the visual and material world this woman film-maker depicted. It was a portrait of the city, at the cusp of modernity, set on location, right where the cinema, the railway, and the shopping arcade intersected to transform our ways of seeing. It was all about motion pictures as part of the emotion of modernity and of the metropolis. And while unreeling this modern, fragmentary cityscape, I constantly reflected upon the ruins of modernity. To draw the landscape of cultural memory in this way is not a matter of seeking origins or authentification of something that is lost. It does not become a job of preservation but is more like
an art-historical type of restoration where you still sense the fragment, visible in the fabric of the (analyst’s) work of intervention. Take the way frescoes are restored now: although the picture may appear seamless, on closer observation you become aware of the different textures of the reconstructed parts.

The trace of the passing of time on objects – the life of material objects, including films, books, works of art or architecture – is inherent in the creation of the archive in *Atlas of Emotion*. And, in different ways, Richter, Warburg, and Benjamin, whose archives are in a way cinematic, become models for thinking about mobilizing the fabric of time. I am fond of objects such as film, which is always in ruin. As André Bazin understood a long time ago, cinema suffers from a ‘mummy complex’; that is to say, it is a plastic art, and, like the casts of the dead bodies in Pompeii, it creates a plastic image (Bazin, 1945/1967). Cinema is an heir of the plastic arts and represents the most important event in their history, for it both fulfills and liberates art’s most fundamental function – the desire to embalm. As it captures the moment, film freezes it. But the second you fix something on celluloid, it is already gone, it does not exist anymore. Furthermore, film constantly moves. I think that cinema – a moving, ruinous kind of assemblage – has become today’s archive. To make a play on words, we might say that *cinemas* and *cinéros* are connected. From dust to cinemas. In other words, films are the ashes of our time. But the history they preserve is always shifting in motion.

**MS:** Death at 24 frames a second.7

**GB:** Yes, exactly. And you see this in art today. Many artists who are making moving-image installations about film, like Douglas Gordon as a classic example, are exhibiting this process. In general, this archive of moving images has become very important for art, and there are constant reworkings of cinematic cultural memory in art installation. Just think of Stan Douglas, Isaac Julien, Doug Aitken, Mattias Müller, Steve McQueen, Mark Lewis, or Jane and Louise Wilson, to name a few artists who all do it in different ways. Think in particular of the latest works of Tacita Dean, *Kodak* (2006), *Noir et Blanc* (2006), and *Found Obsolescence* (2006), about the closing of the factory in France that made 16 mm film, a work that is a wonderful meditation on the kind of archive that cinema is. As her work on obsolescence makes clear, film is our memory. It is our mental space, and it projects how we think. You see this clearly in the way Anthony McCall makes cinema into an art of mental projection in his art installations. This is how we imagine ourselves, how we think of ourselves, how we think of a culture – cinematically. Even anthropologists, not to mention historians, have come to terms with cinema as a history.

But art, in particular, is the place where this moving, filmic culture of memory is being reinvented. In the art gallery, the archives of cinema are constantly exhibited and reimagined. In many ways, cinema exists for today's
artists outside of cinema as a historic space – exists, that is, as a mnemonic history that is fundamentally linked to a technology. Walking in the gallery and the museum, we encounter fragments of this history. Filmic techniques are reimagined as if collected together and recollected on a screen that is now a wall. In the gallery or the museum, one has the recurring sense of taking a walk through – or even into – a film and of being asked to re-experience the movement of cinema.

And thus, as I show in my book *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts*, we confront a mobile cultural memory as film exits the movie theatre and returns to the museum. This return is not surprising or upsetting to me, for the contemporary interaction of art and film is a phenomenon that has a long history. What is happening in the contemporary art galleries and in the museums is only a reminder of how cinema itself emerged. Historically, cinema was born with the museum and emerged from its way of allowing experience of a visual work in forms of ‘public intimacy’. A product of the same epoch of modernity, cinema shares with the museum a spectatorial mode. In a way, pictures – both paintings on the wall and images on the screen – were perceived, looked upon both subjectively and collectively, and traversed in similar fashions. Think about the archive of the museum: the pictures don’t move but the viewer moves from one to the next and puts together her own montage of these gestures, of these memories, as Warburg understood in the way he assembled images together. Film also displays objects that are assembled together in time and space and, even if the spectator doesn’t move, she makes imaginary movements, or projections into time and space, putting together her own assemblage.

