Lurking in a Liminal Land: making images for an ecology of territories and relations

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ABSTRACT

For several decades I have taken photos from the windows of places where I have lived, worked or stayed. This is a performative practice portrayed here in terms of interiority and territory discussed from a point of view predominantly concerned with producing knowing. The themes of interest are interwoven with a description and some evaluation of the project. Ordering and tidiness are enmeshed with establishing territories, because territory as a concept requires a definition; and this involves deciding, sorting, and controlling to establish the forming of a territory and its boundaries. An analytical account of existing territory has the same requirements. My project is seen as revealing, exemplifying, and offering metaphors for understandings of the nature of interior territories. The central view espoused here, is that my several hundred images are best understood as an ecology, where, in this case, the constructed relations to be found between the images provide the privileged means of understanding the whole, rather than any enumeration of content or photographic character ordered according to the application of a 'top-down' system. To arrive at this view, a number of metaphoric connections with issues in the epistemology of interior territories are explored.

CONCEPTS

Gregory Bateson wrote a series of metalogues – versions of apparent conversations with his daughter as a child.[1] The first of these pieces, written in 1948, concerned tidying and the tidiness of her room, and thus the extent to which the very idea of orderliness is definitional and constructed. The underlying interest was the Second Law of Thermodynamics, and the never-ending influence of entropy. He points out to his daughter that once tidiness has been defined, or at least the desired places for things is determined, then disorder is a considerably more likely state, as there are almost infinite ways of being untidy and comparatively few places for things where they will satisfy the definition of tidy. This conceptualising of order is spatial and Bateson uses the tidiness of the daughter's interior territory as his example. He also notes that, in the main, things do not get in a mess by themselves – agency is necessary. Although its sources are similar, the human agency that disorders things differs from the agency that sets up ordering principles. We define and establish where things should be relative to other things; we specify that they reside in the same drawer or computer folder, that they belong on the shelf above and to the left, or in alphabetical sequence reading from the top left.

If exerting control to give things order is a spatial practice, then what we do when we try to order and make sense of ideas is a closely parallel activity. Are relationships we conceptually establish between ideas, and between ideas and their contexts, any less spatial, or are these ecologies of ideas occurring in some non-Euclidian space? The parallels appear to be sufficiently close that the relation is more than metaphoric and warrants further examination. In both physical and conceptual practices, and in any nexus of them, we build new interiors (that is, categories and cells) and position within them things and ideas. We devise new ordering principles and attempt control of portions of our worlds in our efforts to make them tidy. This entails establishing boundaries around ideas so that they are differentiated, putting boundaries around ideas and domains of knowledge to contain them, and for some, destroying previously erected boundaries in the interests of forging new relations. Once boundaries are built, the categories formed can be located in the territory defined by the boundaries. Most of us know that these boundaries are transitions, not dimensionless entities, although it is neater to behave as if they precisely separate the concepts on either side. We endeavour to control placements and relations; we attempt to control the effects of chance. These are themes pertinent to my undertaking, and they will be discussed below.

Things do not stay tidy over time. Entropy prevails. Ideas stay as arranged in places such as books even when pages mould and decompose, but in the world surrounding books, they, and their relations to other ideas, are constantly challenged, mildly misunderstood and a little altered in their retelling. In consequence their bonds to one another are loosened and retied elsewhere. Ideas that once resided in the interiors of a particular discipline are carried across boundaries when the attention of disciplinary guards is diverted. But of course, such an image is flawed; the knowledge remains where it was at the same time as becoming available in another realm. It is moved by performers who find and pass through the windows between disciplinary domains, carrying new knowledge with them to untidy the stuff of dogma.[2]

PROJECT

I want now to jump to an account of a project of mine and relate it to the epistemological ideas. My aim is use such ideas to give the project shape while conceptualising it in terms of interiority and territory.

