

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

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Word Count: ____3614____

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Coexistent Perspectives

Question 3. Space and Place: How do contemporary creative practices engage with the politics and poetics of space, including questions of displacement, postcolonial geography, affective architectures, or the uncanny? What critical frameworks can be used to analyse these spatial imaginaries?

Statement: Both artists Martin Parr and Gregory Crewdson explore the poetics of space and place within their work. This essay will be looking closer and how each artist explores these concepts through a physical medium and/or a constructed and surreal interpretation of space.

Introduction

This Essay will be looking at two renowned Photographers, the late British documentary photographer Martin Parr and American photographer Gregory Crewdson within the themes of space and place, mainly looking at relational geography and the Gothic Sublime. Both photographers capture people within spaces. Parr captures people in real time in a natural, flawed, real space. While on the other hand, Crewdson creates his own reality with high budget sets and large crews to create images that are beautiful, full of melancholy but have a sense of the uncanny within them. I will be comparing both artists, Parr for his geo-relational photography and Crewdson for his bordering Supernatural, Gothic style of photography. Both artists work will be highlighting that space and place can be represented in a realistic way like Parr's work and a supernatural make-believe way like Crewdson's work. Furthermore, I will be accompanying the works of these artists with theorists like, Yi-Fu Tuan for his ideas on space and place, Mark Fisher for his ideas on the weird and eerie and hauntology, Doreen Massey and her ideas on relational geography, Edmund Burke on his ideas of the sublime, Vijay Mishra on his ideas of the Gothic sublime, ...

But what is Space and Place? Theorists have discussed that Spaces and Places are more than just their physical selves on earth. One theorist, Yi-Fu Tuan, conceptualises that Space is open and that place is closed "... if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place" (*Tuan, 1977, p.6*) Additionally, Tuan states that space eventually becomes a place "... space becomes a place as we get to know it better and endow it." (*Tuan, 1977, p.6*).

Linking these ideas to Parr and Crewdson, this essay will explore the space and place within Great Britain through Parr's photography. Parr's work mainly focuses on relational geography and moments of the uncanny. Parr captures the everyday of Britain, many can feel at home and familiar when looking at his art. The spaces he captures can be identified all around the UK. While his most popular work was taken in Brighton you would be able to see similar sights on any coastal front in the UK. On the other hand, when looking at Space and Place through Crewdson's work we see normal places such as houses, diners, streets that would feel normal and familiar, but there is a sense of eeriness. What should be 'Places' only stay as 'Spaces' within his work as the 'Space' is not explored as it should be, it is empty.

Furthermore, another important theorist for space and place is Gaston Bachelard. His book focuses on the human emotion and connection to Spaces and Places. He states, "our house is our corner of the world... our first universe." (Bachelard, 1958, p.26) This short sentence has a strong message that the 'house' while it is small holds such a meaningful place in people's hearts, it is where people grow, have relationships, make connections.

Martin Parr



Martin Parr, who recently passed on the 6th of December, was a photographer, mainly working in the field of documentary and photojournalist style of photography. He was introduced to photography by his late grandfather George Parr. His interest in photography led him to studying the subject at Manchester Polytechnic in 1970-1973. When reading about his time in studying in Manchester, he claims on the FAQ part on his website, that they only taught him the basics studio techniques- he had a drive in him to learn and achieve more so he started his own projects. This rebellious need to look outside the box is clearly shown in his work throughout his career. His aim as a photographer was to capture the peculiarities of society, mainly British. Before he got his signature look of bright and colourful images, he used to photograph in black and white. He states in an interview on the 'Louisiana Channel' on YouTube Parr states that he started documenting communities in North England, he wanted to capture the community he did not have back home in Surrey. He captured these communities in black and white and on the YouTube channel that he views his black and white work celebrating the traditions of working-class life as soft and gentle. in his images and

capturing the British public in not the most glamorous way highlighted his views on the social classes in the UK. He also ventured into documentary filmmaking and has made many books about his photography.

On his website, Parr also answers a question about his influences for photography, one being English photographer Tony Ray-Jones. Jones' work heavily focuses on capturing the British public at the beach, which we see in Parr's work as well.



