



4 *For a Spatial Poetics of Ethics*

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What of a space within reach of my experience that is both (and alternately) real and imaginary? This would be a space both *out there* and *right here* – incongruous, yet plausible. I would sense it inside me, that is, though it stands outside me, drawing me outside myself. It is, for example, that space standing *between* myself as viewer or spectator and the other human subject shown in a film or a photograph. This “self-other-than-myself” is not playing a role, not incarnating a life other than her own. In my mind she hovers at the cusp of the real and the imaginary. The space between us is *actual* because I am not *there*, in her place. And yet, because I am not there (always a potentiality), the space between us is *imaginary* as well. It calls out to, hails and seduces the imagination.

While the spatial separation of discrete bodies thrusts consciousness into a state of *oscillation* between the real and the imaginary, the actual and the virtual enter into an aesthetic dynamics of which the spectator’s thinking affect is the instigator. Together, these two dialectics introduce a medial layer on the basis of which philosophy has (for over two millennia) pondered the experience of beauty and, more recently, the experience of the sublime. The tension between the beautiful and the sublime has, in turn, nourished nearly all discussions concerning the possibility of ethics consequential of aesthetics since the Enlightenment. And all of this occurs even when the art form is arguably at its least mimetic, as in the case of documentary film.

The problem that I am proposing to examine (a problem that I have been putting before myself for quite sometime) is that of the *means* by which to compare the *capacity* of those two closely related visual media of photography and film for luring us into an intersubjective space which I call a space for ethics. I do so reading “thinking space” as both my assignment – to reflect on space – and something space may appear to us to do. Space too thinks

us, in other words. Once lured into that zone for intersubjectivity, that space for ethics, and fully cognizant of having been lured there, I may experience a transformation in my care of the self that opens onto a potential caring for non-selves. A space for ethics is thus a powerfully intermedial space: it opens up in the vastness – the “intimate vastness,” as Gaston Bachelard might have called it – that stands between *this* voice that speaks and a voice barely audible from a space otherwise. What I mean by a space otherwise is an extension I have applied to the embryonic definition that Michel Foucault lent to what he named “*des espaces autres*” in a now famous lecture he delivered in Tunis in 1967. Space otherwise is the geography with which I am concerned. How and to what degree does documentary photography of space otherwise effect the transport of *affect* through that space? How and to what degree does documentary film situated in space otherwise *effect this transport* of affect. Which of these two closely related yet different media is better at eliciting this crucial and I believe absolutely vital feat of thinking and feeling intermedially? And if one is superior in this endeavor, just *how* is it better?

If as Lessing maintained in *Laocoön*, his 1766 essay on the limits of poetry and painting, the visual arts are primarily spatial while the verbal arts are primarily temporal, then film – especially documentary film – ought to be able to win out over photography which stands proudly and stubbornly on its own in silence. The photograph is, after all, mute. The photograph doesn’t even easily accommodate the written word (a one-way street sign, for example, or a title under the print are ~~hardly~~ ^{minimally} discursive supplements). Film manages to be chatty even in its silent manifestations (film’s diachrony seems to demand the prosthesis of intertitles). In film, then, the limits of time and the limits of space to which poetry and painting are constrained conspire to break those limits. (Perhaps it is a question of presentation as opposed to representation.)

What happens or has the potential of happening when the space between *here* and space otherwise is *invested* by the spectator. This first principle is of primordial importance for the development of ethics. The potential for socially and ethically desirable transformation through the investment of space (as, for example, in the case of the tragedy according to Aristotle) therefore calls for a *poetics*. As in that earliest of cases, such a poetics would have implications and applications to all homologous aesthetic economies.

Thus, just as Aristotle twenty-five hundred years ago dissected the tragedy and the epic, critically isolating the components of *mythos*, *dianoia*, *ethos* and so on, describing the mechanics of *hamartia*, *anagnorisis*, and *catharsis*, and extolling the social virtues of the latter, so it should be within our power to extend that work into a poetics of the visual arts technologically available today. We already have, in Bachelard’s singular book of 1957, a poetics if

space. By way of my subtitle I am suggesting that a leap from space to ethics is justified, cogent, and possible under certain circumstances and conditions. That leap would entail a prior leap from a poetics of space to a spatial poetics of ethics.

