

We are all friends now:

Hybrid practices and Georg Simmel's modes of interaction

"Life flows forth out of the door from the limitation of isolated separate existence into the limitlessness of all possible directions".
Georg Simmel, 'Bridge and Door'

One's experience of the contemporary milieu is, in part, made up of a series of thresholds, junctions and intersections through which we travel; these points of passage and the relational connections they create constitute the multiplicity of the everyday. In routine terms, architectural and geographical boundaries are breached on a regular basis as we pass from the inside to the outside. Via these tropes, distinct points, places and disparate entities are bridged.

In academic and cultural environments, the crossing of thresholds between disciplines has traditionally been a somewhat different affair. Typically the ability for one to work across disciplines has been stymied by the notion of 'specialism' and the distinction of intent between, for example, the arts and the social sciences. French sociologist, Bruno Latour in his book, *We Have Never Been Modern*, suggests that there are two opposing tendencies within modernity with regard to the separation of disciplines.¹ Firstly, there is the process of 'purification', whereby a partition, as Latour calls it, is created between distinct entities; the second process – 'translation' – is the mixture of these entities and the creation of hybrid forms.² Typically within translation there is a movement back and forth between disciplines: "To shuttle back and forth, we rely on the notion of translation, or network".³ The fashion for fusion between disciplines has increasingly become more prevalent out of this spirit of translation: separate worlds are now interposed by conduits between various practices and interests. This situation of interconnectedness is seen by some to offer a way out of an over-coded stranglehold that can often stultify intellectual endeavour – it is quite literally a process of interference that offers some measure of thought from the outside. Such hybridity of interests is illustrative of the current state of what we term inter-, cross- or transdisciplinary practice.⁴

A variety of the terms mentioned previously – threshold, bridge, door, conduit – highlight the aim of the current text: to consider the movement of thought between intellectual boundaries. As such then, the remit is to posit the wider intentions of hybrid practices, in both academic and cultural spheres. The standpoint taken here is that the operation of these practices refers directly to a movement between, across and beyond disciplines, whereby an intellectual transferral takes place, but more specifically in terms of how movement is facilitated through the construction of abstract conduits, bridges, doors and facilitators. Clearly these movements are conceptual, but still, this is an inherently spatial praxis. I shall be utilising the work of German sociologist Georg Simmel to help carry us across these various thresholds. Firstly, Simmel's essay 'The Stranger' (from 1908) employs the 'character' of the stranger, in order to investigate the processes of social interaction in and outside of social groupings.⁵ I use this figure as a means to consider the boundaries between disciplines and the ability to enter other disciplinary groups. Secondly, another Simmel text – 'Bridge and Door' – analyses the conceptual

differences of intention and action between these two devices; I concur with Simmel's assertion that "the door speaks"⁶ and argue that the door is an apt 'mechanism' for understanding hybrid practices in their operationally discursive, and open formations. The overarching question then: how can spaces of difference be conjoined and communicate with one another?

The stranger: immanence of the outside

In considering the notions of disciplinary boundaries, 'The Stranger' can offer us some insight into the operation of a 'group' and those purportedly external to it. The general impression of the figure of the stranger is one of mystery, an individual who emerges unannounced from nowhere, enters a community, but remains separate. Whilst this stranger could be seen as alien in the sense that he or she has no established bond with members of the community, Simmel challenges the assumption that the stranger is necessarily separate, by pointing out:

"The stranger is close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of a national, social, occupational, or generally human, nature. He is far from us, insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people".⁷

So even though this individual may be seen as a stranger there are intrinsic *a priori* bonds. My main assertion in raising the engagement between the stranger and a social group is that intellectual, disciplinary groupings share a similar dynamic in allowing access to those external to the group; for whilst a discipline such as biochemistry may seem alien to printmaking there are 'common features' that bridge these two, be they institutional, intellectual, or economic. One could argue that they are always immanent in one another. John Allen in his own account of Simmel's work has noted how "the stranger, therefore, is someone who is involved, yet not involved; close to us, yet part of elsewhere".⁸ This duality of nearness and remoteness, of presence and absence, is understood by Simmel in terms of specificity and generality – again, this is a productive means of conceiving the relationship between academic or cultural disciplines. For Simmel, one has these "general qualities in common"⁹ with the stranger, whereas with members of the same group the notion of connection is established through "the commonness of specific differences from more general features".¹⁰ This can quite easily be understood as akin to the very idea of specialism in academia; one establishes one's specific specialised interests in relation to these general features. And so, does this suggest that in disciplinary terms one always requires the generalised figure of the stranger or non-specialist? This indeed could be read as one of the determining characteristics of hybrid practices – the necessary presence of the stranger in order to facilitate commonality within the discipline itself.

