

Reading Non-Representational Theory

Nigel Thrift

Some information about the author: [Information retrieved from Thrift's webpage]

- Vice-Chancellor of the University of Warwick (currently)
- He is a Visiting Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford and an Emeritus Professor of Geography at the University of Bristol.
- Considered *one of the world's leading human geographers and social scientists*.

Research

His current research spans a broad range of interests, including international finance; cities and political life; non-representational theory; affective politics; and the history of time.

International Finance: Currently, this involves work on the consolidation of income streams in order to produce new borrowing opportunities.

Cities and political life: Writing a new book on how urban policies might be reinvented in order to produce new kinds of hybrid, which are more active and more democratic (With Ash Amin)

Non-representational theory: *Non-representational theory is intended to produce practical political supplements that will enliven events. In particular, the intersection with performance.*

Affective politics: New affective technologies doing the rounds in western democracies, and what they might portend. ['Affect' is one of the main tenets of NRT]

The history of time and the construction of events: Three areas: clocks and clock time, the address, and how new forms of movement space have come about. Paul Glennie and I have recently completed a book on the subject, the outcome of more than ten years of concerted research.

Before getting into the main topics proposed in the two chapters it is important to try to understand what NRT is. [This is found in the first chapter of the book - Also, a more brief and clear explanation can be found on <http://psimpsongeography.wordpress.com/2011/06/07/what-is-non-representational-theory/>]

Origins of the book:

- “Trilogy”: Spatial Formations (1996) & Knowing Capitalism (2005) [The same economic-cultural-political venture]
- NRT is about “the geography of what happens”; what is present in experience. It intends to present a “diagnosis of the present which is simultaneously a carrier wave for new ways of doing things” (p. 2). In general terms, it describe how life gains expression in different expressions [something that can be seen and understood in chapter 3]
- For Thrift human life is based on movement; Therefore, movement could be considered the main unit of analysis, “the reason for much our rhizomatic, acentred brain” (p. 5).

In order to explain NRT, Thrift points out to **six** tenets:

1) NRT tries to capture the ‘onflow’ of everyday life:

- Emphasis on the ***precognitive*** --> Decisions and intentions are made before the conscious itself is even aware of them (this is what we call “instinct”). *Implication:* Questions about what constitutes life itself [from the most biological to the most political characteristics of life]

2) NRT is anti-biographical and pre-individual

- It trades in mode of perception which are not subject-based (p. 7)
- The world is made up of all kinds of things brought in to relation with one another by many and various spaces through a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter, and the violent training that such encounter forces (p. 8)

3) NRT concentrates on the human body and its co-evolution with things

- Human and social *practices*
- The human body is not a separate entity from the world --> It has evolved with the devices build around it.
- *Practices* are constructed out of all manner of resources. Practices are properties of themselves (p. 8) (agency and ethics)

- Practices are understood as “material bodies of work or styles that have gained enough stability over time, through, for example, the establishment of corporeal routines and specialized devices, to reproduce themselves” (p. 8).
- non-representational theory aims to attend to the material relatedness of the body and world and its constantly emergent capacities to act and interact. [Simpson]

4) NRT gives equal weight to the vast spillage of things

- Things are given equal status to human experience, because they are part of “hybrid assemblages: concretions, settings, and flows” (p. 9) --> We would say that *things* operate naturally in different contexts. They do not become useful due to the type of work we assign them, but they have a “genetic disposition”. --> Agency is not put only on humans, but also into the matter.
- This gives emphasis to the idea that human body is not separated from the thing world.
- There is an “affective” development between humans and things. Affective practices (that must be differentiated from ‘affection’) are born in and out of joint action.

5) NRT is experimental

- In this case Thrift makes a general comment of linking the social sciences with performative arts. “I want to pull the energy of the performing arts into the social sciences in order to make it easier to ‘crawl out to the edge of the cliff of the conceptual’” (p. 12)

6) NRT stresses affect and sensation

- I have taken an affective turn with this work, [...] in order to understand affect as the way in which each ‘thing’ in acting, living, and striving to preserve its own being is ‘nothing but the actual essence of the thing’ (Spinosa *et al.* 1997).
- In other words, although NRT tends to look at things as equally comparable to humans, it does not want to separate human experience from the innate characteristics of what a human is. However, NRT intends to look at “reality” from a critical perspective since: “becoming ethical now means becoming critical of norms under which we are asked to act but which we cannot fully choose (Butler 2005) and taking responsibility – in a sense to be specified – for the dilemmas that subsequently arise.” (p. 14)

SPACE:

- Thrift critiques the conception of space: nearness as the measure of all things (anything is that is close to me is constituted as space)
- The paradox of space: “is that we all know that space is something lived in and through in the most mundane of ways [...] can be fashioned from the mundane comings and going of

ships, and trains and now planes, through to the invisible message that inhabit the radio spectrum in their billions and etch another dimension to life” (p. 17)

- We recognize, therefore, that there a millions of spaces that our senses (but our pre-cognitive mind) cannot recognize and work with. The sense of space comes with the acknowledgment that the world “is packed with entities” (p. 17).

IMPORTANT:

“because more and more of the sensory registers in which spaces make their marks as spaces seem to be being recognized no doubt in part because these registers are continuously expanding but also in part because the sheer cultural diversity of how space appears is increasingly being recognized as more than culture or body” (p. 18)