‘Allontanarsi dalla linea gialla’: distance and access to urban semiosis

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Abstract
This is an enquiry into the relationship between familiarity and distance in semiotic and related studies. In parallel, it explores our relationship to cities: the familiar as the ground of our daily lives are invisible, while the unfamiliar become vivid in proportion to our ignorance of them. Learning and research may at first appear to involve a process of gaining greater proximity to the subject matter. There are indications from the semiotic and phenomenological traditions that suggest, however, that greater distance is required, in order to question taken-for-granted semiotic bonds and to step outside in order to examine quotidian life experience. The article explores these issues through the experience of a joint project, between a photographer and a sociologist, which documented and analysed a specific urban area in Melbourne, Australia. The results of the project were presented at two gatherings, one in Melbourne and the other in Torino. The different relationships of the two protagonists to the subject matter, and the different degrees of proximity of the two audiences provide the opportunity to reflect on distance as a methodological element in the human sciences. The study draws on phenomenological and semiotic principles to consider whether distance may provide a necessary critical fulcrum, or may trigger insights across the gap of ςποχη that are unavailable in the ‘natural attitude’. The methodological and pedagogical points are drawn out of a discussion of the photographs themselves.

Keywords
urban semiotics, phenomenology, photography, Aboriginal land, psychogeography

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‘Allontanarsi dalla linea gialla’:
Distance and access to urban semiosis

Richard Mohr
Photographs: John Storey


**Abstract**
This is an enquiry into the relationship between familiarity and distance in semiotic and related studies. In parallel, it explores our relationship to cities: the familiar as the ground of our daily lives are invisible, while the unfamiliar become vivid in proportion to our ignorance of them. Learning and research may at first appear to involve a process of gaining greater proximity to the subject matter. There are indications from the semiotic and phenomenological traditions that suggest, however, that greater distance is required, in order to question taken-for-granted semiotic bonds and to step outside in order to examine quotidian life experience. The article explores these issues through the experience of a joint project, between a photographer and a sociologist, which documented and analysed a specific urban area in Melbourne, Australia. The results of the project were presented at two gatherings, one in Melbourne and the other in Torino. The different relationships of the two protagonists to the subject matter, and the different degrees of proximity of the two audiences provide the opportunity to reflect on distance as a methodological element in the human sciences. The study draws on phenomenological and semiotic principles to consider whether distance may provide a necessary critical fulcrum, or may trigger insights across the gap of that are unavailable in the ‘natural attitude’. The methodological and pedagogical points are drawn out of a discussion of the photographs themselves.

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urban semiotics
phenomenology
photography
Aboriginal land
psychogeography
**Allontanarsi dalla linea gialla**

Preparing an outline for a presentation of a series of photographs of Melbourne to a group of students in Torino, I intended to use a picture of three parallel lines: a railway track, the white edge of a railway platform, and a yellow line some 50 centimetres back from the edge. ‘Your first stop is behind the yellow line’, say the posters on railway stations in Melbourne. The presentation was about markings on the city, and the photo illustrated the marks of railway tracks, representing both transport and menace, an edge or point of danger, and an advisory line, beyond which one should not step. I wondered, from Australia, how the yellow line would be understood in Italy. Would the semiotics of the advisory or regulatory line be recognised in another culture? I sent the outline, with the photograph.

![Image of parallel rail lines](Photo L1000176 parallel rail lines A)

Arriving at Fiumicino airport, I made my way to the railway platform to take the train in to Rome. The first words I heard were, ‘Allontanarsi dalla linea gialla’, and looking down, I saw the yellow line.

This very first question about the semiotic context of photographs from the other side of the world led me to many others, which I would like to discuss in this article. It is
an inquiry into the concept and uses of distance. I am not referring to the number of kilometres between Torino and Melbourne, though that is a factor. The photographer’s gaze and framing of the photograph creates the first distance from that which it represents. The photograph goes through a process of production and selection, and then display, whether on paper or on a screen, to one person or many. The people who look at the photograph bring their own attention, intention, visual wisdom and interpretive framework. They have a different gaze from the photographer’s; they are looking at something different. They are in a different place. In approaching a class at the University of Torino, I felt sure that this distance could help students of urban semiotics learn to see the city in a new way. Yet this conviction was so deep-seated and unexamined that it required further exploration.