(Ray-Jones, 1966)



(Parr, 1977)

You can see Jones' influence in Parr's earlier work. Huxley Parlour (2018) notes that in the first 15 years of his career he exclusively pictures in black and white. These images are not as well-known as his coloured images. His coloured images gave him his signature look that instantly allows everyone to know that is Parr's work. Comparing his black and white work to his coloured work there is a tone change. Without his use of bright colours to evoke a satirical tone to his work his images may be taken in a more serious tone. The work Parr is known for is holding a mirror to society, and its consumerism and taking society's judgments in his images and displaying how ridiculous everything is.

In a video interview for Noods Level, Parr shares that he started his own foundation to display and archive his own work, but he also wanted to help other documentary photographers in Britain. As he was such a famous documentary photographer, he wanted to help others in his field of work. In the interview he says that documentary photographer and photographers are "underrepresented" and "underappreciate." Additionally, in this interview he talks more about his technique on getting the 'right'

image. He states that there is “no such thing as a perfect photo” and that when he finds the ‘right’ image it is a “intuitive feel.” Martin also said in the interview that he was inspired by the “world” as it was “crazy.” He liked capturing the quirkiness of society, displaying flaws and the imperfections that makes us human.

Moving on, in another interview for *My French Stories* alongside director Lee Shuman who made a documentary film about Martin Parr. Shuman states the film is “unifying” and that “Martin brings everyone together... from different class systems...”

Furthermore, in this interview Parr also discusses when he first joined Magnum, a photography company that has members worldwide highlighting their work. Parr explains that many members of Magnum did not want him to join the cooperative. They thought his work was too unserious. They did not like his bright colourful style, as black and white were thought to be better for documentary photography and that documentary photography should only be viewed in a serious tone. Parr says his work is serious, his images are bright and colourful to draw people in, it is up to the individual to see the deeper meaning within the image.

On the YouTube channel “Louisiana Channel”, Parr explains why he wants to do documentary photography, he says in the interview that most images we see are a form of propaganda and that he wants to show us the reality of society, he takes the close-up, unflattering, raw shots of people, buildings etc. He states he likes to “try and find the humour in the world we see”. His images are his personal interpretation on society; he adds his iconic ‘exaggerated’ touch by using his flash.

Martin Parr- The Last Resort



In an interview for the Tate Museum on their YouTube channel 'Tateshots' Parr explains his relationship with taking pictures of the British public. He states that he has a "love hate relationship from the country I am from." In an interview for 'My French Stories,' Parr explains why he wanted to capture seaside cities in the UK. He called the British seaside "Shabby," when going to the beach is supposed to be "Fun" and "Glorious." In his most famous portfolio of work, 'The Last Resort' he captures the seaside city of Brighton you can see in his images that there is a lot of litter across the beach, but many people still sunbathe and enjoy the summer heat.



“The unchoreographed reciprocal gaze is a rare occurrence in a Martin Parr photograph” (Sheers, 2019)

Theory

Aesthetica Magazine quotes Parr “...space, a sense of belonging, a geographical point – it can cover many physical forms, yet also many emotions and senses.”

A place is not an isolated idea. Place is not just the physical concept- relational geography explains that space is more than just a place on the map. Place is made by the people, history, connections with other places. One of the most influential theorists on this topic is Doreen Massey. In her book ‘For Space’ (2005) she quotes “we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions” (Massey 2005 p.9) This is the core idea for relational geography.

“Space is the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity.” Massey 2005

This is shown within Parr's work as he captures the essence of the UK, displaying the upper and lower-class at the beaches. Additionally, he highlights the upper and lower-class at the beaches by photographing that when the public are all at the beach, no matter what class you are from you are all there to enjoy relaxation and escapism from life. We also see within his work that he travels to well-known places that the British public go for vacations. Parr also shares his views on tourism and consumerism through his photography. His photos of these attractive beaches (the best spot for tourism) we get to see diverse types of people visiting the beaches, lower and upper class. The images shown above reflect this, the consumer culture and litter, smart elderly people in the background amongst overflowing rubbish left by people travelling to the seaside.

