Representations of Space, Spatial Practices and Spaces of Representation: An Application of Lefebvre’s Spatial Triad

Ceri Watkins

Management Centre, Accounting, Finance & Management Department, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, CO4 3SQ, UK

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Representations of Space, Spatial Practices and Spaces of Representation: An Application of Lefebvre’s Spatial Triad

CERI WATKINS

Management Centre, Accounting, Finance & Management Department, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, CO4 3SQ, UK

This paper introduces the work of the philosopher Henri Lefebvre into the field of organisational analysis. In particular it is intended to suggest that Lefebvre’s considerations of space have the potential to provide a rich and insightful exploration of organisational space, which is not afforded by many of the current approaches taken in this field. His development of a spatial triad suggests an approach to organisational analysis that facilitates the contemplation of social, physical and mental spaces to provide an integrated view of organisational space, an approach that is in contrast to many current discussions of organisational space in which the focus is often only on a singular aspect of space. It reveals some of the possibilities inherent in Lefebvre’s theories, through providing an analysis of a specific organisational event from a Lefebvrian perspective and exploring some of the implications of this type of approach for organisational analysis.

Key words: Organisation; Space; Lefebvre

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the work of the late French philosopher Henri Lefebvre into the field of organisational analysis. In particular it is intended to illustrate that Lefebvre’s considerations of space have the potential to provide a rich and insightful exploration of organisations, not often afforded by many of the current approaches taken in this field. The epistemological foundation of Lefebvre’s theory is his positing of a spatial triad, which utilises three considerations of space, in order to make lucid the complexities of everyday life. He suggests that space is fundamental to our lived experience of the world, and that every experience is comprised of three interrelated aspects of space: representations of space (conceived space), spatial practices (perceived space), and spaces of representation (lived space).

* Tel: +44 (0)1206-874877; Fax: +44 (0)1206-873429; E-mail: cwatki@essex.ac.uk


2 Here ‘spaces of representation’ is used as a translation of the lived space (espace vecu) element of the spatial triad. This translation follows Shields (1999) and Soja (1996) rather than the term ‘representational space’ used by Nicholson-Smith in his 1991 translation of The Production of Space (Lefebvre, 1991) as it is felt it provides a more transparent understanding.
such come together with the other two elements of the triad to ensure the levels of cohesion and competence required for the everyday functions of society, the spatial events of life. The final aspect, which completes the triadic model, comprises spaces of representation, the spaces of lived experience; this is space ‘as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of “inhabitants” and “users”’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 39, original emphasis).

Lefebvre’s positing of a spatial triad suggests an approach to organisational analysis that facilitates the contemplation of social, physical and mental spaces to provide an integrated view of organisational space. This, as we shall see, is an approach that is in contrast to many current discussions of organisational space, in which the focus is often only on a singular aspect of space. As such, Lefebvre offers us an opportunity to engage with organisations and the processes of organisation in a manner that is richer, more insightful than the ordinary. In order to illustrate the potential of this approach and to make transparent the processes of organisation, this paper begins by introducing some of Henri Lefebvre’s reflections on space. It then presents a Lefebvrian analysis of a specific organisational event in order to reveal the inherent potentialities of this theory. To conclude, the implications of this type of approach for organisational analysis are discussed.

Abstract Considerations of Space Dominate

Lefebvre (1991) argues that the dominant contemporary notion of space has emerged from a traditional western, Cartesian logic to produce an abstract space—a scientific space. He suggests that the perception of scientific understanding, and its apparent success in unravelling the mysteries of the natural world, has led to scientific method being accepted as the primary mode for the development of insights into society. Therefore, it was the ‘natural’ route to follow when engaging with the concept of space, with the vast majority of mainstream considerations of space being informed by, and delimited within, the powerful ideological tendencies that inform all attempts at scientific understanding. This has resulted in a mathematically informed search for an understanding of space, the outcome of which has mandated a notion of space as a Euclidean geometric space. As Lefebvre elaborates, ‘this is that Euclidean space which philosophical thought has treated as an “absolute”, and hence a space (or a representation of space) long used as a space of reference’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 285, original emphasis). Since this space of reference came to prominence, explorations of space have tended to be reduced to a search for ‘that which is contained within this space’ and the identification and classification of spaces within the accepted parameters. Thus many attempts at engaging with the social world, including those within organisational studies, have become a process of distinction and classification in which numerous ‘mental spaces’ of understanding are postulated. However, the spaces generated in this manner, although purporting to explore the social world, are very much an abstraction, a mental construction, and as such have become disassociated from the physical and social realities of lived experience. An abyss has opened up between the theories of space and the empirical world of actions, interactions and understandings, leaving our lived experiences estranged from the conceptions that purport to represent them. This notion of space as a ‘mental thing’ or ‘mental place’ has been inherited by, and has arguably near completely colonised, the majority of current forms of epistemological enquiry. A specific theoretical practice has evolved that ‘produces a mental space which is apparently, but only apparently, extra-ideological’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 6), an apparition which serves to shroud the envelopment of the physical and social realms by that of the mental.