Film itineraries are museum walks, and vice versa. And now moving image installations are exposing this double process as an actual itinerary. I am happy to observe this return of cinema into the museum, because the two started together as a (re)collection of images, open to viewing, and are now reinventing this process in renewed, refashioned forms of interaction. The cinema and the museum are archives that are converging in hybrid ways, in moving installations that mobilize the very nature of cultural memory. And it is cinema’s own obsolescence today, its own ruined moment, that is making it return to life, because things that are dead, as cinema in some way is, are very much alive, and can be reborn in another form.

MS: All of which raises so many questions! I was going to interject at various points, it was hard not to. One of the things I wanted to say had to do with the idea of the assemblage as a ‘living methodology’. In teaching, and thinking through things, I often foreground Warburg and Benjamin and Richter, along with Borges’ *Chinese Encyclopaedia* invoked in the introduction to Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (1966/1996) – another unconventional encyclopaedia – as examples of living methodologies, living methodologies that are building blocks in the
emergence of Visual Culture Studies before the fact. So much of the more creative, imaginative ways of thinking about what we do is already there in those models, as living methodologies.

I like them all very, very much. Theirs are practices that mobilize thought, thinking. But I sometimes wonder what it means to be using these living methodologies as living methodologies? They’re 40, 70, 80 years old! What does it mean for, say, Benjamin in the 1920s and 1930s to be writing about nineteenth-century Paris, and for that to be a way we can make best sense of the early twenty-first century? This makes me nervous sometimes. I don’t know if I’ve ever voiced that. But it does make me nervous. At the same time, it does make such good sense of certain ways of thinking about contemporary culture – although I recognize that its melancholic archival impulse might be a retreating from as much as a recognition of our global consumer capitalist age of empire. This aside, they offer a sensibility. It has something to do with the nature of these particular kinds of intellectual projects as assemblages. I think that’s what it is. I think you’ve absolutely hit the nail on the head. It’s the assemblages that still work ...

GB: I see what you are saying and I have often wondered about this myself. Benjamin to me still makes sense because he understood something about the origins of modernity, which we have had a century to play with. And, in the context of his understanding of modernity, he perceived the nature of the assemblage as a cinematic concept. After all, he was one of the earliest theorists to fully recognize the importance of cinema, not just as a way of changing our ways of seeing but also as a transformative spatial medium. Cinema became equal to architecture in the use and transformation of space, as a form of tactile appropriation of sites. And when he makes that analogy between the surgeon and the magician, as cameraman and painter respectively, he shows he understands not only the assemblage of the medium, its ‘cutting’ ability, but how it is deeply involved in the transformation of the material (Benjamin, 1936/1969). We are talking about metamorphosis, operating by way of these assemblages of modernity. In intellectual adventures this also means the possibility of transitioning along and in between ideas, connecting objects that are epochs of times or even mediums. This notion of moving across and along is again a cinematic concept, because it is within montage that you have reached this possibility of juxtaposing two things that generate a third, not just in the object itself but in the mind of the spectator. Hence the way Benjamin performed ‘operations’ upon this material of modernity is still speaking to me. It is a ‘living methodology’, indeed, living in forms of reinvention.

Sergei Eisenstein also understood this process, and he, too, saw cinematic montage as reproducing the transformative movement that occurs in architectural space. Eisenstein understood montage in film to be an architectural promenade, a way to make you move across a space, and not just physically but
mentally and emotionally. You become able to make jumps, imaginative leaps, in places that involve going back into the future or forward into the past, and to perform all kinds of operations that are science-fiction-like because of this ability that space has to evoke the past, the present, and the future, all intersected, almost geologically, in living space. So this goes back to the idea of lived space as also having layers – sediments and strata, residues and deposits – that is, as being a living fabric.

