

Nora Berning, Philipp Schulte, Christine Schwanecke (eds.)

Experiencing Space – Spacing Experience:  
Concepts, Practices, and Materialities

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Horst Carl, Wolfgang Hallet, Ansgar Nünning, Martin Zierold



International Graduate Centre  
for the Study of Culture

Nora Berning, Philipp Schulte,  
Christine Schwanecke (eds.)

# Experiencing Space – Spacing Experience

Concepts, Practices, and Materialities

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## FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the wake of the ‘spatial turn’, it might seem that everything there is to say with regard to the research category of space has been said. However, as could be seen at the European Summer School for the Study of Culture (ESSCS) entitled “Experiencing Space – Spacing Experience: Concepts, Practices, and Materialities”, which took place in Bochum in September 2013, the intersection of space and experience has seldom been explored and can be regarded as an emerging research topic. As it is both interdisciplinary and international, this field of research is a very lively, challenging and interesting one, just waiting to be explored. This is why this volume maps the emerging field of research related to the presentation and representation of spatial experience as well as the experiential interfaces of space and experience – particularly in light of new directions in research, which include the exploration of space as a ‘cultural-geographical’ or ‘psychogeographical’ category.

This volume not only aims to explore the experiential dimensions of space but also the spatial dimensions of experience. Like the theorization of space, the conceptualization of experience has a long tradition in philosophical, theoretical, and empirical scholarship. This tradition extends from ancient philosophy to many classics of modern European philosophy by, for instance, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, John Locke, and Søren Kierkegaard, as well as to more recent works by Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, and Bernhard Waldenfels. Raymond Williams developed a concept of experience throughout the second half of the 20th century, which illustrates the chiasm sketched above. To him, ‘experience’ is a kind of “knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection” as well as “a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from ‘reason’ or ‘knowledge’” (Williams, *Keywords*, 1976: 126). Against this backdrop, this book revisits the key concepts of space and experience within the study of culture and brings them together. It exemplifies their interdisciplinary overlaps, discusses crucial (historical) practices linked to both notions, and explores the concepts’ positions within phenomena of transformation and materialization.

As mentioned above, this volume has emerged from the ESSCS 2013, which was jointly organized by the European Network for the Study of Culture (ENCS), the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC), Giessen, the Giessen PhD programs, the PhD-Net Literary and Cultural Studies (PhD-Net), funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (*Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst*, DAAD), and the International PhD Programme Literary and Cultural Studies (IPP) as well as the Ruhrtriennale Festival for the Arts 2013, an international art festival that takes place among the spectacular monuments of the industrial Ruhr region of Germany. Within the festival’s spaces, laden with history, a genre-bending program was assembled under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Heiner Goebbels. The 2013 Ruhrtriennale assigned a central position to the concept of experience and opened its artistic program

to the academic public. Within this special setting, the contributors of this volume and external guests entered a productive dialogue that explored the manifold facets of the intersection of space and experience, these categories' cognitive and spatial materializations and related practices. It is to this exciting event that the present volume bears witness. The essays collected here are not to be understood as the last words on the topic of 'Experiencing Space – Spacing Experience', but, rather, as the beginnings of a discussion that is, we believe, worth pursuing.

The organization of this academic event and the subsequent realization of this conceptual volume would not have been possible without substantial support. This is why we, the editors, would like to thank, first and foremost, Prof. Dr. Ansgar Nünning, one of the founding fathers of the ENCS and co-initiator of the summer school. He has not only played a crucial role in the genesis of this European platform for interdisciplinary approaches to the study of culture, which, in 2013, celebrated its tenth anniversary, but he was also a key figure in the development of this volume – ideationally, conceptually and financially. We are grateful for his enormous dedication, generous support and his much appreciated courage to venture out into new terrain – geographically and imaginatively.

We also very much thank our host at the 'Ruhrtiennale' 2013, Prof. Dr. Heiner Goebbels, who contributed so memorably to the summer school by providing the frame and engaging in the discussion. We very much appreciate the on-site help of student assistant Christoph Bovermann and the Giessen team who organized the summer school with us, namely, Franka Heise, Carola Hilbrand, Dr. Beatrice Michaelis, Prof. Dr. Ansgar Nünning, Dr. Kai Marcel Sicks, and Prof. Dr. Martin Zierold. We would also like to extend our thanks to our ENCS partners for their invaluable support and great fervor. We are grateful to the international participants of the ESSCS 2013, who have inspired this publication and have substantially revised their papers and keynotes to make them fit the conceptual framework of this book, as well as to all other contributors, who, with their respective fields of expertise and approaches, have both substantially broadened and complemented the volume's disciplinary and thematic scope.

We would like to express our gratitude to the DAAD and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (*Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung*, BMBF) for their generous publication grant. We are also thankful for the support by Dr. Erwin Otto and Dr. Petra Vock of Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier (WVT), who kindly and professionally attended to this publication. Our editing team's support is also very much appreciated: We thank all native speakers who proofread the articles, Dr. Simon Cooke, Lauren Greyson, Elizabeth Kovach, and Kate Oden. We furthermore thank the IPP and PhD-Net team members, Natalya Bekhta, Ioanna Kipourou, Melanie Mihm, and Anna Weigel, as well as Alexander J. Sperrl for assisting us in proofreading and formatting the edited articles.