The acceptance of another discipline in this scenario is figured on necessity. Once again Simmel's 'tale' of this character gives us an analogical insight into the operation of

We are all friends now continued

disciplinary hybridity. Simmel furthers his investigation by identifying the stranger with the 'trader'.¹¹ His argument is that within spatially close-knit economic groups there was no need for the middleman, as foodstuffs and goods were produced within the group. It was only when more complex or non-indigenous items were required from outside the group that the trader or middleman (and hence stranger) became necessary. Once again this tallies with the notion of looking outside the discipline for some form of 'replenishment'. The stranger is allowed entry into the group in order to enable growth and add something extra. Other disciplines are called upon to invigorate the present discipline. Externality is introduced and the interests of the group transformed and enriched by allowing the stranger to enter. One sees here that the barrier that marks the boundary of disciplines is temporarily lowered. For Allen,

"Boundaries – social as well as physical – which once marked the limits of social relations are now more akin to thresholds across which communication and other forms of distanced interaction may take place".¹²

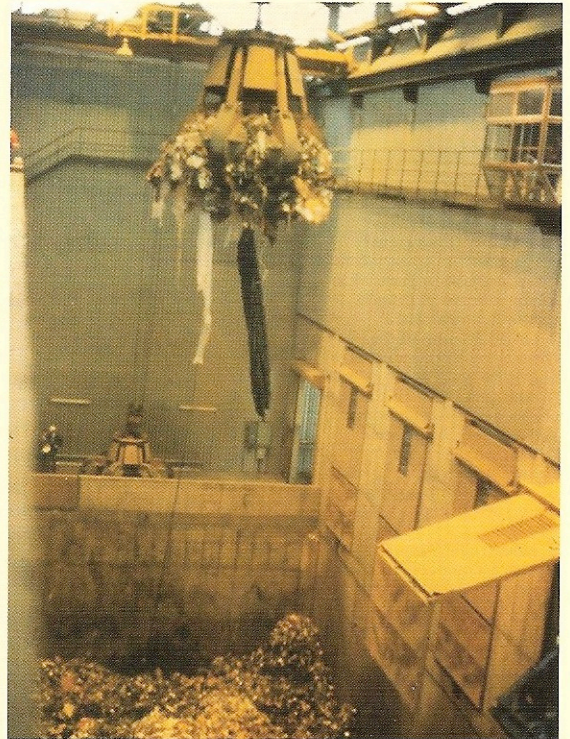
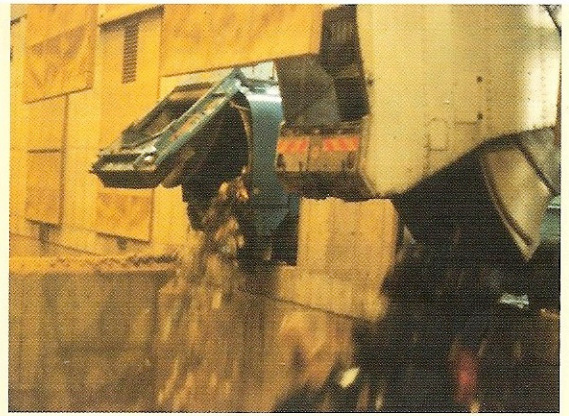
Similarly, Reichert, in relation to disciplinary margins, calls the boundary a "thin, unstable line".¹³ And this instability suggests that the boundary between disciplines is now becoming less permanent, more temporary.

Propped open

As a means to traverse this line between disciplines one can envisage an intellectual 'bridge' of some form: once again, Simmel has investigated the potency of the bridge and door as abstract constructs in connecting phenomena.

In Simmel's worldview everything has the potential to be connected – to "make *one* cosmos"¹⁴ as he puts it. Objects, however, remain separated in space (ie two objects cannot occupy the same space), but not in thought. Precisely because disciplinary boundaries are intellectual constructions the establishment of connections are nominal entities; they are in name only and remain noetic. However, Simmel believes that, "no matter how often they might have gone back and forth between the two [places] and thus connected them subjectively, so to speak, it was only in visibly impressing the path into the surface of the earth that the places were objectively connected".¹⁵ So, if we hold to this, the bridge as an architectural paradigm is visually embodied connection and as such, has to be constructed. Similarly in agreeing with Simmel's thesis – for hybrid practices the intellectual connection that occurs – has to be visually established because otherwise the disciplines remain only subjectively connected.

One could argue that the visible connections here are established and objectified through the construction of an 'object', be that an art object, book, conference paper, exhibition, etc. This 'object' could be understood as a bridge that determines and maps the relationship between disciplines. However, as we move forward through Simmel's essay he goes on to elaborate on the 'frozen' qualities of the bridge as compared to that of the door. The 'object' of hybridity is not 'frozen' precisely because it can move between disciplines, so rather than a fixed structure the 'object' in question here could be more akin to the floating bridge, or pontoon; for it is not static in the sense of the foundational structure of the bridge, but rather moves constantly between disciplines representing hybridity in action.