Above left to right
Figure 1: Les Eyzies, France, September 2006; Figure 2: Marquay, France, September 2006
Figure 3: Bordeaux, France, September 2006; Figure 4: Bordeaux, France, September 2006
Figure 5: Munich, Germany, September 2006; Figure 6: Cologne, Germany, October 2006
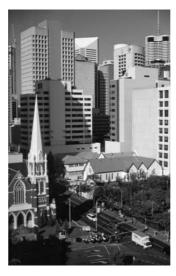
Starting in 1973, I produced photos from the windows of the places where I stayed, lived or worked. (Figures 1 to 6 are a sequence from 2006 starting in the Dordogne region of France and continuing through Bordeaux, Munich and Cologne. It covers eleven days.) This project was initially a little erratic, but became an almost completely reliable practice. My task in this paper is to offer a possible analysis and theorising of this practice – a tidying and ordering of images, content, and my behaviour with respect to notions of interiority and territory. Thus, this paper is a mechanism for enacting the processes discussed above.

Over thirteen thousand days I positioned myself at the windowed boundaries between interiors, and made images of the larger interior territories I could see. The characters of these images vary with place, position, light, and the photographic tools available.[3]

Let us imagine me at the boundary of a hotel room in a city somewhere. The room is separated from what is beyond by a wall with a window or perhaps a glazed door onto a balcony. There is thickness, a zone of liminality between the interior territory and the exterior territory. It is not an exact boundary, rather a zone of possibly varying precision between the two realms. This is a metaphor for the boundary between ideas or concepts where the dividing line has fuzzy thickness – the more it is examined, the more it blurs and evades precision; perhaps such thickness arises from the impossibility of exact definition in all systems lacking the arbitrary precision of rule-governed enterprises such as mathematics. The point at which inside becomes outside in most buildings is a little vague, but it hardly matters in everyday use. In making these images, however, I occupied this boundary zone with camera in hand – sometimes inside a window looking through it, possibly at the cusp of the change, and sometimes supported on the inside while leaning across the threshold to attain the camera position I sought. I also thought about this zone and how much I could transgress it while still claiming to be producing images from windows. How often are these issues paralleled in the world of ideas? Conceptually we play with adjacent ideas at their boundaries and bring them together in

some way; sometimes we establish furtive positions at the edges of a discipline and make boundary crossings. We thus swing from within the territory of one discipline or domain of ideas, over the invisible boundary, to another territory, and, with good fortune, arc back clutching an idea.

In this context, I imagine the act of photographing as a probe. Through this act, some knowledge is sought, captured, and stored, then spirited away to the interior of a domain of inquiry, where it can be examined at will and leisure to coax from it whatever is encoded within. The probe is a means of mapping: each position visible in the territory beyond the window is mapped onto a position on a sensor (or formerly film). However, as Korzybski's[4] aphorism reminds us, the map is not the territory, and although in everyday speech we conflate the image and the actual, in this case it is sensible to admit that issues of mimesis and representation are raised. The territories frozen in the images from decades ago lack the evolutions of their originals. Rapidly, they lose currency and become historical documentation. They form a world of their own, a territory of images of things as they were at the moment of capture. I am attracted to Buell's literary concept [5] of the 'word-world' and its relation to the 'actual' world, and would like to parallel it with the 'photo-world' produced by these probes and available for scrutiny, to ascertain what pertains between the images, the understanding that can be obtained through consideration of them, and the relations between them.

The room I am imagined as occupying might be more accurately described as a 'temporary jurisdiction' rather than a 'territory', in that I paid for its use for a day or two and thereby expect some control over it, a degree of privacy, and some security. It is not, however, a space over which I display the degree of possibly defensive control, ownership and personal engagement that I would over a permanent abode. The lack of truly territorial behaviour relates to the de-personalised character of the room. Many hotel rooms emerge from the same homogenised mould. They do not allow the territory personalising available in longer occupations. Possible defensive behaviour with respect to a hotel room is generally limited to the safety and security of the occupants

and the portable territorial markers and possessions within. Likely behaviour with respect to the imagined room suggests it is not, then, a territory in an ethological sense. Perhaps, because humans have set up such complex mechanisms for establishing and policing their territories, it is reasonable to claim that we do not display the territorial behaviours of many other species. Paralleling the ethological concept are various less strict uses that allow the term to be usefully applied to both this room and the realm beyond the window. They may both be considered interior territories – one is interior to a building, the other a selection of an interior to a city, for the view afforded from the room is constrained and curtailed and my image can only be of what I can see. Lurking at the boundary of the interior territories is akin to the caveman in a place of refuge surveying the prospect beyond for threats and routes of escape – behaviour that is conjectured to have given rise to ingrained human behaviour, that, to this day, predicts much of our behaviour with respect to seating preferences in cafes, lecture theatres and public interiors.[6]