For Lefebvre, the dominance of these mental spaces is extremely problematic. The prominence of such abstract constructs in our societal modes of perception has led to the
circumscription of the range of understandings, and thus actions with which we may engage in everyday life. The socially constructed nature of space has tended to be ignored, with space being typically considered ‘as an abstract, with physical contexts, as the container for our lives rather than the structures we helped create’ (Ross, 1988, cited in Shields, 1999: 119).

In order to reconcile this disjuncture in his seminal text, *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1991) identified space as fundamental to our understanding and interaction with the world, and sought to develop an alternate theory of space that would clarify the role it should play. He posits space as the primary locus of lived experience in the world and has conceived an approach to space, which moves it from the realm of the mental to become the foundation of our engagement with the world. In this his aim was not ‘to produce a (or the) discourse on space, but rather to expose the actual production of space by bringing the various kinds of space and the modalities of their generation together’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 16, *original emphasis*). The act of producing space is recognized as fundamental to our experiences of the world, and as such should be the focus of our attempts at appreciation of that experience. After all ‘we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities. Perhaps more than ever before, a strategic awareness of this collectively created spatiality and its social consequences has become a vital part of making both theoretical and practical sense of our contemporary life-worlds at all scales, from the most intimate to the most global’ (Soja, 1996: 1). Lefebvre’s triad was intended to facilitate this engagement; it was not to be simply another abstract model subject to intellectual conjecture, as the triad ‘loses all force if it is treated as an abstract “model”. If the model can not grasp the concrete (as distinct from the “immediate”), then its import is severely limited, amounting to no more than that of one ideological mediation among others’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 40). Rather, the triad would enable both abstract conceptions and lived experiences to be engaged with as a coherent entity.

Thus ‘in Lefebvre’s hands, space becomes re-described not as a dead, inert thing or object, but as organic and fluid and alive; it has a pulse, it palpitates, it flows and collides with other spaces. And these interpenetrations—many with different temporalities—get superimposed upon one another to create a present space’ (Merrifield, 2000: 171, *original emphasis*). It is this process of creation and being, the production of present space rather than the privileging of a singular aspect of space, which needs to be apprehended as fully as possible if a richer understanding of the world is to be achieved. In response to this need I now take up the challenge inherent in Lefebvre’s work, that is, that his spatial triad ‘needs to be embodied with actual flesh and blood and culture, with real life relationships and events’ (Merrifield, 2000: 175, *original emphasis*), if it is to have any significance for our understandings.

**A LEFEBVRIAN ANALYSIS**

In order both to elaborate the spatial triad and to illustrate its use as an innovative and powerful tool with which to explore the social world, I now turn to a particular event, in this case a theatre performance. This exploration will not only provide an understanding of this particular stage performance, but will also highlight some implications for the field of organisation studies. The analysis is informed by a tradition that draws on the theatre and theatrical metaphors in the study of organisations (Valaskakis, 1999; Clark and Salaman, 1998; Linstead and Hopfl, 2000; Wood, 2002). It is informed by both Goffman’s (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in which dramaturgy is utilised to expose the way in which individuals sustain and define social encounters, and Mangham and Overington’s (1987) development of
the ‘theatre’ as a general conceptual model for the exploration of social interactions. However, my approach is not solely or specifically informed by one of these genres, rather it draws on participant observation data to explore the insights and understandings of a theatre company, as they develop their performance. The reason a theatre company was chosen as the focus of this exemplification is because I have found that the training and skills of those involved and the environment in which they work has enabled them to provide remarkably reflexive and insightful understandings of the processes in which they participate (Watkins, 2002). In this case, the theatre company involved is an English regional repertory ensemble which performs a classical repertoire, and works in what they describe as a culture of mutual respect and inter-reliance, while the play involved is Shakespeare’s Richard the Third. In the production and understanding of any event, in this case a performance in the theatre, Lefebvre suggests his spatial triad is fundamental. Here, it is intended to illustrate the three aspects of the triad and to elaborate how the performance is only brought to life, made effective, and gains depth and vitality through the effective interaction of all three aspects of the spatial triad.

