Spatial Varkaus: A Study of Humankind, Environment and Community

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Abstract

Experienced time contributes, as does the spirit of time, to the contents and tone of a spatial experience. They in turn give birth to that nuance according to which we look at our own milieu. Sometimes we merely stare inwardly and focus on the excellence of our ownness. Sometimes there again we gaze outwards and stress the importance of universality. Is it then that the prevailing spirit of each and every age makes people think and act in a certain way? Or does the spirit of each period lie in how people think and act precisely then?

Key Words: Experienced time, height of time, all-seeing camera, invisible and remembered past, our generation, José Ortega y Gasset

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1. Introduction

Home means more than just a roof over your head. It means the place a person considers quintessentially his own (more his own than anything) which is ever-present in his being a human. Its loss may gouge rough grooves into a person, leaving a sense of permanent deprivation. Then the presence of the missing element will appear as an indelible absence. Something that was is now represented in a person by a trace, an experiential groove. That trace is a sign that at some time something real existed in that place. So longing is born: a ceaseless yearning for a lost home. Perhaps at the same time the person is longing for his distant childhood which still lives inside him as a remembered landscape. Is then the very idea of an adulthood home impossible?

Perhaps in today's world a person thinks he owns several homes and home localities. Presumably though he is capable of ranking them in some kind of order of proximity. In other words, there is probably always one particular milieu that has made him into the very person he is: the defined subject that cannot be interchanged with anybody else. You could call it one-and-onlyness. How then can we characterize that dimension of uniqueness? Language, of course, is the existential home of both individual and community, and with its help we can describe individual experiences in a shared understandable form. Harmony and discord are also part of the existential home of language. They are fixed components of human existence. Of course, the ideal of harmony is the goal at all times.

And what of the picture of an age and picturing an age – how do we manage to examine them thoroughly? It requires a cultural-philosophical contemplative approach. And neither should we underestimate an essayistic-poetic starting point in this context. They open the door to the essence of things.

2. Preamble

The Spanish cultural philosopher and cultural critic José Ortega y Gasset has written about the height of time. His ideas, which continue to be topical, began to appear in 1930 when he published his prestigious work The Revolt of the Masses. There, as if to invite us to further deliberation, one chapter has the sub-heading “The respective height of the times”. Ortega y Gasset interestingly outlines the meaning of being up-to-date or at the height of time. Simultaneously he commendably distinguishes the temporal and cultural height of each present moment compared to earlier presentnesses and to futures awaiting ahead. At the end of the chapter he presents a profound synopsis of the theme: “We shall now make a summary. What, then, in a word is the “height of our times”? It is not the fullness of time, and yet it feels itself superior to all times past, and beyond all fullness known to us. It is not easy to formulate in precise terms the impression that our epoch has of itself; it believes itself superior to what has gone before, and at the same time feels that it is at the beginning, nor can it with complete
certainty even deny the possibility of a struggle to the death. What expression shall we find for it? Perhaps this one: superior to other times, inferior to itself. It knows its strength and is at the same time uncertain of its destiny; proud of its strength and at the same time fearing it. (Ortega y Gasset, 1952, p. 43.)

In terms of research, the concept of present-time awareness emerges as particularly serviceable. It merits meticulous examination. Simultaneously, the essential character of spatial Varkaus will begin to take shape.

Sinikka Kallio-Visapää, who has translated Ortega y Gasset’s books into Finnish, provides an essential additional element for making this characterization. Her excellent collection of essays *On Pictures and Picturing* was published in 1955. Her study of “Ortega y Gasset’s thoughts on the new art and novel” is important for my subject here. Kallio-Visapää offers an interesting description of “About Our Time”: “As a critic, Ortega y Gasset is not at all the type who merely looks backwards with scepticism. The title of one of his works, ‘El tema di nuestro tiempo’ (The Theme of Our Time), is particularly descriptive, and the intention is to deal with the book’s ideas here. By ‘nuestro tiempo’ he does not understand the time which has ended or is ending, but rather the time which is just beginning, the character of which is depicted through the phenomena that his multifaceted examination unveils for the reader. The vitalism he represents, the worldview which seeks a synthesis of life and art, and according to which an enhanced sense of life is the creator of culture, may seem overly simplistic, but it is the personal ethos which sees as its task the ‘unifying’ of Socratic rationalism and Nietzsche’s ‘beautiful, powerful life’ which arouses respect.” (Kallio-Visapää, 1955, pp. 110-111.)