It would be pure folly to think that in these few ^{pages} I can possibly do justice to the full scope of a spatial poetics of ethics. But I *can* carry out the following: I can suggest a very tentative mapping of the components of such a poetics and I can briefly discuss three works that have driven me to begin to schematize what I see as a vital consequence of aesthetic reflection. Preliminarily, then, here is how I propose to name and arrange the elements that would interact in a spatial poetics of ethics . . .

space	intermedial space	space otherwise
artist	medium, apparatus	“subjects on location”
spectator	imagination, reflection, empathy	other (subject-object)

I hope that meanings and workings associated with each will become somewhat apparent in the next few minutes. But for two of them, I suggest we rely on an observation and a claim that Bachelard makes in the penultimate chapter of his *Poetics of Space*, entitled “Intimate Immensity.” First, regarding the imagination, which Kant, as we may recall, held as “an instrument of reason” (§29), Bachelard’s observes that “daydreaming” – which I take simply as a particular manifestation of imagination – “is a fully constituted state from the moment of its inception. [. . .] it flees the object nearby and is immediately far off, elsewhere, in the space of *elsewhere*” (183–84, tr. modified). As a consequence, with respect to what I’m calling “intermedial space” and the work performed for reason by the imagination Bachelard is able to claim that “[T]he diversity of the images is unified in the depths of ‘inner space.’ This is a conclusive formula,” Bachelard continues, “for the demonstration I want to make on the correspondence between the immensity of world space and the depth of ‘inner space’” (205).

The three documentary documents I’ve chosen to help me briefly flesh out this rudimentary schema of spatial ethics are, in chronological order: the so-called *Zoniers* album of photographs Eugène Atget made of the slums ringing Paris and its slum-dwellers; a twenty-eight-minute documentary film by Georges Lacombe released in 1928 entitled *La Zone: au pays des chiffonniers*; and Eli Lotar’s 1946 documentary with commentary written by Jacques Prévert on the slums of Aubervilliers with that eponymous title. Molly Nesbit’s scintillating and visionary book on *Atget’s Seven Albums* as well as Steve Ungar’s encyclopedic study of “Social Documentary in France from the Silent Era to the New Wave” entitled *Critical Mass* have helped me in reading the first and the second of these.

The shanties that have surrounded the city of Paris constitute space otherwise selected by all three of these artists: it was (and still is, in some places) a space of human devastation – one that is but should not be inhabited by a species whose members purportedly care for each other and for the planet that enabled their emergence. As for the *zoniers*, the inhabitants *in spite of themselves* of these spaces, the fourth quatrain of Baudelaire’s “*Le vin des chiffonniers*” is the perfect *ekphrasis* of any souls or shadows who *live on* in spaces otherwise and who become, under the kino-eye or the camera, “subjects on location” for consideration by the spectator using the combined force of imagination and reflection:

*Oui, ces gens harcelés de chagrins de ménage,
Moulus par le travail et tourmentés par l’âge,
Éreintés et pliant sous un tas de debris,
Vomissement confus de l’énorme Paris,
Yes, these people, plagued by household cares,
Bruised by hard work, tormented by their years,
Each bent double by the junk he carries,
The jumbled vomit of enormous Paris,*

I hope, by the way, that it will be understood by inference that I consider *la Zone* and the slums of Aubervilliers as presented by these artists as paradigms for *all* such spaces otherwise wherever and whenever they exist to the infinite disgrace of so-called humanity. They are all spaces that render mandatory a deep revision of our sojourn reigning over this planet.

Of course, that eye of the photographer or filmmaker, mediated as it is always by the apparatus, can itself become the point of reference for a return look. The direct look at the camera is, by convention, rare in narrative film but, as in photography, less infrequent in documentary film. I’ll return to that direct look back at the observer and its defiance if I can. But before reviewing my observations that have led me to favor Atget’s enterprise over that of Lacombe’s in eliciting ethical thought, then describing how I have come to revise those thoughts in light of a later, similar, documentary, here is an incomplete list of the functions that drive the components making up a poetics of ethics.