Cultural Cartography, Spirals, and Sensibilities

MS: Well now I completely understand your book *Atlas of Emotion*. Because what you’ve just said, that’s at the heart of it, right?

GB: Well, yes, it’s all in there.

MS: Turning to *Atlas of Emotion*, I was going to ask you a question about cultural cartography, and what it means to you. You’ve touched on it already, every now and then. *Atlas of Emotion* is absolutely the work of a cultural cartographer – whatever that might mean. It just struck me that you were talking about being able to move, or be moved, between time and space, between different historical moments and geographical places, possibilities. I marvel at how in the book you manage to somehow be in a seventeenth-century cartographical landscape and at the same time very much in the twenty-first century. You write and embody and enact the nature of the project at one and the same time, which is quite incredible! It has something to do with taking charge of the material. I’m picturing *Atlas of Emotion* next to these assemblages, and it’s not an assemblage in the same kind of way as Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, or Richter’s *Atlas*, or Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. I mean, it is like them, and of them, in terms of its sensibility, but at the same time there’s a different sense of ... I keep wanting to use the word ‘ownership’? That can’t be the right word ... but there’s a kind of ownership that *Atlas of Emotion* has of itself: that it gives itself up to things, but at the same time it also makes a decision about how to tell a story. Maybe that is the thing about the cultural cartographer, that they both give themselves up to things, to the shape and nature of things, and at the same time have to navigate a path through such environments?

GB: My work is very much about navigation; it is about routes, and process. And that is why the image of the map, which has sometimes been terribly demonized, is dear to me: because it offers your inner senses an instrument of guiding, which can take both the author and the reader through rugged and ruined terrains. The book was written as a kind of journey of palimpsest-like assemblages. There is a trajectory there, so it is not a random accumulation
of things. As I moved through different layers of material, often I wondered, ‘Am I all over the map? In which ways? How do I keep this navigation going?’ The method of the navigation is important to me, and I prefer the kind of charts that one takes on a journey with oneself, that unravel as you go on the journey so that they are part of the voyage. And this journey is also a narrative itinerary, for I am concerned that a book tell a story, a specific kind of story.

Narration is historically part of cartography, which, after all, concerns the story of a place and has at times even embraced fictional forms of representation. In the seventeenth century, for example, the art of mapping was an imaginary cartography – it was not simply a charting of real places, although real places were portrayed, but it understood the relation between a real place and an imaginary one. In my type of cultural cartography, I touch upon that form of liminal connection that is so deeply important to the visual arts and to film, which do address reality but also dress it in fantastic forms. When you write about visual culture, you have to be able to navigate this story, the relation between the inner imagination and the outer expression, and move in between these two forms.

The map that most inspired Atlas of Emotion and its ‘journeys in art, architecture, and film’ was la Carte du pays de Tendre, literally the map of the land of tenderness, designed way back in 1654 by Madeleine de Scudéry. This map of the land of affects is interesting because it is a very open map. Like a film it has a frame, but things keep falling off screen. At the edge, the sea would flow on the one side, the river on the other. This is a map of a specific place but also represents the place of imagination. And it is a map that wants you to navigate it, that needs somebody to actually enter the territory and move through it rather than form a single image of a place. You would constantly work on the border, around edges, to try and imagine what was behind the boundary of the frame, and your curiosity would pull you towards some terrae incognitae. So this was an important model to me in the creation of this kaleidoscope of different cultural sites and in thinking of how space becomes this repository in which I could move in time but also across different kinds of media.

This map was also important because of how it visualized affects and how it represented an itinerary of emotions, specifically, in the form of a landscape. In Scudéry’s map there was a vast terrain punctuated by little towns, and one was supposed to move from one to the other, and that motion provoked an emotion. This mode of representation became a guide in my way of theorizing the relation between motion and emotion in the visual and spatial arts, and especially in writing about film’s own emotion pictures. This map allowed me actually to visualize how within space itself there are different materials, textures, and fabrics that form the various itineraries you follow as a critic, and that includes the affects.