Another key work in examining spatiality is Ortega y Gasset’s book *Esquema de las crisis* (Man and Crisis), which was also translated into Finnish by Kallio-Visapää in 1956. In it, Ortega y Gasset continues his analysis of the idea and meaning of generation. At the same time the concept of contemporary awareness gradually becomes more precise and organized: “We have already come to the conclusion that each generation is an organ of vision – an eye with which we can see historical reality in all its authenticity, impressive and vibrant with life. Every generation always provides a precise picture of the structure of human life at a certain point in time. It is impossible to discover what really happened at this or that time unless we find out under which generation, i.e., which prevailing form of human life, it happened. If the same event occurred for two different generations, it is, from the viewpoint of life itself, the same immutable fact, whereas historically it is a matter of two totally different things. So, for example, a fact like war is invested with the most diverse meanings according to the point in time at which it appears because it is on that basis that people at different times will draw conclusions leading in totally different directions.” (Translated from the Finnish. Ortega y Gasset, 1956, pp. 9-10.)
The question now relates specifically to Varkausian present-time awareness. The concept of spatiality is always associated with particular places and areas. In philosophical terms, it would also be possible to talk about lived space. That is why we must also be able to look at space from the inside: by being part of it. Then investigation of the present moment allows the multilayered presence of temporality, which is why present-time awareness always signifies an element of both manifestation and interpretation. Some thing or matter shows itself in reality in some way or as something. What then remains for the interpreter is to try to express in language the quality and essence of that something which is manifested in the world in a particular way.

The most essential components in analyzing spatial Varkaus are the photograph and language. The photograph manifests. Language interprets. Spatial Varkaus is now indeed acquiring a linguistic code of being. I, as the researcher, present myself overall as the omniscient narrator, which is why the description can justifiably be characterized as an investigation of spatial Varkaus and an investigation of writing an investigative study. In this way, as the writer, I am aware of myself and of the essayistic nature of my own task. The result will be an intricate wickerwork of existence where I move into a familiar landscape and the familiar landscape moves into me. The narrative framework is complete. (For studies on Varkaus, see also Itkonen, 2012b, pp. 165-170; 2015)

3. Spatial Varkaus

A photograph is simultaneously timeless and time-spanning. The present moment is the days of existence prevailing after 1939. The environment built for people plays an essential role. The cultural composition is full of nuances. Reason enough to begin a thorough examination of the height of several times. Then the concepts “our time” and “our generation” will also acquire distinctive contents and meanings.
Photograph. The all-seeing camera.

Ivar Ekström’s camera is looking down on the landscape from above, a bird’s eye view. It is like a sky at a cosmic time above the milieu: it sees everything, and in it the whole of beingness is also mirrored. The place could be called a crossroads of life. Another apposite name might be a time-bend, a time-twist or a time-curve. Time and being turn at the very point where Ahlström Street joins Savo Road. This is a good place to start.

“In terms of its level, then, at what height is our time?” asked Ortega y Gasset. The answer is easily formulated: “It depends on the point of time that the question is asked.” In the context of spatial Varkaus, the contents of the answer are always tied up with that particular period of time and its specific characteristics. As a general portrayal, it is possible to extract from a landscape such features as: both highways lead to the church. Or they may also start from the church. The spirit of interlocking the existential elements dominates the view. The school and the educational ideal both play a central role. The patronizing or caring hand of A. Ahlström Limited seems to have everything clenched within it. The Factory school and the workers’ houses stand close to each other. People’s commitment to the company is comprehensive. If you control spirituality, religiosity and physicality, do you then own the entire person? When Ahlström offers a home and a livelihood, then it also has considerable power in the way people structure their daily life and celebrations. Nevertheless, a person continues to be an independent being. No power external to himself can own him completely. Even the very idea of some kind
of existential slavery feels strange. So, this is something worth rejecting at the outset. The aim, after all, is a profound analysis of spatial Varkaus.