Let me illustrate each element of the triad, beginning with representations of space, which Lefebvre (1991: 38–9) suggests is the dominant space in current society and is the conceptualised space constructed out of symbols, codifications and abstract representations. These representations are the ‘logic and forms of knowledge, and the ideological content of codes, theories, and the conceptual depictions of space’ (Shields, 1999: 163), and are thus the manifest representation of our mental constructs of the spaces of our rational, abstract understandings. It is this aspect that codifies epistemological approaches to understanding, against which claims of knowledge and truth are evaluated. It is an abstract representation, which has arisen through the proliferation of symbol systems providing categories, forms and taxonomies of analysis, which dominate attempts at understanding and representation in modern society. In a stage production the abstract representations, the symbol systems and codifications which are the representations of space aspects for this particular event are the text or script, the Deputy Stage Manager’s book, the composer’s score, and various ‘notes’ from the director, producer, composer, designer, etc. Igor offers an actor’s explanation of his methods for developing a performance, which helps illustrate the roles of this and the other elements of the triad. In his understanding he separates what he calls the ‘technical’ from the ‘performance’, with the latter referring to the performance as a whole that is the entire spatial event. Whereas the technical aspects are the specifics such as having ‘to remember all these lines’, or to achieve specified targets such as ‘hit the light’ (be in the right place, at the right time) that could be considered as a framework for the performance that is substantially developed from the representations of space. These detailed aspects are used to provide a general guideline or framework for the required performance, which is derived by the participants in order to aid the orientation of the lived experience of the ongoing performance itself, the spaces of representation. This understanding of the development of some sort of framework or guidelines from the formal abstract representations was a very common motif amongst the theatre company. For example, the Director insisted on the need ‘to establish the skeleton of the play early on so people have something to work from’. While Susan, another of the actors,
presented a similar understanding, in which she considers the guidelines supplied and specifically the text as a ‘blueprint’, or a skeleton, from which performance is built:

So it is as if you have a blue print in front of you, it is all in the text, and you can find everything you need, you can find all the clues you need, basically, there, and then it still requires whatever the chemistry is between the person cast and the blue print to bring it alive and that chemistry means that it will be different from show to show and from performer to performer. The strength is that the blue print is there to be interpreted in lots of different ways. A clue can be taken in lots of cases, taken in different directions but people will be dependent on the experience that they bring and the understanding they bring, the technical ability they bring.

Igor explained that although this framework is seen as essential to the performance, ‘it was one of the most enjoyable scenes in the play to do. Because I knew exactly what I was doing, I knew the purpose, I knew the objective I had to hit’, he also identified that it is not totally unproblematic. A point Thomas’s [actor] graphic description of having to follow these set prescriptions and criteria implied: ‘another fucking hurdle to jump over during the performance’. These problematic aspects will be subject to further exploration later in the paper.

The second element to consider is spatial practices, which ‘embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 33) and as such comes together with other triadic elements to ensure the levels of cohesion and competence required for the everyday functions of society, the spatial events of life. This ‘cohesion through space implies, in connection with social practice and the relating of individuals to that space, a certain level of spatial “competence” and a distinct type of “spatial performance” by individuals’ (Shields, 1999: 162). It is the learnt, but often essentially intuitive, spatial practices that enable individuals to participate effectively in a spatial event. To understand this aspect of the triad, we need to comprehend the abstract representations of the spatial event, and the routines and understandings which they serve to shape—in this case, the accepted and acceptable spatial practices of the theatrical context, on which the actors draw, along with the representations of space, to develop a framework for the performance. These spatial practices include everyday routines and evolved social conventions of tolerable behaviour within the milieu of the theatre, aspects such as ‘knowing your lines well enough’ and ‘giving the right cue’, or definitely ‘not grandstanding or upstaging another actor’.