Speaking of other cultural cartographers, it is significant that the Situationists were inspired by Scudéry’s map, which was reprinted in the Internationale
situationniste in 1959. This form of mapping becomes, in a way, the model for
the kind of psychogeography that rethinks spaces in relation to fluid assem-
blages, and to psychic montage. In this cartography, for instance, you can con-
nect places in a city or on a cultural map not by way of real distances but by
way of events that have been experienced in the imagination and in the reality
of the people who have lived through them in the space. You can see motion
in culture as deeply related to living space and lived temporality. And you can
also understand that emotion itself is a movement, and then movement is
something that touches a person, touches something profoundly deep within
the person, which enables a deeper social transformation. In this way you can
understand the work of affects beyond physiognomy, and emotion not just as
one single image or state of mind but as the possibility of moving across differ-
ent states of mind, creating diverse, mobile forms of connections to the world.

MS: Madeleine de Scudéry’s map reminds me of a project published a couple
of years ago by the magazine Cabinet.11 As a project entitled ‘A Slight Mismap’,
they reproduced François Jollain’s Nowel Amsterdam en L’Amérique (1672).
Exploiting Europeans’ interest in the New World and their ignorance of it,
Jollain’s map is a fictitious bird’s-eye view of Manhattan Island that’s copied
from a sixteenth-century view of Lisbon!

But Jollain’s cartography is a lie. You’re speaking about something quite dif-
ferent. What you’re articulating is exactly the point where the experience of
the thing itself and the imaginative possibilities of that thing come together.
You’re struggling with how the map can be used to mobilize your understand-
ing of what it is you’re needing to do. It’s about the journeying, it’s about the
‘getting there’, not the getting there.

GB: What is most fascinating about the journey is the process itself, not the
beginning or the end product. Quite often, what is most important are the
stops along the journey, the arrests and standstills that generate another way to
go. Sometimes the journey begins on a personal note and takes a personal form,
for, as a cultural cartographer, when you move through different geopsychic
fabrications you are also moving through your own personal imagination and
your own emotions. In this sense, critical theory can be understood as a jour-
ney in lived space. You traverse this huge territory and sometimes you even dis-
cover something that makes you want to go back within yourself. But this
‘analytic’ journey is not really a going back. It is almost as if you have moved
through a spiral, which represents a different, more productive kind of circu-
larity. I am fond of spirals and of spiralling ways of thinking. The spiral form is
not the circularity of the ending, but it is a circularity that allows you to make
motion, and even allows you to circle backwards while going forward.

I have been very fond of this idea of movement for the longest time (it spirals
in different ways from Streetwalking on a Ruined Map to Atlas of Emotion to
Public Intimacy). And, in this respect, there was something I held very dear for a while, which was a concept that James Clifford expressed: ‘to theorize, one leaves home’ (Clifford, 1989). Which has to do with departure, and separation. As he writes, the Greek term, is a ‘practice of travel and observation’, so theory itself, from the beginning, is ‘a product of displacement, comparison, a certain distance’. In my case it was even literal – I left my home country, my mother tongue. I left to find my own way to theorize, and possibilities became opened to me in New York, at a specific moment in time, to take on this theoretical journey.

Over the course of time, I have also realized that this kind of journey, this love of motion, has very little to do with speed. It actually has a lot more to do with slowness and with duration, and this is especially desirable in an age where we are deprived of the time itself of thinking. Rather than having this constant fascination for restless movement, I then became more and more interested in meditating on forms like spirals, which allow you to revisit things. Spirals enable a certain revisitng of territories, and even allow you a form of return. In fact, having taken this route and journeyed along this path for a long time, I finally discovered that to theorize one cannot really leave home behind. Ultimately, one must accept the risks, theoretical and otherwise, involved not only in leaving but in attempting a return.