In my existence, Ahlström Street was a boundary: walking towards the church, my own territory was on the left-hand side of the street. The area on the right-hand side was unknown and even a little frightening. As a child you just live your life, and that is enough. Reflections and interpretations come only later. I think that childhood at those time-bend stages has been the same in every decade. Only the present moment of adults has varied. The present moment of childhood is overflowing with childhood.

Childhood, then, always represents a time of greatest fulfillment. The time of adulthood was probably the period at the end of the 1930s with the power of patriotism at its peak. Or that is probably what the generation thought who felt that defending the homeland was a matter concerning everybody. I don’t believe that generation had any doubts about the task ahead: sacrificing oneself for the Finnish fatherland was probably the uncompromising goal. Yet that generation could not be sure of its destiny.

In later decades, then, the yards of the Koivula and Peltola families were being trod by the generations that believed in the importance of reconstruction and the new era’s message of liberation. Probably, for those people too, their own presentness was of a higher level than the days of their past. The common task was only just beginning – the whole time. In all probability they thought they were capable of much more. Yet, in each person’s mind, the progress already achieved may well have appeared as a period full of vigour and strength.

At this point, Ortega y Gasset’s insightful understanding of the significance of time just beginning becomes important. When in my own time I was starting at the Factory School, I was on the brink of something extremely momentous and unique. I did not reflect on the possible experiences of my predecessors. I merely felt that waiting ahead was a future that would exceed everything so far.

A key part of my experience of existence was via the principle of co-education according to which girls and boys were in the same class. There weren’t separate schools for girls and boys. I am totally lacking in experience of that kind of schooling. At least for me this was the best possible starting point. Perhaps it was one way to succeed in promoting the ideal of equality, at least somewhat.

Looking back on it now, it is easy to accept as my own the ethos which was revealed by Kallio-Visapää and which combines intellect and beauty. Perhaps, then, the Factory School directed my life towards the existential path connecting spirituality, physicality and community-mindedness. In one class at school there was social polyphony present: no doubt this was an attempt to achieve equality independent of social class. This was why nobody was superior to anybody else. Could this be called the pursuit of human companionship?
The all-seeing camera, however, also reveals a clearly organized or arranged existential structure. When the concept of generation is thought about with the meaning “sight organ”, then it is always a matter of the height of adulthood time. To this must also be linked the idea of social cognizance. That is why the concept of “class awareness” must be examined every time in relation to the generation bound to a defined adulthood. It is the only way to reach out to historical reality. In this way it is as if the existential door to the pulsing time-curve of life can be pulled ajar. As an omniscient narrator I must endeavor to act as the existential interpreter of several generations. Otherwise the height of time for different presentnesses is difficult to characterize. Simultaneously, the spatiality of my self-experienced Varkaus takes shape.

A photograph presents something that the viewer has to be able to see. This in turn presupposes the ability to look at a landscape from the inside: to see spatial Varkaus in such a way that you have yourself been a part of the lived experientiality of the landscape. The story of each person’s spatiality of their own Varkaus evolves from both personal experiences and accounts heard from others. Certainly one feature common to all the stories is the idea of the factory boss’s time. Then the main character talked about is often Leif Glöersen, a graduate engineer who became the manager of Varkaus’s factories after the wars and retired in 1967. (see TT 2018). So, the factory boss’s time in spatial Varkaus lasted about two decades, and yet its significance is clearly more important than its duration. Its spirit colours the time-curve time of the photograph.

How, then, do my time, the time of the time-curve and the factory boss’s time connect with each other? It is the time of spatial Varkaus that joins them all together. The photograph shows houses set out in a precise order as if by the huge hand of existence. These are the dwellings of working people. Their homes were situated in those buildings because they were employees of the factory. Yet I would not think of the situation in any way as ownership. The management lived in its own area: on the Kosula headland, which lies beyond the upper right edge of the photograph. The villas are dimly visible amongst the trees. They are present only as a trace or whisper. And yet the knowledge that they exist is indelibly present in people’s minds. In other words, within the time of spatial Varkaus there are several personal and individual times. Sometimes the same spatial Varkaus time is even able to appear to different individuals and groups experiencing it as a very different time. Then the interpretations too will differ from each other. In this way is also born the time of polyphonic stories. Yet each person probably considers the story of his own time to be the one and only correct story.