Images:

Thanks to University College for the Creative Arts for all images.



The door in Simmel's description is closer to the intent of hybrid practices than the bridge. For although the bridge depicts unity between two points, that unity is singular, petrified. The bridge arranges spatiality "into a particular unity in accordance with a *single* meaning".¹⁶ The bridge connects two points – thus dictating a 'direction' – a movement from A to B and back again. This "prescribes unconditional security and direction".¹⁷ Although this is advantageous for Latour's conception of 'purification' it is not emblematic of the multiplicity of interests that embody the desire for 'translation' and hybridity. Crucially for Simmel, and my assertion here, the door, by contrast, when opened, opens out into a multiplicity of directions; there is not a prescribed path, as such, between A and B, in the same way that there is not a determined outcome in hybrid practices. These practices are established on the basis of their potential to produce a variety of offshoots. As such the door is potent. Like the pontoon, the door is obviously a boundary of sorts but one that can be propped open or closed when so wished: "it is absolutely essential for humanity that it set itself a boundary, but with freedom, that is, in such a way that it can also remove this boundary again, that it can be placed outside it".¹⁸ It adheres to the flexibility of entry and exit that typifies hybrid practices. The door exemplifies the spirit of generosity that is inherently at the heart of disciplinary interaction – it mirrors the complexity of hybridity.

Transformations

There are clear parallels in the work of hybrid practices to that of metaphor: for Francis Wheen, "the function of metaphor is to make us look at something anew by transferring its qualities to something else, turning the familiar into the alien or vice versa".¹⁹ This desire to look afresh and allow the experiences of the 'other' to enliven our intellectual disciplines is for me an ethical issue and is at the heart of what these hybrid practices can achieve, and the willingness to let the 'stranger' in is to accept the transformative process, to seek change from the outside 'in all you do'.²⁰ The politico-ethical dimension of hybridity and the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries are all too starkly illustrated when one considers that other boundary – the geopolitical border. For if the leakage across boundaries in the intellectual arena is emblematic of the wish for a fluidity of thought, to let in the stranger through the open door, then the function of the boundary in geopolitical terms – that is, the concrete, political realm – is far from dissolved. On the contrary the boundary as physical barrier operates as a supposed safeguard against 'intrusion' from the outside. We can see this in numerous arenas.

It may be desirable to allow intellectual transferral, but the physical movement of people is now one of the most highly controlled spheres of operation. So whilst the rhetoric of globalisation suggests that mobility across geographical borders is becoming ever increased, the reality for many is that the boundary in physical terms is growing rapidly in scale and authority. The door should be left ajar.

Notes:

- 1 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993)
- 2 *Ibid*, pp.10-11
- 3 *Ibid*, p.3. A much earlier precedent for the partitioning of disciplines is Kant's *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) where he describes the difference between the 'lower' and 'higher' faculties.
- 4 In this text I combine the three categories of disciplinary and subsume them under 'hybrid practices'. Clearly there are subtle differences in terms of movement and ethics but I focus instead on the general concept of *connection* following Latour.
- 5 Georg Simmel, 'The Stranger', at <http://www2.pfeiffer.edu/~Iridener/DSS/Simmel/STRANGER.HTML> English translation published in Kurt Wolff (Trans.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 402 - 408
- 6 Georg Simmel, 'Bridge and Door', in David Frisby & Mike Featherstone (Eds.), *Simmel on Culture*, (London: SAGE, 1997), p.172
- 7 Simmel, 'The Stranger', op cit.
- 8 John Allen, 'On Georg Simmel: Proximity, Distance and Movement', in Mike Crang & Nigel Thrift (Eds.), *Thinking Space*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.57
- 9 Simmel, 'The Stranger', op cit.
- 10 *Ibid*
- 11 *Ibid*
- 12 Allen, op cit., p.58
- 13 Dagmar Reichert, 'On Boundaries', in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 1992, Vol.10, p.88
- 14 Simmel, 'Bridge and Door', op cit., p.170
- 15 *Ibid*, p.171
- 16 *Ibid*, p.172. Emphasis in original.
- 17 *Ibid*, p.173
- 18 *Ibid*, p.172
- 19 Francis Wheen, 'The Poet of Dialectics', in *The Guardian*, 8 July 2006, p. 6
- 20 See Cameron Tonkinwise, 'Ethics by Design or the Ethos of Things', in Anne-Marie Willis (Ed), *Design Philosophy Papers: Collection Two*, (Crows Nest: Team D/E/S), p. 49