So it is not by chance that the last chapters of Atlas of Emotion are devoted to Naples, the city in Italy that I am from, revisited with the eyes of someone who has left it behind. This is a virtual journey of return, in which I am not physically going back and through which I have become a different person along the way. This return is not about reclaiming roots, origin, or identity, but it is really about the nature of displacement and about what this motion means, culturally, to individuals like myself, who are now a type of cultural hybrid, existing across and in between cultures, people who not only have elements of different cultures but have also transformed themselves along the way.

Ultimately, this critical expedition is a real cultural journey, for it is its own journey of migration through territories. To connect this back to what we were saying about the materiality of language, I further discovered while working on Atlas of Emotion that the word emotion contains in itself not only motion but has, in its own roots, the cultural notion of migration. The Latin root of the word emotion speaks clearly about a ‘moving’ force, stemming as it does from emovere, an active verb composed of movere, ‘to move’, and e, ‘out’. The meaning of emotion, then, is historically associated with a moving out, migration, transference from one place to another. This ‘moving out’ is exactly what one does as one crosses a border, which can be the territory of a nation, or a culture, a language, or even an emotional territory. It is a going out of oneself, in the sense of being able to push one’s own limits and one’s own borders. So this cultural journeying of migration, this moving from one place to another, is a cultural cartography deeply steeped in the pleasure and malaise of our time, a method created by new migrants, cosmopolitan workers who question their
own territories. This is another way to understand the emotion of motion, as the affect brought about by all senses of migration, theory included, which is an actual emotional ‘transport’. When you re-turn to theorize this way, and you go back, by way of writing, you make this kind of spiralling journey of understanding through the straits of material culture, while you are yourself being transported and transformed.

**MS:** This all leads me to ask a question about ‘environment’, or, rather, about Environmental Studies. It is, in a sense, a question that takes us back to the beginning of the interview, to matters of the university, disciplinarity, and so on. You are based in the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University. It’s a title I love! When I first came across the name, it confused the hell out of me! I always understood the ‘visual’ bit, but on first viewing the ‘environmental’ part of the department’s name seems to have something to do with ecology, sustainability, protection agencies, and so on. But everything that you have been talking about, everything you do in your research and writing, makes sense of a Department of Visual and Environmental Studies. You couldn’t be in a more appropriately titled Department!

**GB:** I love this title. I like it even because it is confusing. I know a lot of people can get confused, because ‘environment’ has come to mean something different; but the origin of how it came about, in terms of the genealogy of this place, is perfect, and it even touches on a notion of the ecology of the image. The Department was founded over forty years ago, way before the concept of the ‘built environment’, which is its origin, was as theoretically relevant as it is today in terms of a culturally built space, that is, a representational landscape. In some way, the philosophy of this Department of Visual and Environmental Studies came out of a post-Bauhaus notion of connections among all the arts, and again that is where design also enters into it.

**MS:** With the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts itself ...

**GB:** Yes, with the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, because there were some architects and also designers who were exiled from Europe during the Nazi era and World War II whose ways of thinking led to this. The idea was to create a building that might house a department that would not be just of architecture. The concept was broader, with the sense that the visual arts could have a place within design, or, rather, as we see it today, within a visual architecture, and that included even graphic design. The seeds of the birth of this place are contained in this idea of the creation of an architectural home for the art object, which was widely conceived, with all the arts represented along with architecture.
MS: And the fabric and materiality of the building and the nature of the experience of being in the building ...

GB: Yes, this is crucial, because Le Corbusier was given the commission to build this fantastic building that houses the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies, which is actually the only building of his in North America. The Carpenter Center is very different from the rest of the Harvard campus, and, as the artist Pierre Huyghe showed in his Huyghe + Corbusier: Harvard Project in 2004, a work produced for the fortieth anniversary of the building, a part of the institution was concerned about its modernism, for which the architects among the faculty had advocated, and there were letters in the archives fearing a white whale was to rise in the middle of campus. The concrete and glass structure of the building is almost like a pianoforte: it looks like two sides of a piano. This is a perfectly rhythmical place, in many ways, especially because you enter it through a ramp. So the door is already a place of motion – the passage between inside and outside is already a trajectory, an idea that suits me perfectly well. Also, there is no difference between entrance and exit: the way you enter the building by the ramp you can also exit, without even going inside, for the ramp cuts across the whole body of the building. It is a fantastic metaphor for what I have been thinking about for a while.

The Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts is also a building you cannot hold in your mind as a single image. I have taught there since 1990, so it is seventeen years, but if I close my eyes, as when I think about New York in my mind’s eye, I am not able to recall it in a single image. There is no single vision that holds it; the building is full of fragments, a fractured place that is seen by way of lighting, that changes according to how the light reflects and refracts, that is all about windows that are cinematically ‘cut’ and that traverse the building. This building is really an assemblage, in some way, and one that can only be experienced in motion, for it comes to life only as you move through it. Le Corbusier, after all, was the architect who theorized and practiced the idea of an ‘architectural promenade’ (Le Corbusier and Jeanneret, 1964).

The first thing that attracted me was the potential of this edifice, and the extent of its conceptual expanse. The particular fabric of this building enfolded a visionary concept and had within itself the seeds of a very interesting history. I love this notion of an integrated study of visual culture, and the idea that this place housed architecture and design along with painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, photography, animation and film, and now also video art and art installation, in both theory and practice at the same time. This building is a kind of laboratory of ideas, and I was thrilled that I could actually find a place where I could expand across the horizons of everything I am passionate about, which was already contained in some form in this imaginary assemblage. Of course, the concept and the connections had to be reinvented, for, by the time I got
there, naturally, the original founders were aged or retired, and their critical
tenets could no longer hold in the same way. The Department’s vision had to be
rebuilt theoretically under the new tenets of thinking about visual culture. For
me, a key to this is to work with the history, with the idea of an architectural
container for objects of visual representation, understanding it as a theoretical
architecture – an architecture of the visual that can extend from the art object
all the way to the object of design. It is this material object that has the poten-
tial to cut across and connect all the visual arts, and to link them as well to the
spatial field in a wide-ranging way of thinking about visual space. In this sense,
Visual and Environmental Studies is about a broad sense of spatiality and how
the visual arts themselves make space.

Many different roads can be taken from there. To stay with your original
question about the environment, when thinking about the ‘built environment’,
for example, the treatment of architecture can become an understanding of
landscape. To speak of cityscape or streetscape says a lot more about the urban
than mere architecture, which tends to be tectonic. The built environment is a
place in motion, a landscape of movement. And when you think about the cre-
ation of this ‘scape’, of a built environment that is a representational landscape,
landscape itself can be understood as something made up. There is nothing nat-
ural, after all, about a landscape. It has been framed and painted, over and over
again, so that it has become an image; just think of the Renaissance or the
Picturesque. And now it also is constantly photographed and filmed. This kind
of complex, interactive, imaginary landscape is very much part of the fabric of
how we think culturally and of how images are created and circulated. There is
a real relation in visual life between art, architecture, and the moving image,
which intersect in creating even our own scape. So the name of the Department
of Visual and Environmental Studies is indeed very meaningful, and this was
and is the perfect place to be able to develop my ideas. Atlas of Emotion: Journeys
in Art, Architecture, and Film was born while walking up and down the
ramp of Corbusier’s building, and it grew through a number of seminars that
I taught with students who are very inventive and willing to take a journey with
you, something I cherish about this place of intellectual adventure. And the
place continues to grow, and more colleagues have come in, and so it has
become much more possible to share these ideas and further expand not only
their horizon but also their impact.

Another important thing, institutionally – and this is something that I hope
will expand to other places – is to rethink the place of film studies, to reposi-
tion it in relation to the history and theory of the visual arts and of architec-
ture. The birth of film studies as an academic discipline in the institution was
generally connected to literary theory and semiotics, at least in the United
States, and cinema studies was regularly located in literature departments, often
as an offshoot of English departments. Then it became its own place, though
you still find literature programmes functioning as institutional homes for the
study of film. But what has not been really tapped into, and I think there is a
tremendous archive of possibilities, is its relation to art history as well as
architecture and urban studies, which can open up a wealth of new research.
To me, the idea of locating a graduate programme in Film and Visual Studies in
a Department of Visual and Environmental Studies is a chance also to reinvent
film studies, positioning it much more in relation to the traditions of thinking
visually and spatially that exist in the history of art and architecture, and
especially in contemporary art. Just think of art installation today, or go back
to modernism or the origins of modern visual culture. I mean, how can you be
an art historian and not know anything about the moving image, and vice versa?