The third element of the triad, spaces of representation is the space of lived experience, it is space ‘as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of “inhabitants” and “users”’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 39, original emphasis). As such it is the space that overlays physical space as it is lived in the everyday course of life. This is the aspect of space that embraces the partiality of representation and knowledge systems, and which Lefebvre tries to ensure retains a prominence in any engagement within a spatial event. It is the spaces of representation that forms, informs and facilitates the deviations, diversity and individuality that are a fundamental aspect of any social encounter. This distinctiveness is achieved in conjunction with, while not being completely constrained by, the strictures of the representations of space and the spatial practices that have developed to provide the necessary cohesion and competence for successful social interaction. It is this experiential aspect of space that it may be argued is often submerged and near abandoned beneath the dominance of abstract representations of space. The presence of this triadic element was clearly demonstrated by the awareness of the cast to the role that actual physical space, and thus the spaces of representation which overlays it, plays in any performance. They emphasised the need to develop the performance in the actual physical space in which it is to occur as being paramount. This position was clearly illustrated by the emphasis the cast placed on the final rehearsals taking place in the same physical space, with the same costumes, props etc. as the final performance. This consideration of space as both a constraining and enabling phenomena reflects Shotter’s (1999: 3) suggestion that ‘not only do we find a space around us offering us openings for movements,
but we also find it issuing compelling calls for us to act...more than just being, a space of possibilities open to our actions, it also has its own requirements’. Igor sums up the situation nicely when he explains, ‘you’re talking about working in the space’.

**An Integrated Triad**

More perceptive readers may have recognised that in my attempts to illustrate Lefebvre’s spatial triad, I have in a sense transgressed its most important teachings, insofar as I have attempted to dissect that which Lefebvre has insisted must be considered as a whole. It is only in considering the three triadic elements together that it is possible to surface the true potentiality of Lefebvre’s theory. In order to alleviate that transgression and to demonstrate the full potential of the triad, I now reveal some of the interrelationships of the triadic elements. All three aspects of the triad were clearly visible in both the methods the cast used to develop their performance, and in their understandings of the nature and requirements of an effective performance. Central to any performance appeared to be a process of interaction between all the participating elements of that performance, elements which included in their number the cast, the physical environment, the audience, the text of the play and the framework it informs. For example, Igor explains how the first thing he investigates on beginning to develop a performance is the way his role interacts with the other performers, and with the overall performance in the form of the script, notes, etc., an understanding and approach that was widespread amongst the cast:

The method that I use to go through a text and draw that evidence out is just a sort of simple exercise really. I go through the play first and I write down everything that I say about everybody else: that my character says about everybody else. Then I go through the play again and write down what everybody says about me and so you have the two lists to balance up and so, for example, if you get a character that says about your character ‘Oh well, he’s a rotten sod, don’t trust him’ so you take that line and you have to determine, well, is this true or is it just slander or you know or is he really a rotten sod and he’s not really trustworthy. So you can formulate it through.

The actor Susan emphasised the need for a ‘chemistry between the blueprint and the person to bring it alive’. For persuasive performance to be achieved, the framework or parameters (derived from the representations of space and the spatial practices), though essential, needs to be transcended. However, it must be emphasised that it is not a case of totally abandoning, or casting aside, the necessary parameters, which are continually being formed and informed by the representations of space and the spatial practices, but of using those parameters and exploiting the available freedom of the spaces of representation. As Sophie, another of the actors, explains:

You are aware of the dynamics of the scene and the way that you have...the way in rehearsals you have decided to serve them, and so that does give you a sort of routine within a scene you have to follow. But within that there’s a lot of freedom and it’s about keeping it free, really.

Or, in Igor’s words, ‘even though the basic shape will always be the same, within that you have licence to find a new activity to get what you want’. Malcolm the composer provides a similar understanding:

[It’s] in the text—because everything has to arise from things that are there and I am saying that there is truth there, but what I’m saying is how you then translate that with referencing outwards rather than inwards, so it’s how you actually think how do we make this a 3-dimensional art form.

He explained that, despite following the framework being important, it is what occurs beyond these basics which makes for memorable performance, an effective event—a point he illustrated utilising Judy Dench’s rendition of Send in the Clowns, which he suggests is an outstanding performance despite the artist lacking the technical tools to follow the script and score with any great degree of accuracy. However, for him, it is her ability to translate and transcend these prescriptions, to live the role, which is vital to generate what is the essence of a great...
It was clear for Malcolm, that it is not only the quality of the representations of space in the form of the text or of the framework derived from this and spatial practices, that is fundamental, but the quality of the processes that occur during the generation of performance in conjunction with that framework, that is the lived experience, the spaces of representation.