The empathic work opened up for the spectator’s imagination to perform in the spaces otherwise that Eugène Atget offered forth in his *Zoniers* album and that Georges Lacombe did in *La Zone* has in the past led me to stake more hope in documentary photography than in documentary film for setting the groundwork for an ethical paradigm. I shall therefore begin with some remarks about those two works in comparison, then finish with revisions to my thinking on the basis of Lotar’s *Aubervilliers*.

Lacombe's film dives right in, beginning with steady purpose to present the workaday life of ragpickers as they shuttle between northern districts *within* Paris and their dwellings in the zone just *outside* Porte de Clignancourt. The first several minutes are captivating almost to the point of mesmerization. The skilled, intense labor of the ragpickers (whose sisters and brothers of today are the garbage divers, gleaners, plastic bottle recyclers, etc.), whose uncanny movements Baudelaire attributed to alcoholism, are shown with obvious empathy. As we enter the third minute, it is mid-morning. Lacombe has brought us to a *ligne de partage* – the city limit, where day workers from the *banlieues* walk or are bussed *into* the metropolis, where bourgeois in suits and ties stop to buy the morning newspaper, and where the ragpickers reverse commute by foot, pulling carts, into *la Zone* to continue their labor, processing recoverable refuse for the rest of the day (fig. 4.1).

But about half way through Lacombe's documentary, rarity gets sidetracked by the temptation of narrative which overtakes the film's documentary thrust. And in doing so, the film doesn't quite altogether succeed in revealing to us what Walter Benjamin called the "critical point" of *zonier* existence where we would not only glimpse *being in a space otherwise* but actually *go there*. To go into a space otherwise must ultimately entail *being otherwise*. To approach that critical point is to consider afresh the ethical possibilities in the experience of the sublime theorized over the course of a century and a half that spanned Boileau's landmark preface to his translation of Longinus's *Peri hypsous* to the "Analytic of the Sublime" in Kant's *Third Critique*, recovering



Fig. 4.1: Photographer: Eugène Atget. Title: *Zoniers*. Porte d'Italie, Paris. Date: 1912 (public domain).

all-too-often forgotten stages in the work of John Dennis and, especially, Edmund Burke. To point quite directly to the ethical promise Kant saw in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* of 1757, let us consider this quote:

It is by [sympathy] that we enter into the concerns of others; that we are moved as they are moved, and are never suffered to be indifferent spectators of almost any thing which men can do or suffer. For sympathy must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected; so that this passion may either partake of the nature of those which regard self-preservation, and turning upon pain may be a source of the sublime (§XIII).

This statement which today we read as a definition of empathy, fed directly into several of Kant's speculative efforts in the "Analytic of the Sublime" to tease ^{out} a cause and effect relationship between esthetics and ethics. Burke's confidence [^] that self-preservation can turn social, responsible, even moral under the effect of the sublime is reflected in such Kantian declarations as this:

The idea of the good conjoined with [strong] affection is called enthusiasm. This state of mind seems to be sublime, to the extent that we commonly assert that nothing great could be done without it (§29).

But to return to ^[italics] *La Zone*, George Lacombe's drift back to story-telling notwithstanding, what his gem of a film *begins* to show with the feverishly incessant movement of bodies in the non-narrative first half is labor. This painful labor that none of us perform. In the details of his labor, the *zonier* emphatically and definitively distances himself from our bourgeois life, foreclosing any attempts on our part to integrate him into "our" world, all the while asserting that there is a life for us *elsewhere* – in an elsewhere that is, nevertheless, *here*. Perhaps because photography, more often than film, its technological offspring, stands back from narrative, foregrounding its reticence to *recount* in face of the scant wisdom in a saying like "every picture tells a story," or perhaps because subjects of the photographic apparatus can so much more often than in film *stare back* in such a way as to hold hasty claims to knowledge by the spectator in abeyance, the photograph seems far more apt to open onto an ontology of the inhabitant of a wasteland, a zone. (Harvey 162–63)

Atget's images of space otherwise invite our look to linger at the same instant that we discover, with a shared sense of incredulity, that the look of the *zonier* seems to linger on us. What Molly Nesbit's patient and brilliant commentary helps us to see is that their very being is a function of separateness, in other words, and the *Zone* is "[a] remove that was as much chosen as it had been encouraged" (175). Yet – and this is the crucial advantage

I still see in Atget's work over that of Lacombe – through photography, these garbagemen cleave to us bourgeois spectators, beckoning us into their *vita activa*, as Hannah Arendt called it in *The Human Condition*.