The visible territory beyond the window is in part given definition through a consideration of its place – either its physical place in the world or its place in a structure of concepts. Place can be constructed in two broad manners: first, as a bounded entity, and

second, as a zone of influence around a central focus. The hotel room bounded by walls, floor and ceiling is a straightforward example of the first kind, while the view from the window that includes a church spire or other landmark that is central to an area around it, exemplifies the second manner. Perhaps this territory is being eroded or invaded as in Figure 7. Similarly, a territory of concepts might be formed around a central idea or constrained by boundaries. Physical territories of social groups often centre on particular gathering places such as clubs or pubs, or are more-or-less bounded by major roads or rail lines in urban settings.[7] Such territories might be imagined in some of these photos. Equally my image might record the territory of a fox or a small bird.

Windows are framing devices – just as they bound a view, we can explore bounding the concept itself. Windows have an epistemological character – they enable us to see some things and not others. They allow a (partial) view of the world, and it is only by challenging the framing that we can see in ways that are not controlled by the normal boundaries of windows or the constructs of language or collective knowledge. We may argue that they allow us to see what is important, just as the defining labels of language do. Rarely does a window frame appear

pictorially as a controlling device in my set of images, but frames were present at the taking of each image: they nurtured, they hindered, and they controlled my efforts to make a photograph in every case. Figure 8 offers glimpses of a stone sill and surrounds.

In many instances there is more than one image from the same window, for 'window' is not a tightly bounded concept, and I made no attempt to frame the construction 'photo from a window' in any prescriptive manner. Photos and windows are concept sets that locate 'photos from windows' at their intersection. There is no precise prescription of what constitutes a photo from a window: it might use a wide-angle lens or a telephoto, be produced by a skyward-pointing photographer kneeling at a window, or it might look downward from many floors above its subject. It might be intended as a record of some object or as an interpretation of an ambience.

Aware of how much the outcome would be determined by any prescriptions I might impose on my own photographing activity, I resisted such constrictions. I let the number and character of the photographic possibilities available determine the outcomes. Each of the photos was produced as a reaction to the circumstances I understood. The photos from hotel windows or other people's houses conform to a long-established ritual: when staying in a room I must make at least one image from the window. If I am only there at night and it is raining miserably, an image must still be made. A longer stay produces more opportunities and commensurably more choices and decisions. Photographs from places where I have lived or worked have typically been made to record a frequent daily image or perhaps variations in it that might occur only in special circumstances. They can also log variations resulting from the passing of seasons and changes made by others over many years. Perhaps perversely, I spent a number of years in an office with a high window that precluded even a horizontal view out of it when seated. I typically

saw some roofs, the sky and a chimney. Finally, with Figure 9, I produced a single encapsulating afternoon image recording a favoured moment when the sun passed behind the chimney on the building opposite.

According to Elizabeth Opalenik '… all good photographs are self portraits.'[8] I am inclined to extend this and claim that all photographs have at least an element of self-portraiture. Those who snap and lament: 'It didn't come out.' tell us something about themselves. Committed photographers such as Ms Opalenik of course speak photographically with much greater eloquence, but the choices made in producing any image minimally indicate what the photographer deemed to be important, how different aspects of the photo were valued relative to other aspects, and, to some extent, offer commentary on what was omitted from the photo – intentionally or thoughtlessly. Photos obviously have edges and thus include and exclude potential content. Other photographic characteristics such as exposure, depth of field, and colour palette all enable a photographer to control their photographic communications – often through after-the-fact manipulations. As this project is about presenting what was there, as I interpreted it at the time, white balance, colour, or exposure adjustments have been minimal and recomposition through cropping was limited – any such undertakings being to support the photographic content present in the original. Therefore, commensurate with the processes of scanning and subsequent production, only mild manipulation through Photoshop or Lightroom has been undertaken in an effort to communicate my ideas or emotional responses. I decided to celebrate, or at least tolerate, the various casts, reflections and optical impediments that were introduced by the glass in windows that did not open, as I deem them part of the process of peering through windows. In other words I have established a level of control of the related aspects of these photos that I judge to be appropriate for this project.