Nora Berning, Philipp Schulte, and Christine Schwanecke  
Giessen, September 2014

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# EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF SPACE AND EXPERIENCE: AN INTRODUCTION

NORA BERNING, PHILIPP SCHULTE, CHRISTINE SCHWANECKE

## 1. The Theory and Experience of Space<sup>1</sup>

There is a legend concerning the philosopher Thales of Miletus, which goes as follows: One day, on his way through the streets of his city, he was so absorbed in contemplation of space and the celestial bodies that he overlooked a pit right in front of his nose and fell in. Laughingly, the maid accompanying him observed: “You can’t see what’s in front of your feet and you want to understand what’s to be found in the heavens?” (Laertius 1807: 36 f.) Thus while Thales’ musing about the cosmos was highly abstract, his corporeal experience inevitably involved an entirely different encounter with space; indeed, it constituted an event in and of itself. There is a seemingly irreconcilable tension here between the contemplation of space in its abstract dimensions and the immediate experience of it, including its very direct effects on the body of the subject – this tension is relieved in the laugh of the maid.

The theory of space and the experience of space: This volume collects reflections, investigations, and approaches that illustrate and explore the complex interplay between modes of dealing with space. The temporal aspect of experience is most often invoked, whether as momentary surprise, as with Thales, or as an ongoing practice that qualifies as ‘experienced’. The following contributions, on the contrary, interrogate the concept with regard to its spatial dimensions. This also comes closer to the German word for experience, ‘*Erfahrung*’. Its morpheme ‘*fahr*’ (the word stem from ‘*fahren*’) indicates a spatial dimension, namely, the idea of crossing through space. At the same time, *Erfahrung* etymologically stems from words like ‘to wander’ or ‘to ramble’ (*Umherschweifen*) and ‘to cross’ or ‘to perambulate’ (*Durchwandern*). Thus, experience invokes a space continuum through which a subject moves (through time), which is shaped by it and, in turn, shapes it. Experiences (*Erfahrungen*) are always bound up with spatial materiality: The eventful experience of the brief moment, as well as the more gradual experience acquired over time, are connected with specific and often specialized places. And they are necessarily dependent on these spaces: The experience we garner in and from one place can, in another, be impossible, worthless, or even an obstacle.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank Lauren Greyson and Philipp Tiesler, who kindly shared the task of linguistically taking care of a previous version of the first section of this introduction.

This orientation towards the concept of experience foregrounds a less commonly observed aspect of the spatial turn, which has, since the 1980s, radically altered the manner in which space is regarded by cultural theorists. Central to this approach is the idea of the social production of concrete spaces and spatiality, and with it the dismissal of space as simply a given. Rather, space is understood as a performatively constructed fabric, perpetually renegotiated, which historically is the result of prevailing power relations. This process, termed “spatial practice” by Henri Lefebvre (1974: 38), describes the constructivist paradigm change in the theory of space. With this, Lefebvre implicitly distances himself from the concept of experience – at least insofar as it might be regarded as the immediate relation of the subject, conceiving itself as ‘thrown into’ a supposedly natural space, to its environment. “The spatial practice of a society,” according to Lefebvre, “secretly that society’s space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it.” (Ibid.) Society ‘propounds’ and simultaneously ‘presupposes’: The claim that spatial practice both conceals and professes its own power to construct, and that these constructions are naturalized by society, is the basis for Lefebvre’s skepticism towards the concept of experience. Experience can no longer serve as a direct connection to a natural space, but instead is a manipulated and manipulable parameter in the play of power that is the performative ‘bringing-forth’ of space. It is thus no longer a supposedly natural space that can be experienced in its “illusory immediacy” (ibid.: 40). Experience, according to Lefebvre, anchors itself instead in the lived practice of the representation of space, which is also the point of departure for the artistic, sometimes subversive, treatment of technocratically conceived representations of space:

Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time. (Ibid.: 42)

This volume brings together contributions from a number of culturally oriented disciplines, from sociology to literary studies and art theory to philosophy, that, through concrete objects of inquiry, examine the ramifications of the theoretical articulations of the spatial turn for the concept of experience. How do spaces constitute experience in the dual sense, as described in the beginning? And, vice versa, in what way are spaces created through experience in the first place? In order to investigate these questions and, at the same time, not tumble into the same pit as Thales, the PhDnet/ESSCS Summer School 2013 “Experiencing Space – Spacing Experience,” of which this volume was a result, chose its venue very deliberately. The summer school was organized in cooperation with the Ruhrtriennale, an international art festival taking place among the spectacular monuments of the Ruhrgebiet’s industrial culture and history. A genre-bending program was assembled under the three-year leadership (2012-2014) of Heiner Goebbels, which itself assigned a central position to the concept of experience. The Ruhrtriennale was thus perfectly suited as a site for the summer school in three regards. First, the “Ruhr Metropolis,” as one of the largest metropolitan areas in