We normally think of learning as a process of increasing familiarity. One begins at a distance, and works to achieve proximity to the subject matter. In this case, I wanted to help the students carry the distance that they would experience in seeing Melbourne over to their view of Torino, their own neighbourhood, or the familiar precinct outside the lecture room. Our paths through a familiar city are routine, their routes well worn. A new vision is required if we are to achieve any insights. In phenomenological terms, such insights involve gaining information about consciousness (rather than the natural world), while semiotic insights involve the explorations achieved by detaching signs from their usual signifiers. I was trying to shock the students out of their everyday vision of their own city, and to help them think about how (or whether) one can see a city, even a familiar city, through a stranger’s eyes. The following discussion asks why and how unfamiliarity with the subject matter of images may promote understanding of a topic.

The set of photographs – their production, selection and display – was initiated by a photographer’s proposal of a joint project examining two postal district areas (postcodes 3068 and 3070) in a residential area of Melbourne, a large Australian city. The photographer, John Storey, arrived at this theme because he lived in one of the postcode areas, and had a postal delivery box in the other, adjoining one. These postal districts are used as the basis of various sets of demographic data by government and private businesses, so Storey often had to decide which one to use whenever asked for market research or similar purposes. What was the difference between saying ‘3068’ or ‘3070’? The different character of the areas; the people who live in them? What is a postal district anyway? How do we know which one we are in or when we have crossed into another one? Does it matter?
The photographer sent me more than one hundred photographs that were informed by his vision of a familiar environment. Apart from some early discussions between us about the project, the implications of postcodes, how their boundaries are marked and what they mean, the photographs largely spoke for themselves. We made a selection from among the photographs I had been sent for the first public display at a conference in Melbourne in December 2007. I had done some research and writing inspired by the photographs, and offered some thoughts about their themes as they related to those of a law and society conference on ‘borders’, in a very condensed version, preferring to let the pictures speak for themselves. Each version of my responses to these photographs has become more wordy. Now, for a print-based journal, the words overrun the pictures that impelled them.

**Familiarity and the point of access**

The person displaying the photographs uses distance for different purposes. The first time we displayed these pictures at the Melbourne conference, a number of people in the audience, like the photographer, were living or had lived in the area photographed. I have never lived in Melbourne: they ‘knew it’ better than I did. The second time the photos were displayed to the class at the University of Torino in April 2009, Melbourne was a barely grasped distant concept: I was closer and they were further.

The familiarity of the subject matter to some members of the Melbourne audience elicited some interesting and surprising responses. Being socio-legal scholars and lawyers, they were also more familiar with words than with pictures, and the photographer later remarked that they had very limited responses to the visual stimuli. They were confronted with the unfamiliar experience of the display of numerous beautiful pictures in the word-filled environment of their conference. Unable, perhaps, to relate to the visual *per se*, they talked of their personal connections with the subject matter. It was clear that the images had triggered memories, of places and the experiences associated with them. Their comments included reminiscences of shops, now closed, and reflections on the times in their lives that they had lived in the area. The familiarity of the places depicted provided a bridge to an earlier time, eliciting reflections on their life history, letting them enter into a dialogue with earlier selves.
The second public display of much the same selection of photos, slightly reorganised, elicited very different responses. None of the exclusively Italian audience had been to Australia, much less Melbourne, and so they had few cultural referents or associations to apply to the images. My discussion on that occasion was more extensive, and included more reflection on the process of interpretation and the implications of distance from the objects in a semiotic process. The first comments from the students, however, again addressed the familiar. I had drawn attention, as I have here, to the common semiotic marker of the yellow line, and I also referred to the substratum, the land that was, ultimately, the medium on which all these marks were drawn. The most basic and enduring underlying feature was the creek that, for a kilometre or two, divides the two postal areas (discussed below). The primordial creek, the universal tendency of water to run downhill, following the law of gravity, became a link to the familiar that could be grasped by students on the other side of the world, who recalled times when rivers they knew had defied human structures to revert to an earlier course.

