

***Lively Temporalities: A Postgraduate Workshop***  
on *Interdependence Day*  
Royal Geographical Society, London  
11.00am, Saturday, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006

The Open University



### **Closing Comments: Nigel Thrift**

I said to Matthew that I'd have to make this up on the spot, and I mean it. I thought I'd pull out a series of themes that I think are interesting about this area at the moment.

I thought I'd start with one that I think is a cultural given, which is very interesting in its own right because I think it's being played on right now. That's the idea of the so-called *decisive moment*: the point at which everything shifts and changes, which is a favourite meditation for Renaissance artists. If you look at a lot of Renaissance art, it's about trying to depict exactly the moment when things become clear and things change. Of course it's become an iconic part of modern photography. If you look at Cartier-Bresson and people like that, there is this whole idea of the decisive moment that you can get at, somehow or the other. This then moves its way into the media in various ways. You only have to think of all those famous photographs that are meant to encapsulate a time, that are almost meant to set it off. And it seems to me that this is, in a sense, what capitalism is selling. Actually in a way, it is precisely those kinds of moments which are decisive on however modest a scale which capitalism most wants to model and produce. It's not goods anymore that capitalism is now selling. It's actually these moments. So that's one kind of time that seems to me to become more and more important. It comes back to some of things you are talking about, and some of the ways you can articulate those moments – melodrama and so on – but there are plenty of other models for doing that as well. So that was one thing that I thought was interesting.

Yet at the same time, and this comes back to another thing, of course there are all these *practices* going on, which never question anything at all. They're not there to do that. They're there to reproduce everyday life in one way or another. They are interesting as well, because on the whole they do change pretty slowly, and they do take a long time to bed in, and they don't move decisively in any way, shape, or form. All the work that Paul Glennie and I have been doing over the last ten or twelve years has been trying to show the way that this actually happens, which has proved excruciatingly difficult, precisely because the field was dominated by E.P. Thompson's work. That was based on a kind of quasi-Marxist model, which believed there was a decisive moment called the Industrial Revolution. We have had to spend a lot of time showing that this might have been a decisive moment, but not in terms of time. So that's been interesting.

Going on from that and setting this off to one side, there is also another kind of time, which has been kind of uncomfortable to work with here in this discussion. This is

one around, if you like, natural events and how they happen. One of the interesting things here, I think, is the way in which a vocabulary of time is gradually getting a sort of grip. I think it's not working so much through climate change and things like that, but I think it's working through from biology, with notions of emergence and mutation in biology. These kinds of things are part of that, and you can go back in time and find a convenient philosopher like Whitehead or someone like that who wants to talk about this. You can almost show the way that this idea of time makes its way through Conrad Waddington gradually into modern genetics and genomics. But you can see it in other kinds of ways as well. There's a whole idea of a moving complex which doesn't really have an outside, and rolls itself over, gradually mutating, gradually producing new things, for which it is very difficult to put a time scale by its side, because it works on hybrids which all have their different kinds of time scales.

Then I think there three more modest points that might be worth making. One of them of course is the classic critique that Bergson made, that somehow time is being spatialised and that this is a bad thing. It may be a bad thing, but I think this is actually what is happening. If you read modern architecture, one of the interesting things is that they say, we will actually spatialise time. In many ways, the object of modern architecture is to produce buildings in which time is actually captured within, and the buildings themselves are processes. That's an interesting modern way of proceeding. It's started, I suppose, around 1910, but has then moved through, interestingly, into being able to actually do it, which is a different matter altogether. It's easy to write about it, but very difficult often to do these things.

This takes us to another point about interdependence, I think. There we are starting to produce a vocabulary that might enable us to talk about the way in which a modern world is interdependent in all sorts of ways. Part of that interdependence, only part of it, is the media. I'm thinking here in particular of the way in which people are starting to talk about – not long distance sympathy, which of course has been a meditation for the last ten or fifteen years: that one could actually amplify sympathy at a distance – but also as interestingly, long-distance hate. This is something that Appadurai and others have been talking about recently, that probably one of the great inventions of the modern world is the ability to hate at a distance in really quite strong ways. We really shouldn't forget this. Again, what is interesting is why people have become interested in crowds, imitation and these kinds of things, because they've tried to express the kinds of ways that ideas and practices can sometimes move very rapidly. We have no spatial-temporal vocabulary for actually talking about this, and this is one of the big reasons people are now revisiting nineteenth century diffusionist ideas, because at least they had some rough vocabulary for doing so. It was all judged to be rubbish subsequently, and everyone thought it was hopeless and caught up with the colonial past, etc, but actually it turns out I think to be very interesting.

The last thing – it seems to me very important and relates to Interdependence Day here – is of course, one of the only ways you can realize these things is throughout your practical work. So art and performance and architecture are, in all sorts of ways, the modern laboratories of social science thinking. It seems to me that they are the ways that, more and more, people are trying to do certain kinds of social science because, if you have to build something, you often do learn something that you often

don't if you are just writing about it. There are important things around that in all sorts of ways, some of them a little scary. I was at a conference yesterday on the auto industry – for reasons we don't need to go into – and the woman who was in charge of Unipart was talking about the way in which they have produced a completely different time signature for the company based on everyone, not learning but teaching, so the only way she said that you could actually really learn properly about things – and in particular about their corporate culture – was to teach it. So they had made virtually every worker in the company into a teacher. Now that has interesting consequences in all sorts of ways that need thinking about. But they are particularly interesting in terms of time and about the way you can rapidly embed practice, which is what people are increasingly trying to do. So practices were thought to be slow, glacial (I'm sorry), but what if you can rev them up? I think that is what a lot of modern industry is trying to do: rev up those kinds of things and embed them. Before we say you can't do this, oh yes you can: Unipart actually now has been able to get to the point where it's so sure that it's workers will innovate in the domains it is interested in that it actually puts it on the bottom line as a predictable income. When you get to that point in time, it's really rather interesting, the kinds of things you can do. That's about re-engineering time in various ways. Anyway, I'll stop there.