

Communicating in the Third Space

Edited by Karin Ika and Gerhard Wagner

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In this diverse collection of interdisciplinary essays, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the third space is finally given a thorough critical interrogation. *Communicating in the Third Space* offers a rare and much needed critical debate on the value of Bhabha's third space for theorising intercultural interaction in the social sciences and the humanities. Other texts, like Joel Kuorrti and Jopi Nyman's *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies in Transition* (2006), are discipline-specific and focused on those elements of the third space of interest in relation to specific conceptual frameworks, such as hybridity and spatiality respectively. Texts dealing with intercultural communication in particular, such as Michael Kelly, Imelda Elliot and Lars Fant's *Third Level, Third Space* (2001) and Kevin Bruyneel's *Third Space of Sovereignty* (2007), either do not engage with Bhabha or else deal minimally with postcolonial theory in general. *Communicating* is thus valuable for having brought together previously unexplored approaches into one well-organized, well-researched text. This book is sure to encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration and is worthwhile reading for those working in intercultural communications, postcolonial studies and cultural studies.

For anyone reading Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, one of the greatest challenges is the author's own unwillingness to offer a clear or protracted definition of the third space. Consequently, as Gerhard Wagner notes, the concept is frequently employed as an "umbrella" term to denote almost anything about the postcolonial condition that its user intends. Several contributors seek to remedy this by carefully examining the philosophical and theoretical premises that underpin Bhabha's work. The promise of the third space, they argue, is its ability to imagine an identity or subjectivity, even a culture, that does not succumb to an either/or logic, but rather embraces the simultaneity of the also/and. Following Bhabha's own conversations with the writings of Jacques Derrida, many of the contributors use his work as a reference point to question the actual potential of the third space to overcome these binaries in order to produce something truly different. Consider, for instance, the problem of determining meaning within the third space. If the locus of the third space is its hybridity, how do we communicate the signs within that space without constantly referring back to the sign's culture-of-origin in an instance of *différance*?

Robert C. Young would deny that this is a problem in Bhabha. Young argues that the cultural meaning-making that takes place in the third space occurs at the moment of enunciation. It is therefore not referential but spontaneous; its meaning, as Bhabha confirms in the prologue, is attached to its iteration *in situ*. Britta Kalscheuer also notes that “the openness and flexibility of the in-between space or third culture seems to be temporarily restricted to the moment of cultural encounter” (34). This temporal emphasis is persuasive; however, it raises questions about the ephemeral nature of such cultural production. What impact can a culture have if it only exists in the moment in which it is conceived?

Ikas and Wagner offer another way of interpreting the third space that rejects the referential reliance on originary cultures, and yet manages to envision the third as a solid, lasting and independent position. They argue that Bhabha was not convinced that the concept of *différance* actually succeeded in theorizing beyond binaries and so, therefore, we cannot understand Bhabha solely through Derrida. Ikas and Wagner turn instead to German philosopher Gotthard Gunther for his ability to successfully articulate an alternative subject position. Gunther, they argue, goes beyond Hegel’s dialectics and Aristotle’s two-valued world to produce a third subject through the rejection of the “one or the Other” dualism. Ikas and Wagner thus attempt to locate the postcolonial subject as alternatively positioned in relation to the dialectically-understood classical subject. Theirs is a compelling description of the third space as a real alternative position that goes beyond the often vague language of the in-between. Their essay is a genuine attempt at grounding the third space in a theoretical framework.

To that end, cultural geographer Julia Lossau’s essay is a provocative reflection on grounding the third space in spatial theory, and is a challenging companion to Edward Soja’s work. Inspired by his encounters with the cityscape of Los Angeles, Soja encourages the development of a new spatial consciousness. Lossau, however, has legitimate reservations about the openness of spatial theory. She argues that it is not possible to employ spatial theory while at the same time ignoring the principles of such theory. Traditional ways of thinking about space, she insists, rely on boundaries to demarcate or “containerize” spaces. It is a theory which is therefore incommensurable with Soja’s openness. The problem with understanding the identities or cultures that form in the Third Space via spatial metaphors, therefore, is that it could ultimately mean reifying identity through its close association with particular, tightly bound spaces.

The idea of cosmopolitanization that Ulrich Beck introduces in his chapter offers a way out of the problem posed by Lossau’s critique of spatial theory. Beck suggests that one can inhabit two distinct spatial positions simultaneously. He writes that “[y]ou can be an alien, a non-citizen living elsewhere and at the same time be a neighbour, a competitor” (13). With regards to Beck’s cosmopolitanism, then, the third space may mean that one can be both here and there, working as a call-centre operator in India for a customer-service company in America, in a

manner that estranges us from those to whom, economically, we have much that connects us. What is clear, however, is that one cannot be *here* and *there* in equal proportions. To suggest otherwise would be to deny the material aspects of living. There is a definite asymmetry to Beck's concept of the third global citizen.

Communicating in the Third Space is an impressive dialogue on the third space, assembling renowned authors like Bill Ashcroft, Ulrich Beck and Robert C. Young into one volume. For graduate students or scholars who have only recently come to Bhabha, *Communicating* provides a well-organized introduction to various approaches to the third space. For those already well-versed in the third space, this collection reconfirms the difficulty in synthesizing Bhabha's elusive concept. At the same time, it brings together a level of theorizing and range of interpretations that inspire new ideas about the continuing relevance of the third space as a framework for alternative thinking. Finally, Bhabha's preface alone makes this a worthwhile read. In it he draws on a scene from *The Heart of Darkness* in which Marlow encounters a Congolese man who has tied a bit of white yarn around his neck; for Marlow, along with Conrad's readers, the meaning of this necklace is ambiguous and elusive. By the very act of trying to translate its meaning, Bhabha argues, Marlow enters the third space. This one concrete example proves to be an enduring and worthwhile image to keep in mind as one reads through the otherwise dense theoretical discussions in *Communicating in the Third Space*.

Works Cited

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