Clearly, then, the familiar offers a guide to understanding. Indeed, in the example of the law of gravity we see an illustration of exactly that nomothetic form of understanding sought by the sciences through laws of nature. The search for universal laws characterises only one model of science. Since Dilthey, and before him Vico (Vico 2004 (1730), 231-2), we have known the distinction between the
sciences of nature and of humanity, with their different subject matters and, it has been argued, different methods. Familiarity can still form the basis for understanding in the human sciences: Dilthey’s own notion of *Verstehen* requires the investigator to enter the era, the *Geist*, of the subject matter (Dilthey 1996, 235-6). If the Torino students were able to understand a strange city through the familiar laws of nature, the Melbourne audience understood the strange visual medium through familiarity with the places that they had experienced.

**Mind the gap**

It appears, then, that the first response to the strange is to relate it to the familiar. While this may be frustrating to the guide wishing to bring the audience to fresh insights and a new language, of signs or pictures, it suggests a strategy. How can we utilise the value of novelty, the illuminating power of distance, of incomprehension? There are important arguments that explain the value of distance to the pedagogical and investigative project. One of these was addressed to Dilthey in his own time.

Husserl developed his phenomenology at least in part as a response to concerns that Dilthey’s *Geisteswissenschaften* ended in relativism, a concern also held by advocates of a more conventional positivism (Buck-Morss 1977, 245; Hesse 1980). In the hands of Husserl’s many followers, however, phenomenology turned out to be a major challenge to positivism. Husserl, like Descartes before him, began by trying to find a critical fulcrum which would give access to a degree of philosophical certainty. The positivist project requires this fulcrum to be a fixed point, a ground zero from which distance may be measured. Husserl went back to the very notion of distance itself to find a moving point within consciousness: the suspends any judgment of spatio-temporal existence (*Dasein*) (Husserl 1931, §32). By distancing ourselves from the ‘natural standpoint’ of our normal associations and knowledge of the world we can gain access to a ‘unique form of consciousness, which clamps on to the original simple thesis … and transvalues it in a quite peculiar way.’ (Husserl 1931, §31) Husserl’s *Aufhebung* is a gap which gives access to consciousness.

Benjamin and the surrealists explored this gap further, to give access to the unconscious, and they applied it explicitly to the city. This gap could be artificially stimulated, as a sort of exercise in applied *Aufhebung*, were one to become disoriented or lost in the city. Benjamin distinguishes this from the common experience of searching for an unknown destination.
Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance—nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, sign-boards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center. (Benjamin 1986, 8-9)

Becoming detached from the usual associations of place and purpose, losing oneself through a dérive, (Debord 1958) is another means of gaining access to a special form of consciousness, which in this case may involve the unconscious.

Figure 3 (Photo L1000685 on coming train 130)

A wide gulf separates Husserl’s Cartesian revisionism and the surrealist explorations of Benjamin or the situationists. By positioning this inquiry in such a wide open space, I risk losing any grip, while the ground opens beneath me as in a cartoon. Semiotics offers a guiding thread, while the photographs themselves are a means of reading the city in ways that can test the value of distance for learning.

In the natural attitude, to use Husserl’s expression, we understand our world as the theatre of our lives and our projects. Our everyday vision is a product of our intentional approach to a practical world. While the phenomenologist emphasises intentions as a guide (one might say, a limit) to consciousness, the semiotician will note the familiar interpretive context, within which signs will determine the link
between the signifier and the signified. The natural attitude and the familiar semiotic bond are the enemies of the reflective phenomenologist or semiotician. As long as consciousness or reading is determined by everyday projects and familiar interpretants, there is no room to examine consciousness itself (the phenomenologist’s aim) or the transfer of signs between signifiers (the semiotician’s). This is the reason for the phenomenological Aufhebung, as a means of bracketting the everyday meanings of things, to open up alternative readings or to focus on consciousness itself.