The centrality of this interaction, the fundamentality of it to the performance, led Susan to feel that there was very little preparation that could be done for her performance as Lady Anne, without this interaction. Because Anne is responding to Richard III it was necessary to wait ‘until you see what Richard is going to do and how he is going to approach it’. Thus, it was about ‘just being as real as you can and just playing it to your, attempting to affect your, colleagues’. Although no other participant went quite this far in suggesting that it was ‘impossible’ to develop his or her performance in isolation, there was a widespread sentiment as to the difficulties, or even inappropriateness, of becoming too isolated. The feeling was that if any one aspect of the process came to dominate it would tend to have a detrimental effect on both the individual and overall performance—an understanding that strongly intimates the deleterious effect on an event, if any aspect of the spatial triad dominates.

Although this interaction and expansion of the framework is essential for persuasive performance to be achieved, it is not simply a case of elaborating upon the framework. Rather, it is an ongoing process of mutually informed development, where for example the spaces of representation, the lived experience, continually refers to the representations of space and spatial practices, in the form of the performance framework, to ensure the coherence and competence of the spatial event is maintained. This operation was manifest in the constant monitoring process carried out by the cast during the ongoing event to ensure it remains within the requirements of the framework for this particular performance. Thus the three elements of the triad remain true to each other. For example, the script is described as being ‘like a tram line’ that informs the performance, which allows one to ‘set up your parameters’ after which you are unlikely ‘to make a drastically wrong choice’. Susan also talks about how this is achieved through a process of monitoring aspects of the performance, against these prescribed criteria:

…there is always a bit of you that is monitoring, there is always a bit of you that knows you can’t take another step forward or you will go off the edge of the stage, or there is somebody at a table 3 inches behind you, or that speech is getting a bit dull.

Similarly, for Igor it was seen as a procedure, a facet of which consists of a ‘mental check of all the technical aspects’.

Sophia [actor], in agreement with Igor and Susan’s sentiments, goes even further suggesting this monitoring is at its most effective when it becomes an unconscious, rather than a conscious process.

You can’t really explain it because you have a responsibility as an actor to make sure you are in a certain place at the right time for all the other actors. Being in a moment is also very very much about being aware of everyone else on the stage and if you’re in the moment and you’re happy with the way you’re being directed as well—that does help—you’ll damn well make sure you’ll get there, but you won’t be thinking, god, I must get to this point in the next 2 minutes. It just becomes the most natural thing in the world to do.

The relationship of the abstract representations to the totality of the spatial event itself is complex. The success of a particular spatial event, in this case the performance, is not simply a case of achieving the specific abstractions of the representations of space, or the strict prescriptions developed from these in conjunction with the accepted spatial practices. Rather, the monitoring process serves to identify areas of the spatial event that are problematic; it surfaces difficulties and disruptions, rather than defining success. It is how the actors respond to deviations and disruptions, how they are tackled and the interrelationship of this process with the prescriptive framework, along with the implications for organisation studies, which I consider next.
Disruptions and Dominance in the Triad: Some Implications for Organisation Studies

It is to the framework derived from the spatial practices and representations of space, with its associated prescriptions, rules and objectives, to which the performers turn in the case of any disturbances or difficulties that threaten to disrupt the spatial event, the performance. As Igor elaborated:

The technical side and the performance side and you’ll melt those together. Of course, within that as well this is where it becomes difficult trying to switch your mind off completely from the technical side to completely envelope yourself in the scene. Because if something goes wrong like a line is dropped or something gets smashed, there is a prop missing, then your mind has to really switch round fast back into the technical side and again because you know you’re not going to get to a certain point if you ain’t got the letters, if you ain’t… do you see what I mean. I think that’s the hazard of it…. So, yeah, basically, generally that’s how it’s anchored in the technical and performance.