Furthermore, looking back on the introduction, Bachelard was introduced. Bachelard and Parr's art go hand in hand. The essence of Parr's work supports Bachelard's theory by capturing places that hold memory and life. A lot of his beach is in public areas with crowds of different people. These spaces that can be seen and understood to so many British people, and foreign people transcends that the beach is just a 'beach.' The beach is the same as Bachelard's 'house' in his book. These are psychological places as they are physical places. People hold different emotions, daydreams, feelings, history with these places.

Gregory Crewdson

From looking at Parrs work, a photographer that has a bright optimistic look to his work but when you look closer you see the flaws and reality of society, we then have the works of American photographer Gregory Crewdson, where his work looks dark and mysterious but in his interview with American reader he “finds his work essentially “optimistic.” Loh and Vescovi.

On the Gagosian Gallery website (Website owned and directed by Larry Gagosian) exhibits famous artists of the 20th and 21st century. They have a page dedicated to Crewdson where it shares that Gregory Crewdson was born in Brooklyn, New York and when he started his education into photographer, he studied at SUNY Purchase and the Yale University School of Art.

The ICP says that Crewdson is highly known for his “...*elaborately staged scenes of small-town American life*” (Mathies.)

The Independent Photographer website does a focus article on Crewdson. “Crewdson has justified his attraction to the uncanny by claiming “*ultimately, probably what scares me most is reality. When it’s a representation, when it’s separate from the world, it more effortlessly becomes poetic or beautiful.*” Torres, 2019.

When comparing Crewdson to Parr, Crewdson works on a much higher budget with a large team and sets looking like they could be for a movie production. Crewdson completely transforms the space he is working in. Parr was capturing reality while it was happening, Crewdson has made up a narrative on a large scale. For Parr, he is just one man and a camera who relies on his camera settings to get his high saturation images without postproduction editing. Moreover, Crewdson’s work has a darker view on society than Parr. There is an eerie feeling to his work, and absence of this happy inclusive feeling you get when looking at Parr’s work. This absence could be the lack of society, especially the connections that are made within society and places.

Theory

It is good to note that Crewdson’s work delves into the Gothic Sublime. A key theorist of the Gothic Sublime is Vijay Mishra a Professor of English Literature and Cultural Studies. Mishra published a book in 1994 called ‘The Gothic Sublime’. To discuss about the Gothic Sublime there needs to be an understanding where the *Sublime* came from. Some say the word Sublime is now overused and has lost its meaning. To explain the

origins of the sublime it is important to introduce the Enlightenment ideas that came through in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The core ideas of Enlightenment were science and logic. During the Enlightenment period came the Sublime. The concept of the Sublime was first introduced during the 18th century by theorist Edmund Burke. Burke quotes that the Sublime is “...*it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.*” (National Galleries Scotland) additionally, the Tate museums website states that the sublime is “a judgement, a feeling, a state of mind and a kind of response to art or nature” (Tate Museum). The sublime was all about being in awe of nature, the overpowering sense of nature that would have you starstruck but also leaving a feeling of terror over you- “*Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime.*” (National Galleries Scotland). So, what is the difference between the Sublime and the Gothic Sublime? Mishra argues that when the core ideas of Enlightenment break down (logic, science, order...) that is when the Gothic Sublime emerges (fear, insanity, loss of trust). “*The Gothic sublime emerges out of a crisis within the Enlightenment project.*” (Botting, 1996, p. 1) The Gothic Sublime way of thinking is looking at the Enlightenment period and seeing that life cannot be ‘controlled,’ and ‘logic’ cannot be applied to certain cases there is the unknown in life.

Furthermore, we can see this Gothic Sublime visually within Crewdson’s work. There is a sense of the uncanny and within ‘normal’ spaces. Crewdson quotes “*What I am interested in is that moment of transcendence, where one is transported into another place, into a perfect, still world.*” Crewdson, 2021. Using the word ‘Perfect’ for his type of art showcases that his work is in line of the Gothic and the Gothic sublime. The gothic sublime is all about the dark beauty and terror and this is repeatedly shown throughout Crewdson’s work.