**Origins**

Apart from the technique or process of gaining distance through the photograph, John Storey's original conception contained another valuable element for analysis. The project’s focus on the post code areas raised the question of the boundaries between the areas: were they visible? how were they to be read? While many of the boundaries were invisible and apparently arbitrary, for instance running down property lines between two streets, one of them stood out. Merri Creek forms the boundary between 3068 and 3070 for some distance. The creek has carved out a deep gully, and runs between banks of natural vegetation and weeds. The creek has been here, supplying fresh water, since long before the arrival or Europeans some two hundred years ago. This substratum, underlying and contrasting with the artifice of purely administratively defined boundaries,¹ takes us back to the origins of the city, to its earliest occupation, as a dwelling place of the Wurundjeri people.

¹ The artificiality of administrative boundaries in dividing post-Revolutionary France into ‘eighty-three pieces, regularly square, of eighteen leagues by eighteen’ was denigrated by Edmund Burke, who saw this as no great achievement, nor any great offence: it is just the work of the land surveyor (‘with his chain, sight, and theodolite’). (Burke 1961 (1790), 189) Burke contrasted these boundaries with underlying landmarks, and deplored the substitution of administrative governmentality, that sweeps aside all history and habit in order to rule the nation on rational principles: ‘Is every land-mark of the country to be done away in favour of a geometrical and arithmetical constitution?’ (p 67)
The search for origins is a deep-seated methodological trope of the human sciences which may be interrogated, along with phenomenology or semiotics, for any light it may cast on the heuristic value of distance. Agamben has drawn attention to the role of the arché or ‘punto di insorgenza’ in the ‘pilot disciplines’ in the formative stages of the human sciences, philology and comparative linguistics. (Agamben 2008, 109) We find in Serres a defence of this approach contra structuralism.

‘Si vous lisez les schémas de l’analyse structurale, ne manquez pas de voir que son jeu est rendu possible par la possibilité de placer un élément au lieu d’un autre élément et vice versa. Le language lui-même dit que cet échange est victimaire. Ne lisez donc pas seulement ces traces inversables, écoutez le bruit, les appels et les cris de ceux qui passent en la place. Retournez-vous, faites conversation.’ (Serres 1983, 46)

Serres’ exhortation to ‘go back and have a conversation’ has particular resonance, and finds particular difficulties, in the Australian context. Serres wrote that passage in the context of a discussion of the origins of Rome, in a language derived from Latin. To seek origins in Australia is to challenge the very English language that is written there. It is to find a people whose traditions were so different from those of the English colonisers that they are not accessible to us through the techniques of analysing familiar linguistic, classical or folk traditions. And yet the land, in the spirit of archaeology, yields memories, and the people themselves continue to occupy familiar spaces even though the land and much of their culture has been taken from
them. Never ceded to the colonisers, the land and its underlying conversations are profoundly disturbing to European inquiry and consciousness.

In more remote parts of Australia than Melbourne, Indigenous people are still practising, analysing and teaching their relationship to the land. While colonisers write on the land, and use writing as a tool of dispossession, the Aboriginal inhabitants survive and nourish their culture by reading the land. (Benterrak, Muecke and Roe 1984) Geographical features are associated with origin stories of people, animals and events, and custodians of the land are linked to the land through these stories and places and their representation in paintings and other artefacts. (Anker 2005; Mohr 2002) The land itself is the repository of these important guides to life and culture.