For this theatrical event the achievement of, or returning to, the framework and its prescriptions is not seen as a triumph or success in itself, but merely as a method to re-establish the necessary enabling factors which allow a return to, a reorientation, or re-establishment of, the required spatial event of the performance. An event should involve all three aspects of the spatial triad being in balance, and as such achieving the correct balance between triadic elements is perceived as vital to an effective performance. As Igor suggests, you need all aspects, ‘the technical side and the performance side and you’ll meld those together’. He further elaborates on how a target, or objective that is part of the framework derived from the representations of performance and spatial practices; in this case a very specific one, a ‘cue line’ will enable him to reorientate a lost performance, to ‘get through’ with ‘no egg on face’. Yet, he recognises that in terms of an effective performance, it has gone ‘out the window’:

That’s quite an interesting thing because I can never understand how this works. It’s bits and pieces that I’ve done, I’ve had moments where my mind has just gone completely blank. I know I’ve got a line to say or that I’ve got a speech or something coming up, and I’m listening to the other two people, but all that’s going on up there is, ‘You don’t know what you’re going to say, do you, you don’t know what you’ve got to say, shit, shit, shit. What is it? What is it?’ And then miraculously the cue line will go and you will open your mouth and the right words will come out. And then your mind’s going, ‘God, how did you do that?’…. You got through it.

Thus, this process of monitoring and falling back on the framework and prescriptive actions allows the performance, the spatial event to continue, but in a limited fashion. This understanding has some very interesting implications for organisation studies. I have already elaborated the potential inadequacies for organisations of the over reliance on various prescriptions for success based on abstract notions of performance (Watkins and King, 2002), notions that are congruent with Lefebvre’s (1991: 6) identification of the dominance of abstract mental spaces in current forms of epistemological enquiry. The example above thus serves to give flesh to both Lefebvre’s position and my own concerns.

Susan also exemplifies this same point: that you may fall back on the abstract representations of space, the text, if you are not really sure of what you are doing:

[I] remember Sophia at one point saying she could not get her to come out and moan about this man has died, or this man has taken over the kingdom, or my sons are now dead, endless come out and mourn. And who in one way, yes, really it is her job, and then again once you look at the text, it is quite specific how she does it, a conniving sort of come out,

Thus, although this approach provides a solution, it is not considered very satisfactory; it is ‘a conniving sort of come out’. She further emphasises this position of being able to provide ‘a performance’, if not a very satisfactory one, by elaborating how in one of her previous performances, when she did not really understand her performance but simply followed the representation of space, the script. Susan implicitly recognises the easy, but impoverished solution merely following the representation presents.
I did a show where I was playing a Moroccan girl, it was written by an Arab lady novelist, and translated. And I didn’t get half of what this girl was doing. Again we only had three weeks rehearsal, I was cast just before it, and I did not have a lot of time to do the research I needed to, for something like that, so I just had to use the text and trust it. I didn’t get it. I used to think half of it was funny with jokes, I just thought they were terrible, but I played it. And the first night was mostly lots of her friends, and they all were laughing, they loved me, because they understood and responded in a way that I wasn’t. Even though it was what I was doing, I didn’t really understand. It wasn’t my culture. None of the references were mine, so that was very odd.

Sophia also explains how following, or retreating to simple abstractions, may act as a safety net that, although allowing the continuation of some sort of the spatial event, is not a very ‘true’ outcome and doesn’t really get to grips with what is going on.

As a sort of safety mechanism it can be a way of not getting to grips with something … when you have a good text because you can use the language to gloss over the fact that you don’t really understand what you’re saying and the others are saying why, why are you saying that.

Here again, we have a manifestation of individuals hiding behind the representations of space and spatial practices derived framework, and how it may apparently be successful on the surface, provided you have a ‘good set of rules’. However, all this approach serves to achieve is to mask the true lack of understanding, the relative vacuity of the spatial event. If relying on only part of the triad to recover a problematic position leads to a vacuous event, it beggars the question what is the likely outcome if a partial aspect of the triad comes to dominate our social engagement.

These representations of space and spatial practices, whether described as technical aspects, blueprints, or ‘fucking hurdles’, despite being essential to the performance, were seen as problematic if they dominated the ‘the spatial event, the performance’. As Igor elaborated earlier, the performance ‘had all gone out of the window because I was too worried about the technical aspect of it, and so that was unfair, and I think everybody else felt the same way’. This judgement by Igor of the role of the representations of space aspects of the performance, and the framework developed from it, was an accurate description of the general attitude of the cast. This attitude was clearly manifest; for example, in the performers’ reaction to one set of directorial methods employed, which insisted on a strict adherence to the script, with many instances of both covert and overt dislike and resistance to their prescriptive nature being witnessed during the participant observation research. This, combined with a number of direct explanations presented by the participants during discussions of the production, makes for a convincing understanding. For example, Susan expresses her dissatisfaction with the rigidity and the lack of space she was given to develop the performance, resulting from too strict an adherence to the requisite representations.