Unlike Lacombe's laps^e into narrative, which comforts the viewer, many of Atget's photographs in the *Zoniers* album quietly disturb by revealing a distinct *erasure of differentiation* between garbage – the raw material of the ragpicker's labor – and the ragpickers' body. Appearing to become indistinguishable from the garbage he treats, the *zonier* ensures something approaching his ontological distance from the bourgeois. In Lacombe's presentation, at least until narrative creeps in and ruins our pensive awe, bodies move without interruption, incessantly, feverishly, furtively; in Eugène Atget's, bodies freeze and stare. If they move at all, it is in the instant, in defiance of the rule that operators usually derive from the strictures of the apparatus: the rule of standing stock still.

The lifecycle of garbage and the being of men tend to blur into a continuum. In *la Zone*, this ontological divide becomes indistinct. The *zoniers* are *garbagemen* and Molly Nesbit's critical work is meant to make these *beings apart* be part of, partake in *one* world. Nesbit correlates the ragpicker's separateness from mainstream proletarian concerns with the deep space of his being in order to plumb the *zonier's* being with her empathic gaze. Putting herself in Atget's place at the very moment she imagines him having strived to place himself in the moment and space of the ragpicker, Nesbit describes the *garbagemen* half engulfed in refuse within their shanty near Porte d'Asnières. Nesbit's work in the wake of Atget's is what Burke and Kant meant by the empathy that may be derived as a residue of the experience of the sublime (fig. 4.2)

In a more extensive elaboration of this spatial poetics, I would have to examine these dynamics in conjunction with Hannah Arendt's distinction between labor and work in her analysis of *vita activa*, as well as the relationship among labor, pain, and the alleviation or sharing of pain through empathic action – work, labor, and action being the three conceptual components of Arendt's presentation of the human condition in her 1958 book by that title. Now, however, I must turn to a second document which complicates my earlier favoring of photography over film in developing a spatial poetics of ethics.

Watching photographer and occasional film director Eli Lotar's documentary on Aubervilliers, then reflecting on ^{what} Steve Ungar writes about it in *Critical Mass*, I've come to throw back into [^]question my earlier contention that photography is better equipped for facilitating a meaningful approach to bodies and beings seemingly altogether *other* and that anything smacking



Fig. 4.2: Film title: *La Zone*. Director: Georges Lacombe. Date: 1928 (public domain).

of narrative – or, rather, the *compulsion* to narrate – serves as impediment to breaching an ethical space through which effective empathy can arise. Here is how Ungar introduces us to Eli Lotar’s brilliant documentary:

Aubervilliers was commissioned by Charles Tillon, a French Communist Party [PCF] member who was elected mayor of the town in 1945 after representing it for nine years in the *Chambre des Députés*. Tillon’s predecessor as mayor for the previous twenty-two years was Pierre Laval, whose cabinet posts during the Vichy regime resulted in his postwar arrest, trial as a traitor, and execution by firing squad (103).

Tillon was a true exception among PCF officials of the time. Lotar’s camera documents scenes, captures movements, makes moves, and sets up Roger Dwyre’s intervening montage transitions with much the same visual lyricism one witnesses in the so-called “poetic realism” of Jean Vigo’s *À propos de Nice* or Boris Kaufman’s *Les Halles centrales* (Ungar 21). Not unlike Lacombe’s intention in *La Zone*, Lotar’s “vignettes [. . .] were aimed at inner-city spectators for whom the geographic proximity of Aubervilliers did nothing to lessen its invisibility” (108). Lotar thus not only transports us right into Aubervilliers, but into the very bodies performing labor there. With his camera positioning itself ever closer to where my eyes would be if I were



Fig. 4.3: Film title: *Aubervilliers*. Director: Éli Lotar. Date: 1946. Source: author's personal screenshot.