For example, in this image at first glance it seems like a normal photo, there a Lady standing in a living room looking out her window. But at a closer look we see that her stance seems eerie. She does not look relaxed, and she seems as if she has spotted something in the distance. All we see from the windows in the picture is a vast amount of land covered in snow. Additionally, the colours of the furniture and what she is wearing are very bland, a juxtaposition to the bright outside where someone has her in a trance.

As brought up in the above image, there is an eerie tone to it. It is important to discuss the Weird and the Eerie. Theorist Mark Fisher wrote a book on the weird and eerie and he claims “The eerie, by contrast, is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*” (Fisher, 2016, p.61) We see this in the image above, there is something missing from the viewer and that is the questioning what has the lady in a trance?



Looking back at some first points made in the introduction, it is good to note how Crewdson goes against the theories of Bachelard. Bachelard's idea of the house in his book *Poetics of Space* is filled with warmth and connection. His house is filled with emotion and daydreams of what people make in their minds about places. While yes, in one of the images above a house is presented but it lacks the comfort that is felt in the poetics of space. Crewdson's work challenges Bachelard, Crewdson showcases a house that does have a filled interior, but it is abandoned by this romantic talk that Bachelard discusses when he explains the feeling of when a Space turns into a place. Crewdson's places feels as if they are just spaces. This shows that some places can have a failure to create intimacy in these domestic spaces.

Conclusion

To conclude, both artists represent space and place in similar ways and not so similar ways. They both hold a mirror up to society. Parr holds the mirror up in a humorous way, he allows the images to be presented as lovely seaside images of Britain, but it is up to

the viewer to have a closer look at the image/ mirror to have a closer look at themselves and society. On the other hand, Crewdson allows the viewer looking at his work feel uneasy but have a sense of familiarity with his work. He has spaces that look familiar, restaurants, streets, interior of houses that all should feel similar, at a first glance they do but when they start to look closer the cold tone of the image and the bleakness of the interior of the place leaves the image missing a sense of warmth, human connection. Both explore space and place in such creative ways. Parr using a camera and changing the settings in his camera and using a flash to exaggerate the colour and saturation in his images gives off his satirical look. His technique is to simply walk around the space and get up close and personal with his subjects that are only normal people in their own places. However, Crewdson using large sets and a crew of people to help create his Gothic style images. A contrast to Parr's extreme close-ups Crewdson uses wide, sometimes extreme wide shots to put across the emptiness within his images. This showcasing the lack of human emotion and connection that should be in the space. Finally, Parr shows that space and place can be represented through a 'real' gaze as he is capturing society at its core. While Crewdson represents space and place through a make-believe gaze. He makes up these different 'worlds' for his images, transporting us to these strange, supernatural horror Esque images.

Abstract

This essay explores the theme of space and place and how artists Martin Parr and Gregory Crewdson express their versions of space and place. Firstly, this essay explores the theorists dominating the ideas of space and place. These theorists are Yi-Fu Tuan and Gaston Bachelard. Yi-Fu Tuan's ideas on space and place take a step back from geography, he examines that space is all about freedom and place is all about being connected. Additionally, Bachelard has a similar but more human approach. His ideas for space and place start with how humans interact at home. Once again, it's not so much about the literal geography of a place, but how the human mind connects, makes memories, and connects to a space. Both theorists can easily be applied to the

works of Martin Parr, British documentary photographer. His work is on capturing people in highly tourist and consumerist areas. In these areas we see community and people coming together, memories are being made. We also see different classes coming together at the beach. No matter if you are upper or lower-class the beach is for everyone. Parr's style of photography makes viewers must take a second look at this work to get a deeper meaning. Parr's imagery is constructed of vibrant colours that come through on sunny days down the beach with the extra help of his flash being on. This bright colourful image holds warmth and familiarity; you would need to think more and digest the image to see what Parr is commentating on about society. Moving along, Crewdson is the complete opposite with his approach to photography. While Parr has a stroll around with his camera and uses his intuition to get the right picture, Crewdson has a large crew of people to help him get the grand shot he desires. His work is large space, sometimes taking up a couple of streets for his wide shot images. Domestic scenes are seen frequently throughout Crewdson's work however; his work goes against the theories of Bachelard. His places and a lack of warmth and humanity within them.

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