Merri Creek, that post code boundary of such deep and lasting provenance, appears in some of the earliest English records the area. A record of births and deaths in the area refers to Aboriginal people who died there: On March 12, Aboggurbuddingrook of the Yarra tribe, a single female of 60, died by the creek: ‘Encampt Merri Creek’. (Thomas 1843) The people who write on land came here and wrote the deaths of the people who read the land. They claimed the land with their writing. Serres’ analysis draws attention to the foundational force of writing, which linked agriculture and law. People who ploughed the land mimicked the furrow in the lines of script. Nomos was the plough, nomos is the law. The European fratricidal myth of Romulus and Remus, killed for jumping over a furrow marking a boundary, was overlaid on those laid down in the dreaming of the Indigenous populations.

Writing is part of the violence of British colonisation of Australia, as expressed by one of Jach’s characters in the Australian novel Napoleon’s Double.

‘When you master language, when you are the masters of writing and recording you are able to possess whatever you see in front of you. The courts will recognise written documents and drawn charts, nothing less. Progress and science erase all primitive claims. If they do not name and chart and claim in the European way then they do not name and chart and claim at all. If they scratch their claim in the sand or sing their claims to the breeze and the wind carries away these claims then none of what they do will be recognised by any European court.’ (Jach 2007, 206)

The colonisers continue to write on the land, and their marks are the subject of Storey’s photographs. As can be seen, the awareness of origins, of a substratum,

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2 ‘Dreaming’ is a common translation of terms in various Australian Aboriginal languages for the body of myths, laws and learning.
can be profoundly disturbing to the coloniser’s consciousness, yet it allows us to read the familiar in totally unfamiliar ways. Whether we go back three thousand years in Europe or three hundred in Australia, we find origin stories and pre-histories that can be a shock to the familiar passage of time: a recent past, a present and a future. This suggests that temporal as well as spatial gaps may help to stimulate new, disturbing and original understanding.

Reading the city

Cities are filled with signs. Many are written in script, perhaps in a familiar language, while others use conventional signs: arrows, yellow lines, traffic notices. We read these signs as an aid to moving around the city or as a distraction from the familiar… waiting for a train, walking to work. They may be so familiar that we do not even see them. With its semiotic overload urban life buries insights, or perceptions of any originality, under piles of quotidian messages.

It is incumbent on the semiotician, as much as the phenomenologist, to suspend a certain naïve understanding. Since the semiotician reads signs to a different purpose than ‘the man in the street’, but since semioticians while functioning in everyday life are also the men and women in the street, it is necessary to shift gear to a different mode of understanding. To take a famous instance in semiotic analysis, Roland Barthes attained certain insights into the myth-making involved in depicting an African saluting the French flag while glancing at a magazine, waiting to have his hair cut. (Barthes 1993, 116) Waiting, the necessary act of doing nothing, gives him time to reflect. He is not reading Paris-Match in order to find the hairstyle that he would like, nor is he scanning a bill being presented to him to quickly seek out the bottom line so he knows how much change to take from his pocket. There is no purpose in his reading other than a semiotic or reflective purpose.

To pursue this example a little further, we can see that Barthes uses this example to explore the way in which signifiers can be transposed from one signified to another. In doing this they change their frame of reference. At a first reading, the picture is taken at face value: ‘a black soldier is giving the French salute’. The hairdressers’ bill would have to be taken in just such a way: five francs for the haircut. The mind must wander, however, if it is to take the next step: imagining the tricolore that the soldier salutes, associating the African with the French colonies, recalling the debates raging
over imperialism and militarism, and relating the image to this new semiotic system. Only then is myth *discovered*, in this shifting signification.

![Image of an arrow pointing to the left with the text "ENTRY VIA HIGH ST." on a yellow background.](image)

Figure 5 (photo L1000452Q1 red arrow 70)

As in this expression that ‘the mind must wander’, metaphors of travel and movement are common in discourses of language and reflection. Movement is a prerequisite for discovery, in philosophical as in geographical senses. Wittgenstein referred to the connection between language and spatial orientation.