Why do you stop at that moment? Why don’t you carry on for another…and something can come out of that. Maybe I stopped because I’ve tripped over, or I am tired, or they have dropped the coffin, and I say that rest, let’s have a moment’s pause. Well we didn’t, we just went okay, the text says we stop, so we stop, so nothing dramatic comes out of the moment.

…as I think I said to you when we had that conversation before, Douglas said to me on that 5th line, you can be more introverted, well that is no good to me, because every time I then come to do this speech I am thinking on the 5th line I must be introverted, when I should be thinking, as I said, about my dead husband and the fact that my life is so much worse now than it is and it might come out introverted and it might come out extroverted.

For Sophia, it was particularly problematic, as all the director was apparently interested in was the achievement of certain limited, often visual, objectives. As she confirmed:

Because Douglas’s style…Douglas came to the play with a very definite image and I think sort of in a pictorial way, he has his images with him which he wants you to work. Wanted us to work. So you fit in with those images.

Occurrences such as being instructed that ‘I want you to stand over there, I want you to stand over there, I want this image, I want it to look like this’, or that she had to hit very specific textual objectives with no, or very little, explanation, elaboration or even understanding—‘the text says we stop, so we stop, so nothing dramatic comes out of the moment’—reduced the depth and
persuasiveness that could be achieved by the performance. This closing down of her space to perform was often realised through very specific instructions, a rigid adherence to the requisite representations of space and spatial practices derived framework, such as being told that ‘on that 5th line, you can be more introverted’ which she felt was ‘no good to me, because every time I then come to do this speech I am thinking on the 5th line I must be introverted’. Obeying only the framework overrides the development of the performance, which resulted in a stilted, impoverished, and thus less rich and persuasive event—a practice that was also recognised by other cast members, for example, Igor, as extremely damaging to an effective performance:

Douglas was quite happy making the tableaux for each scene and wasn’t really bothered about content. And that’s very dangerous—that’s when downfalls happen.

Sophia also supported the position that the unchallenged adherence to the framework has a detrimental effect on the performance. In her case, the same rules on verse speaking that she also recognises as being beneficial:

The end of the line, I think can be very liberating, but to use it all the time I think is very limiting. I think there are situations within which you can apply it and it works terribly well, but I don’t believe in having one rule of speaking verse…. [That method] can work brilliantly. The great thing I think about going to the end of the line—one of the good things about it—is that it does stop you becoming indulgent. You can break up the line too much. And have interminable pauses. What I don’t agree with is that you have to stop at the end of every line—some lines have to run through to keep the thought going. And I went with the line ending for about the first week and then I thought, ‘Right I’m not going to stick to this rigidly, I will use it when it works and ignore it when it doesn’t’.

Thus, she clearly identifies a problematic aspect of following specific sets, of what are often perceived as unchallengeable abstractions. This issue of representations of space and spatial practices being dominant was not just restricted to the actors alone; it was also a major influence for the composer Malcolm. Although he also recognised the need for a framework, suggesting that without one he ‘can’t play…unless [he] can technically get it right’ it was a position he immediately revised by adding that he ‘then that has to somehow just be let … you have to let go of that’, implying that to produce an effective performance you need more than just accurate adherence to a set of prescriptions. In fact, he identified as problematic the position where the sole criteria for success is perceived as the achievement of a specific abstract representation, in that it is the abstractions themselves that are then managed rather than the whole of the event (cf. Tsoukas, 1995). Malcolm says:

But it’s that weird thing isn’t it? Because there is that thing that you…it’s down to specialisation. It’s down to the fact that you have…that you…you’re given techniques because you need techniques to cope but then what you’re not taught is how to implement the techniques properly—how to use them properly. So they become ends in their own means—they become ends in themselves and they don’t…they are not absorbed in the larger picture.