using my hands and arms to work, I am momentarily performing such work. What work? Towing barges by bare hand, steering, and unloading. Then the camera moves us so close to the old women and children gleaning potatoes dropped while being loaded onto the barges. Masonry, carpentry, recycling. During a brief visit to a Saint-Gobain factory where we are told that ammonia, sulfuric acid, fertilizers and degreasing agents of all sorts are concocted, we meet a worker with his inadequately protected hands dipped constantly in caustic soda. He inspects those hands covered in open sores, speculating that “whatever’s going on inside must not be good.” (fig. 4.3)

As much as the content of Prévert’s text it is the quality of voice – the vocal delivery not of Prévert, but of Roger Pigaut – that carries Lotar’s vision and view. ~~Pigaut is a~~ fascinating rhapsode as Longinus called purveyors of the sublime. He has that somewhat affectless perfectly Parisian pronunciation of the mid-twentieth century. A nasally, flatly metallic yet fleetingly emphatic staccato, Prévert, through the vehicle of Pigaut, excels not only at *lexis*, but at *dianoia*, *pathos* and *melos* combined – not only words, but thought and an oddly dispassionate music to the voice. Lotar returns us, once again, to categories of a poetics. And this is how the Prévert-Pigaut tag-team catalyzes the images of the space otherwise that was post-war Aubervilliers that Lotar offers forth.

Following individual introductions that are filmed with the on-site microphone off and Pigaut continuing to deliver Prévert’s commentary, Lotar assembles the Izy family – two parents, six children, and a dog – for a group shot. This cinematic cliché then morphs into a framed photograph on the wall of the crumbling hovel they call home. That space is even more

eloquent even than the family members and more apt at luring us into space otherwise. Prévert through Pigaut says it well: “And who might think while looking at the family portrait hanging on the wall that this wall, as well as everything that supports all the other walls surrounding it, might collapse, literally collapse at any moment? . . . Possible or not, this is how it is.” And the peroration ends with a somewhat disturbing pun on “*être au pied du mur*”: “And as always, it is at the foot of the wall that the bricklayer is to be found and the hands of workers that come once again to the aid of this paralyzed and depressed world, this world which must absolutely change and which will change” (quoted in Ungar 110). While *être au pied du mur* literally means “to be at the foot of the wall,” someone who is *au pied du mur* is, like the slum-dwellers of Aubervilliers, is *up against the wall, cornered, hemmed in* on all sides.

In face of this conclusion I contend that we are once again aligned with Bachelard’s sense that when a poetics of space is effectively at hand, there can be a sort of “communion through brief, isolated, rapid actions” (xvii) aligned with Burke who so inspired Kant when he said that the empathy precipitated by the sublime “put[s us] into the place of another man, affect[ing us] in many respects as he is affected” (91). Zones wherever they may be, just like *la Zone* around Paris once was, are interworlds, no-man’s-lands. Aubervilliers, on the other hand, is a place. Not exactly a no-man’s-land, it was a Nowheresville, a horrid, squalid space just this side of the dystopic. I think of the juxtaposition of no-man’s-land and Nowheresville as one of the very few distinctions that can be made between the namelessness of a space like the zone and a zoned-out named space like Aubervilliers. But just like the work carried out by the *zonières*, the labor performed by the indigent Albertivillariens in 1947 should be studied more closely now that we are fully in an era named “Anthropocene” by the very species that has carved that story into the flesh of the earth. Walter Benjamin showed that Baudelaire was first to draw our attention to the elusiveness of that labor’s characteristics. The imagination of the viewer, of the reader, of the spectator gets fired up in inverse proportion to the degree of narrative attempting to supplement, but in fact diminishing the power of the representation. The medium of poetry, on the other hand, respects and stimulates the imagination.

For the sake of attenuating, if that is at all possible any more, the Holocene extinction, space otherwise – space which is altogether otherwise only to [^]hopelessly egocentric – must cease to be considered space elsewhere. Spaces otherwise are *never* uninhabited and their denizens are *far from* idle. We must with redoubled purpose open our eyes upon, sharpen our attention to, and consider the possibility of emulating their labor, sharing in their pain

not by insisting that their space become *this*-wise and exploiting others for labor *here*, but by ceasing to consider their business, their *busy-ness* inferior to and *other than* ours.

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