‘Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about.’ (Wittgenstein 1968, §202)

To read signs in the ‘natural attitude’, to apply Husserl’s notion in a semiotic context, we draw on learned associations and unconsciously obey rules. This unthinking application of conventions is as necessary to everyday communication as it is fatal to new insights into semiotics or consciousness. In following the pathways of language, Wittgenstein noted, the rule ‘stands there like a sign-post.’ (Wittgenstein 1968, §202) Yet the sign itself is ambiguous without knowing other rules: the rules of following sign-posts. We could not know whether to follow an arrow towards its point, or the other way, unless we had learned to follow that rule. Storey’s photos of arrows, on walls, the ground, and signs, unsettle our taken for granted approach to following the rules about following arrows. In the photographs, arrows themselves can be ambiguous, or they are curved and inverted in a reflection in the roof of a car. The
everyday life of the woman walking against the direction of the arrow would mean little to her, not noticing the arrow that she passes every day. Yet to the viewer of the photograph, this daily routine can appear subversive, particularly in face of such a boldly expressed sign. While everyday life can indeed subvert semiotic regimes (Mohr 2006), this is often an unreflective process. The subversion goes unnoticed until the regime of the sign and the quotidian activity are juxtaposed.

Taylor, following Wittgenstein’s conventional theory of language, points out that we understand which way arrows point not just out of habit, but because we know something about arrows (and less about ray guns). We can give reasons for following rules, as we can for following arrows, but there is another form of understanding that we know in a corporeal and unexamined way. (Taylor 1993, 59) The woman walking against the direction of the arrow draws attention to exactly that substratum of communication to which Taylor refers. Despite her tiny presence in the photograph against a huge arrow (as Storey points out), she disturbs our reading of the photograph because we identify with the kinetic image of a woman walking even more strongly than we identify with the conventional sign of the arrow. In this way the photograph juxtaposes two interpretations, which Taylor would say are deeply linked, in a way that challenges the act of interpretation itself, and lays it open to doubt and reflection. Again, we see the connection between shock and discovery, this time in a way that offers further understanding of the spatial and bodily elements of interpretation.3 When in the natural attitude we walk familiar routes, past familiar signs, we do not question those signs or their interpretation. More than this, though, is the familiar bodily routine of the walk, the drive, or the ride which, as routine, conspires against insight. Seeing a photograph, like any other artwork, that challenges the expected routine, is a spur to reflection. It can encourage us to read a city ‘against the grain’, experiencing the clash between the formal aspects of a semiotic regime and the multiple actions that are played out against this ground.

In everyday life our attention is focussed on matters that distract us from the approach we would need in order to gain insights into meaning and consciousness. In Husserl’s terms, the our focus of intention in the natural attitude is upon the

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3 Simmel drew attention to the emphasis, in urban or ‘metropolitan’ life, on the intellect: understanding with the head at the expense of the heart. The ‘enhancement of metropolitan intellectualty’, together with the money economy, led to the predominance of the ‘blasé attitude’. (Simmel 1950, 410-14) While Simmel saw this as the origin of such everyday characteristics as reserve and calculation, we may also compare it to Husserl’s ‘natural attitude’, which is to be overcome if we are to gain new insights into the urban environment.
outcome of a project. In Storey’s photographs the city is, above all, the site of projects. We see infrastructure projects, old and new: railway lines, roads, freeways. Building projects are seen in various stages, from the empty shop to the construction site, the new set of apartments, and the sales advertisement for real estate. These are projects at the macro level: ones that take years to organise and build, and that last for years to come.

The residents of the city are also glimpsed going about their own projects: driving cars, riding bicycles, pushing prams and carrying shopping bags. They use the railways, the roads and the houses to travel and to live. The real estate advertisements appeal to longer term personal projects and aspirations, touting proximity to ‘nightlife’, ‘café culture’, or Merri Creek, now transformed into an attractive location for home-buyers. We see Coca Cola advertisements that stimulate thirst, desire made manifest. One must step outside this world of projects, aspirations and desires in order to become reflective. The reflective regard of the photographs stimulates insights in a way denied us when we are pursuing our own projects in a familiar city.