Europe, underwent, in a few decades, a rapid structural and thus singular change in the conditions underlying experience. This transformation not only pertains to the Ruhrgebiet emerging from an almost exclusive reliance on industrial mining to become a much more diversified economy, but also connects to the regional as well as international cultural offerings from, for instance, the Ruhrtriennale. Unique to this region, and particularly important for its inhabitants, is the polycentric array of the 4.000 square kilometers of urban landscape between the Lippe and Ruhr rivers.<sup>2</sup> The Ruhrgebiet, with its complex social and cultural transformations, thus offered manifold stimuli for reflecting on the interdependence of experience and spatiality; above all, it provoked the question of how a metropolitan region composed of 53 cities and municipalities can be experienced. Secondly, the Ruhrtriennale, founded after the conclusion of the *Internationale Bauausstellung Emscher Park (IBA)* in 2002 as a decentralised art festival for the Ruhrgebiet, can be uniquely regarded as experiential change put into practice. The alluring halls, defunct collieries, and power plants, saved from deterioration by the IBA and made objects of aesthetic interest, were predestined to serve as sites for new forms of artistic interaction – a kind of experience far different from that originally bound up with the industrial spaces. And thirdly, under the artistic direction of Heiner Goebbels, the festival focused explicitly on the concept of experience as a form of perception going beyond the obvious understanding and intelligibility of the world:

I like to speak of *art as experience* because I'm not interested in theatre as an instrument for conveying messages. [...] Theatre can be so much more than that: a kaleidoscope of impressions generated by movements, sounds, words, spaces, bodies, light and colour. And this 'more' can perhaps reach areas of experience for which we (still) lack words. So 'art as experience' involves a readiness to accept that it may not always be essential to understand what is happening on stage, a willingness to listen to a strange language or unfamiliar music and to look at images that subvert existing categories. (Goebbels 2012: 9; emphasis in original)

After these introductory remarks, we will discuss the key notions of experience, space and also place to provide a working definition for the explorations to follow (Section 2). We will then move on to give a research survey on the topic at hand (Section 3). By way of transition to the contributors' articles, we will highlight some possible research questions and points worth considering and, finally, outline the structure of the present volume (Section 4).

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<sup>2</sup> See also Christa Reicher et al. (2011). Special thanks to Christa Reicher, director of the department of urban planning, design, and zoning at the faculty for regional development planning at the TU Dortmund, who presented a particularly interesting analysis of structural change in the Ruhrgebiet during the summer school.

## 2. Experience, Space, and Place: Discussions and Working Definitions of the Key Terms

To provide a theoretical framework for the articles that follow, the key terms at the heart of the intersection at hand will be at the center of this section's attention. And this despite of the fact that, as one may be inclined to argue, both 'experience' and 'space' have been so widely and controversially discussed that neither anything new and original nor anything definitive can and should be added to the research of centuries. Against this backdrop, it will not be the aim, in what follows, to give an overview of the respective research history and conceptual history of space and experience.<sup>3</sup> What has to be done, though, with the aim of a terminological clarification, is to approach the key terms and, for the purpose of bringing space and experience together, to highlight those of their characteristics that become important in the light of the intersection.

The idea of 'experience', which has been dealt with in a long tradition of philosophical, theoretical and empirical scholarship, ranging from ancient philosophy to European classics by, for instance, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, John Locke, and Arthur Schopenhauer to more recent works by Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, Bernhard Waldenfels, and Raymond Williams, seems to be inherently bound to spatio-temporal dimensions. Even though philosophers and other scholars have repeatedly cautioned against simplified and reductive approaches of dichotomizing certain qualities of the concept (cf., e.g., Tygstrup in this volume; Waldenfels 2009: 33; Williams 1985 [1976]), experience seems to be made up of a plethora of, sometimes, contradictory characteristics or meanings. It oscillates between past and present, between activity and passivity, and between manifold, somehow related concepts, such as perception, feeling, knowledge, or memory. To Raymond Williams, 'experience' is a kind of "knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection" as well as "a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from 'reason' or 'knowledge'" (Williams 1985 [1976]: 126).<sup>4</sup> To Williams, there is the experience from the past, perhaps in the form of 'les-

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview on discussions of 'space' and the 'spatial turn', see, for instance, Bachmann-Medick's study (cf. 2006: 284-328), Stephan Günzel's body of work on space and spatial theory (cf., e.g., Günzel 2007, [2008] 2010, 2010), Günzel's collaborative work with Jörg Dünne (Dünne/Günzel 2006) or Wolfgang Hallet and Birgit Neumann's introduction to 'space and movement' (2009) in literature. For an overview on discussions of 'experience', see especially Waldenfels' *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung* (2002), in which the philosopher does not only develop his own theory of experience, but also revisits former, primarily philosophical conceptualizations, as well as Raymond Williams' key term entry on experience (1985 [1976]).

<sup>4</sup> In Williams' terms, 'experience past' entails reflection, whereas 'experience present' is characterized by a heightened degree of immediacy: "Experience past already includes [...] those processes of consideration, reflection and analysis which the most extreme use