The pictures speak of where I have been over the thirty-five years of the project. They celebrate the everydayness of their views; I did not set out to shoot the exotic, the sunset in a magnificent landscape, or the difficult to attain. Equally, I did not avoid them. As a man with a camera photographing the world beyond the window, I am an outsider. While I am looking out from the territory or jurisdiction behind the window, I am looking in to someone else's world, their everyday places and activities as seen and recorded by me, the tourist. While so many touristic captures of photo opportunities offer nothing that is new and simply add one more instance of the known highlight, I hope to sometimes see in ways that are particular to me, maybe in ways that exemplify the freshness of gaze of a visitor in contrast to seeings of the familiar by an insider. A resident may accept as normal what appears unusual or novel to a visitor. Like everyone before me with a camera, I have made my own capture of a tourist highlight as a memento, or a record of delight and excitement. I am not trying to belittle the activity, simply to suggest that there are more and less mindful ways of photographing tourist highlights. Of course, one is rarely fortunate enough to be presented with a star-rated highlight from a hotel window. (I can cite a few, such the night view

Opposite left
Figure 10: Lincoln, England, October 1985 HOTEL

Opposite middle
Figure 11: Paris, France, September 1992 HOTEL

Opposite right
Figure 12: Paris, France, May 2000 HOTEL

of Lincoln Cathedral West Front obtained by leaning an appropriate amount from a hotel window, shown in Figure 10.)

The view may well show generic qualities or aspects of a place, however. I have looked out over archetypal Paris rooftops for instance, that offered a shorthand image announcing my presence in Paris by referencing prior images that a viewer might know. Conversely, an ungenerous modernised Parisian light court in another hotel offered no hint of locale that I can determine, but attains some interest for that very reason when labelled and juxtaposed with other images (see Figures 11 and 12).

The possibility of an identifier such as the rooftops seems important when the interiors of cities, are, in many places, converging toward a bland similarity, festooned with shops from retail chains also present in other cities, or trumpeting brands available worldwide. In a world of increasing connectedness and homogenisation, how much of an essence of the interior of the place can a single image capture and portray? Without a label, what does any picture convey about the specificity of its place, its 'whereness'? A number of my images originate on two Australian farms. Some announce that they are made on farms, and possibly that they portray the interior of a country more readily than that they are Australian, but eucalypts often suggest their location, and those photos with kangaroos offer a high degree of certainty. Detailed images of water, grass, horses and light may not even indicate that they are from farms, as they might be from less tamed territories. The intentional, selective control of the photographer matters. If set the task of confusing or misleading the viewer, exclusions and selections could offer ambiguous and indeterminate images. In deciding what images to capture from any window, I engage in an interior monologue about what I see and feel and how to best represent it. In reflecting now on decades of such experiences I am again conducting an interior monologue made at least partially public through this writing. The interiority of the personal discussion about what the photograph should portray will be revealed in the public and external territory ultimately chosen to display the finished set of images. This paper is a stepping stone – while some aspects of the project are changing here from the interiority of my thoughts to the interiority of your thoughts as a reader, only a few images are also making the transition into a public territory.

To a reasonable degree, I can control the transmission of ideas across these wild lands between my interior thoughts and yours by what I reveal and what I hide. I can have no real control of what you think and feel as a result of reading and seeing. You can misunderstand my intentions and misread what I believe I have conveyed, but, most significantly, my work will trigger in you a collection of ideas through association and through your efforts to interrogate the images. You, like any other reader, will construct your own new knowing in response to your engagement with this paper or with the collection of photos. There is an element of chance in this as your views and experiences are brought to bear on the evidence of mine. The intersection of these strains of endeavour will differ from every other such intersection. The resulting knowledge production is thus, within some constraints, chance-like.