Images of a familiar city, as we noticed when displaying the photographs to a Melbourne audience, stimulate associations with projects, including remembered projects, remembered lifestyles, to use the favourite word of the real estate advertisements. They appear to stimulate some reflection on one’s own life, which
may promote self awareness. Greater distance allows us to see other people going about their business, business that we can only guess at, speculate or reflect on.

**Your first stop is behind the yellow line**

The foregoing has proposed that unfamiliarity is a stimulus to reflection and discovery. Starting from the apparent contradiction inherent in that hypothesis I have tried to indicate, by reference to images of a city, some of the reasons this may not be as strange as it seems. The city is a repository of signs and projects to rival a Borgesian library. While we focus on our own projects, the potential meanings of the signs lie dormant: their signifieds and signifiers can be short circuited in the natural attitude of urban life. Yet the city embodies the ever-present possibility that a sign will be misread, its meaning usurped or subverted. It is the prerogative of photography and the artist to catch the city and its inhabitants side-on, in those moments of misreading. It is the role of the social scientist and semiotician to explore those alternative readings, and to help our students and others to find their own ways to catch the text or the city off guard. Cities are such fertile interpretive ground precisely because they have more unguarded moments than many other texts.

In Storey’s photographs we see those moments, and beneath them a reflection on the ground that all this is written on, behind or beneath human intervention. Merri Creek is an underlying fact of nature, a watercourse that predated and survived European settlement and the building projects that have rendered so much of the land unrecognisable. Despite all the cultural overlay, all the building and activity, every so often our attention is directed back to the ground, the substratum, on which all this rests.
The ground is not only beneath our feet, but above our heads. Looking up, we can find that even the sky has become a tabula rasa on which our civilization impresses its impact. The signs are there again: cryptic, meaningful perhaps only to operators of the electricity network. We are struck here by the media: aluminium pole, light, metal housing, glass: all on the stark blue infinity. A spider has also made its mark, doing its own drawings on the sky, taking advantage of the manic projects of modern civilization.

The ground as origin can lead back to the ‘philosophical archaeology’ which Serres and Agamben advocate as the proper regard of the human sciences: to look behind origins for a punto di insorgenza. Such a point may satisfy the need for a fulcrum, a fixed point to which other points of social meaning might be referred. However, I questioned the need for such a point to be fixed in the context of Husserl’s Aufhebung, a suspension that works better as a gap than as a fulcrum. Do we need to move the world, in Archimedean fashion, or do we simply need two charged points across which a spark can leap?

To give up the search for a fixed point or fulcrum frees the human sciences to make new connections. Promoting this promise is Serres proposal that we should go back to have a conversation across that gap between ourselves and those who have gone before, or, we may add, with the inhabitants of a city. We need not pin down their
mentality to some positive and provable authenticity, but open a dialogue at the level of signs and meanings, actions and interpretations.4

The value of this gap, the void of an enforced suspension, or Aufhebung, is seen in the photographer’s sparse images. We realise the need to stop and think: we must stop to think. To gain insights we need to step outside the stream of consciousness as lived experience (Erlebnis) in order to look back at it. Without a ground, there is no object. The line that appears on the ground can be read for its meaning, respected for its advisory or regulatory force. The line and the ground it is painted on may also have other meanings, and to find those we need to pause and to gain distance. Even waiting for a train or a hairdresser one may have the opportunity to stop and think, an opportunity opened up to us by exposure to the unfamiliar, as well as by enforced inactivity. Your first stop is behind the yellow line.

References

4 The dispute over Verstehen in the social sciences asked how much we are to empathise, to think ourselves into the position of the other. The contrast between Dilthey and Husserl may be traced to the object of inquiry: Dilthey’s ‘Geist’ to Husserl’s ‘consciousness’. Remembering how much we share with others takes us back to Vico’s assertion that we can find truth ‘within the modifications of our own human mind’ (Vico 2004 (1730). 231-2; Vico 1968 (1744), §331).


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