The cross-pollination of these disciplines is crucial to creating new methods
and new ideas, and to moving on into a different form of theorization of the
moving image that can treasure the whole trajectory of the history of represent-
ation by delving into the visual archives that belong to the visual arts and
architecture as well as into their cultural histories. There is tremendous energy
in this interaction. Just to give you an example, my students in architecture are
the cinephiles of our era, they are obsessed with film. And you can see why, in
terms of the architecture that is being constructed, because architects have
been struggling for a while with wanting to mobilize the object itself of archi-
tecture, this thing that doesn’t move. So of course they are attracted to cinema.
And then there is the connection between the two in terms of the creation of
a living space, of a space of circulation and transition where fabrics of histories
and stories are written on the walls, as they are in houses or buildings, which
breathe the history that has been lived through them, or as they are projected
on the screen, which also absorbs the fabric of life.

I think it is important for film studies to dig into these archives of art and
architecture to be able to rethink its own medium, and vice versa. And film,
this syntethic, hybrid art form, can be, and has been, tremendously important
to these other disciplines in opening up their own frames of mind in different
directions. The moving image is the centre out of which other journeys can take
place. And more will come of these crossovers. Artists and architects already
understand the power of the moving image. It is clear every time you walk into
a gallery or look at architecture, even if sometimes academia takes longer in
catching up with the ideas. Such is the nature of academic institutions. And so a
lot more can still be done creatively within the institution to revitalize film stud-
ies by linking it, historically and theoretically, to the visual space of architecture
and the mode of representation of the visual arts.

MS: In the end, when it comes to these questions of interdisciplinarity, one
both thinks about and doesn’t worry about the links between, say, Film Studies,
and Geography, and Visual Culture Studies, and so on, and so on. It matters and
it doesn’t matter. One does what one does because it is important for it to be
done, and then every now and then one thinks about what it means to reposition this or that in relation to this or that.

GB: I just do what I do.

MS: And they will come. People didn’t come to the Bauhaus in the 1920s and 1930s because it was in Weimar or Dessau or Berlin. People didn’t come to teach and learn at Black Mountain College in the 1940s and 1950s because it was near Asheville, North Carolina. They came because of a ... 

GB: The word really is sensibility. A common sensibility. For myself, this is just the way I think, an attraction to all forms of representation of space. In the end, it is the passion and fascination of what one does that counts. I am not exactly an institution builder, in the sense that I didn’t make a programme first; what I needed to say I needed to write, because I am a writer first. But the book is a building block. Books create a foundation by their very existence, and I am happy if Atlas of Emotion can function in this way. But to work in this espace, and in between textural fabrics, does not mean I do not have respect for the disciplines. It is actually much more difficult work to do, this transdisciplinary voyage. People sometimes misunderstand what it takes to do visual culture or material culture. You need to know a lot more, several fields, and be a lot more careful and sensitive to certain things – you have to know both the objects and the borders. It is tremendously rigorous work. The balance between the confines of the specific field or object you are tackling and how to cross over to make them speak in a different way is quite delicate. Perhaps, in the end, that’s why I am attracted to cartography, because to map is to construct through close engagement with material objects – with method and fluidity, which have to work together if one is to move with sensitivity and elasticity across the terrains one is traversing and the materials one is interweaving.

Notes


4 See Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Treatise on the Sensations (Geraldine Carr, trans.). Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1930. Originally published as Traité des sensations (1754).


7 This is an allusion to the argument at the heart of Laura Mulvey’s Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image, London: Reaktion Books, 2005.


9 This is a phrase that comes up in the interview with Susan Buck-Morss in this volume.


References