Chance performs another underlying role in this production. The times and places of the original photographs were partially under my control and partially determined by others. While I agreed to accompany someone somewhere, accepted an invitation to stay, or chose a conference, the locales were established by others. Imperfect information typically determines the choice of a hotel, and particular rooms are allocated by hotel staff. Seasons affect weather, light qualities, and the delights of sunshine or showers, and hence the photos. Chance may thus be as influential on the photos as any effort to shape the content and select what is portrayed.

There is a sequence of photos from 1985 taken moving through an unfolding territory in France as I spent a week on a slowly moving canal barge. (Figures 13, 14 and 15 show a selection of these.) This provides a set of images more akin to the normal experience of traversing a territory. Farming territory flanked the canal. The photos suggest an interior arable heart of a country, but the grain and density of human inhabitation slowly changes, there are areas that appear untamed, and, infrequently, industrial sites. There is a parallel to be drawn with the variations in density of ideas, events or physical constructions in any physical or conceptual territory. These are matters designers can attempt to establish and control in their efforts to produce interior territories by shaping the experiential journeys available.

For those images produced in my own city when I look from places where I work or live, my relation to the territory out the window is different. In both cases, I am photographing my familiar world which is indicative of the culture in which I am immersed. If the image is from a window of a house where I have lived, then I was encased in my own territory and recording aspects of its surrounds. Chance is reduced because I can photograph whatever I notice: choose an occasion, a season, a lighting. This is a more controlled process. Like the images taken from the barge it evokes issues pertaining to the distant edges of territories. My current house allows images of a small court, neighbours' roofs and a city skyline. The first I would claim as territory, the second is within an area I walk through most days and can thus construe as territory in a looser sense, and to the extent that I can reasonably describe my home city as my territory, the distant view can also be included.

Above
Figures 13, 14, 15: Near La Charité-Sur-Loire, France, August 1985 (barge)

ACCOUNTING

There is an ecological account to be given of these images: we can examine them to privilege the relations between them rather than concentrate on the photos as objects. The individual images may or may not be interesting or delightful; they are definitely not a set of photos I would present as my 'best', but their obsessive production over thirty-five years requires some accounting. The relations between them might offer illumination. It is straightforward to consider their spatial and temporal relations, and any relations of similarity or difference in their content. The relations between photos could produce various mappings. I considered arranging them according to spatial co-ordinates and tried positioning them on a map of the world. The intervals of time between them can be plotted. However, I have not judged spatial and temporal mappings to be rewarding. The photos are heavily clustered in Southern parts of Australia and in Western Europe; blobs, not patterns, are produced. The temporal intervals show gaps of years down to gaps smaller than seconds. In each potential mapping, there can be clusterings of images and empty regions. The intensities speak of my interests and reactions and are thus biographical if anyone is interested.

Another way of relating the images is to categorise them based on (dominant) content: the set of photos of contained territories such as courtyards, the set of photos which extend to a distant horizon, the sets with and without people, those with detailed elements such as chimneys or window shutters, those with rain,

with rubbish, or with blue things. Imagine twenty such sets were established. Some photos would belong to several, maybe many, sets. The photos could be displayed according to a hierarchy of their incidence of appearance in the sets chosen. Figures 16, 17 and 18 offer three examples to classify.

The arbitrariness of arrangements resulting from the categorisations could prove compelling or repelling to a viewer. If the sets were chosen to accord with a particularly interesting conception intended to reveal ideas embodied in the collection, then the categorising approach could prove to be rewarding. So far, however, I have been unable to concoct a complying set of sets. The attraction of this approach is based on the same core issues canvassed at the outset – allocation of things to categories, or the putting of things where they belong according to a set of determinants established for the purpose of attaining order. Once order is attained, then maintaining it – keeping the ordered material ordered – is the essence of tidiness.