The constrictive and deadening nature of the dominance of a representations of space and spatial practices defined framework was by far the most common problem identified amongst the cast, which supports Lefebvre’s criticism of the prevailing considerations of space—in that they are dominated by mental abstractions that have become divorced from the realities they are attempting to depict. A position, I suggest, is also true in organisation studies, with a similar concerns being clearly raised in the critical organisation literature. For example, Potter (2000) and Gergen and Thatchenkery (1998) have identified the dominance of the mind and mental constructs in the field, with the former particularly emphasising the independence of these mental constructs from the physical and social environment. In Knights (1992) the processes of partition, separation, reduction and reification are especially problematic, whereas the devaluation of the meaning of abstract concepts concomitant with their separation from the lived context they profess to describe, has been highlighted by Mischler (1979). Thus representations, which often start out as attempts to codify an understanding of a particular lived experience, rapidly become the criteria against which the truth of a particular event is judged. Any judgements derived from these representations, which
although they may exhibit some partial understanding, also serve to obscure other potential insights or avenues of exploration.

As such research in organisation studies could be considered to reflect Lefebvre’s warning that research dominated by mental abstractions that are representations of space tend to produce:

…either mere descriptions which never achieve analytical, much less theoretical, status, or else fragments and cross-sections of space. There are plenty of reasons for thinking that descriptions and cross-sections of this kind, though they may well supply inventories of what exists in space, or even generate a discourse on space, cannot ever give rise to a knowledge of space. (Lefebvre, 1991: 7, emphasis in original)

A course of development that is apparent in the organisation literature with its manifestation of innumerable spaces of understanding, and exemplified through the proliferation of categories, forms and taxonomies of analysis, each of which are elaborated and further dissected by its own particular band of acolytes. The futility of this type of approach could be considered to be demonstrated by the fact that, despite the large body of research that has been produced over a number of years, these studies are still often unable provide an effective or useful understanding of the processes of organisation.

Much of the organisation literature appears to fulfil Dumont’s prophesy that ‘the outcome of research, surely, is new objects of research’ (cited in Auge, 1995: 17). The proliferation of representations of space, does not lead to the replacement of previously identified (constructed) understandings, rather they serve to complicate them—an outcome in direct contradiction to the implicit aims of these understandings, which is to simplify, and thus make available for control and manipulation, organisation. Thus, a situation has evolved where an explosion in the number of abstract representations of organisation, the representations of space for these spatial events, produces an array of symbol systems, which constitute a means of recognising a particular form of representation, rather than providing any useful knowledge of the organisation and processes they purport to represent. However, despite the disjuncture between the representations and that which they try to represent, these symbol systems are, more often than not, unconditionally accepted—generating a series of totalities that are partially fictional—but effective, in that they affect our actions (Auge, 1995). Thus, the outcome of these methods of research becomes far more than a simple proliferation of research objects, as ‘when there is a change in the modes of grouping and hierarchy it is always social life that is affected’ (Auge, 1995: 17). Rather, attempts to predict and manipulate organisation using only the representations of space aspects of the ongoing spatial event continually fail to affect the lived world in the predicted or required manner. This failure to produce or predict the requisite effect on organisations serves to make all too transparent the disjuncture between the abstract concepts and the lived world they purport to represent. However, because these signs are the acceptable orthodoxy of the organisation discourse, and as such are the means of recognition and participation in the discourse of organisation theory, the flaws of this approach are seldom recognised. Auge (1995: 35–6) encapsulates the problem, and points in the direction of a solution, when he suggests the world ‘does not exactly match the one in which we believe we live, for we live in a world that we have not yet learned to look at. We have to relearn to think about space’.

IN SUMMARY

The preceding Lefebvrian analysis of a theatrical performance has served to illustrate the potential of Lefebvre’s consideration of space as a resource to investigate the social world. It has shown the necessity of all three aspects of the spatial triad, spaces of representation, representations of space and spatial practices as essential components of the events
explored, and how it is from their interaction that the totality of the event emerges. All three aspects of the triad are continually and mutually informed and informing, and as such are essential in the successful negotiation of the social world. Furthermore, that it is necessary for the interactions between the triadic elements to be appropriate and in balance if an event was to be persuasive and effective. This illustration was achieved through both illustrating the role of all three aspects of the triad in a spatial event, and by surfacing some the problematic issues if any one part of the triad gained an unjustified prominence. The evidence presented showed how a Lefebvrian analysis may be used as an analytic tool to identify problematic issues within a social event, and as such provides the opportunity to address those issues. In undertaking this elaboration I have sought to provide the reader with an indication of the potential of, and need for, the use of Lefebvre’s theory of space in organisational analysis. Furthermore, I hope to stimulate an impetus to revisit our notions of space in organisations, and to reconnect the abstract representations of organisation with the lived spatial experience from which they have become estranged.

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References

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