The images themselves give little information about the relations between the interior territories photographed and the interior territories behind and around the photographer. Although, for the fascinations of this analysis, a reflection of an interior room juxtaposed with the image of the outside is a compelling idea, it was rarely allowed to happen in any substantial fashion. With careful scrutiny, some hints of the reflected room behind can be seen in a few photographs, but this is insufficient to posit much about this territory and thus its relations to the photographed

one. Sometimes a viewer can assume the interior territory occupied by the photographer is more comfortably warmer or cooler than the image indicates the exterior to be. Perhaps it is also quieter in one territory or the other, but most such imagining of relations has little within the images to draw upon. The relations between the photographer and the subjects are ever-presently on display, but not clearly articulated. Some emerge through scrutiny, some may be construed by a viewer. No one is to know if I produced a particular image by selecting the least appealing content visible because I was grumpy on the occasion, or if I waited till evening to enable an alluring silhouette disguising uninteresting features on a nearby building. Abstracting an understanding of the relations obtaining between me and what I photographed is at least partially possible image by image for me even if it is memory-taxing. It can be imputed by a viewer and may be at least as accurate as what I thought or think prevailed at the time of capture. Photographic content and portrayal considered over the complete suite of photos may lead to a view of the photographer-world relations.

For some years I have been characterising this project as a performance piece, starting in 1973 and ending in 2008, with suitable comfort breaks for an event of this length. In fact, over the duration of the performance, there was no audience, simply a man playing the role of photographer from windows at a large number of locales at irregular intervals over 13,000 days. Any audience is for the residues of this performance. Part of my role was to make choices enabling the image production. Next, another set of performative behaviours are required to refine these images, and subsequently I have another role that entails tidying the territory formed by the images, and placing them each where they belong. To perform this role I must first devise a structure within the territory formed from their making, a way of positioning the images, arranging them, holding them apart but in place relative to each other image. Conceptually, there must be an ecology of these images, their relations in some field of ideas and the possibility of dominance, significance and subservience. In playing this role at present, I have been grappling with the issues of ordering outlined above, and establishing a map to enable tidying

my territory. The most convincing relations between the images, are, I consider, those brought into being through the sequence of their production. Each photo is left in the order in which it was produced with the inherent spatial and temporal relations brought into being through the firing of the shutter. Relations between the content of adjacent groups of photos or widely separated individual images are left to a viewer to construct. My final performative role is as the disseminator of the ideas of this project. This paper is embroiled in the performance. Through it I am telling the reader something of the project and showing a smattering of the images.

NOTES

1.   See Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind.* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972). The daughter is the now famous author and anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson. Some of her view of these metalogues is to be found in *With a Daughter's Eye: A Memoir of Margaret Mead & Gregory Bateson* (New York: Perennial, 2001) (A reprint of the 1994 2nd edition.)
2.   See David Turnbull's argument for the production of transmodern knowledge in David Turnbull, *Masons, Tricksters and Cartographers: comparative studies in the sociology of scientific and indigenous knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2000)
3.   For those intrigued by such matters, all images from 1973 up until 2006 were shot on 35mm transparency film. A 16-bit scan of each was made with a Nikon Super Coolscan 5000 ED scanner. Two Nikon F2 camera bodies did the work until the early 1990s, followed by a Nikon F4s until the end of 2005, a Nikon D 200 in 2006 and 2007 and then a Nikon D300. 35mm lenses have included various 35, 50, 200 and 500mm primes, a 24-50mm zoom and a couple of different 80-200mm zooms. A DX-format 18-200mm zoom has been used on the digital cameras. Transparency cleaning was necessary and I am undertaking some restoration via Photoshop and adjustments in Lightroom or Photoshop.
4.   Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, 1941. Full text available at http://esgs.free.fr/uk/art/sands.htm, accessed 28 October, 2009.
5.   Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: environmental crisis and literary imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 30.
6.   Roger Downs and David Stea (eds), *Image and Environment: cognitive mapping & spatial behavior* (Chicago: Aldine, 1973)
7.   Robertson, Charles, Marion Holley, and Peter Downton. *A Study of Techniques for Describing the Relationship between People and the Residential Environment* (Parkville, Vic.: Faculty of Architecture, Building and Town & Regional Planning, University of Melbourne, 1977)
8.   http://www.opalenik.com/portfolios/sensual-2003/index.html accessed 9 March 2009.

Opposite left
Figure 16: Oban, Scotland, April 1973 HOTEL

Opposite middle
Figure 17: Venice, Italy, September 1995 HOTEL

Opposite right
Figure 18: Winchester, England, November 1985 HOTEL