My time was very much the time of the Factory School. To this there belonged the interior of the school and the area surrounding the school with its yards, roads, squares and meadows. A central role was also played by the church and its exciting and complex forecourt.

I learned the rules of the road in the schoolyard by taking part in traffic contests and by trying to ride a bicycle according to given instructions. This is why I still give a hand signal.
when I’m turning. It was on a spring day, sitting on a bench in the terraced churchyard, that I learned my grandfather had died. My mother wore a mourning veil as did the other women. It was a dignified custom. The mourning veil is probably unknown to present generations.

Ortega y Gasset is right: a funeral as an event provokes different images in the various generations. The postwar generations will certainly not fully understand a wartime funeral. Neither did I fully grasp what it was about when in those days I listened to the conversations of what seemed like old men and women. I really was living out the existential narrative of my own generation. And so were other people, too.

I also agree with Ortega y Gasset that the meaning of some specific matter becomes clear solely by examining the time of different generations. Nevertheless I believe there are supra-generational aspects. Otherwise the common narrative of spatial Varkaus would be impossible. We must therefore assume that in telling my own story I at least also touch on somebody else’s story. Or perhaps each fact is preserved, passing from the present moment into another unchanged, but the interpretations made of it may vary from generation to generation.

The landscape presented in that photograph brings back a flood of memories. The summers were leafy, warm and fragrant. There again, the autumns were rainless, exciting, beneath star-spangled skies. The winters in turn were cold, with heavy snowfalls, made for skiing and for skating. The church is unquestionably my church. It’s where I was baptized and where I went for confirmation classes. I have also attended a host of weddings and funerals in my home church. I wonder: will I return there sometime? (See also e.g. Itkonen, 2009, pp. 273-278; 2012a, pp. 107-111; 2016.)

An essential part of the general narrative of spatial Varkaus must be Lennart Segerstrål’s altar fresco, which he painted in 1953-1954. The name of the fresco is appropriately descriptive: “Thy Kingdom Come”. (See e.g. Varkaus parish 2018). The models used for the figures depicted are familiar to inhabitants of spatial Varkaus. Contemporaries have met them in person. For younger generations those living models have been stories and names. One common feature, however, links the generations together: the impressive wall painting is specifically in the home church and nowhere else.

4. Closing Words

Similarly relevant as an instrument of analysis is Ortega y Gasset’s collection of essays The Dehumanization of Art and Ideas about the Novel. It was competently translated into Finnish in 1961 by Sinikka Kallio under the title Art Breaks Away from Humanity. The translator was in fact the same person responsible for earlier Finnish versions, but her surname had changed from Kallio-Visapää to Kallio. Of particular interest is Ortega y Gasset’s view that humans can be divided into two groups according to how capable they are of understanding art. At this point there seems to be an overlapping of social and artistic criticism. The text provokes a wealth of
ideas: “In my opinion the most characteristic feature of new art is ‘from the sociological viewpoint’ precisely that it divides the public into those two groups: those that understand and those that do not. It would seem that some people possess some kind of ‘receptive organ’ which others lack; it is thus a matter of two different variants of the human species. [---] The masses are accustomed to assuming the leading role in every field and so they think that new art is an infringement of their ‘human rights’ since it can only be understood by the privileged, those who have the nerves of the nobility and the instincts of the aristocracy. Wherever young muses appear, the masses begin to rant and rave in opposition.” (Translated from the Finnish: Ortega y Gasset, 1961, pp. 11-12)

Slightly adapting what Ortega y Gasset writes, you could perhaps at this point think of human beings as belonging to two groups: There are those who are capable of seeing the stratification of spatial Varkaus. They look at an object from the inside, in other words with the Varkausian internal eye. Then there are those who are only able to look at spatial Varkaus from the outside. They see just a single dimension at a time. Their mode of observation means examining an object with the Varkausian external eye. This perhaps then justifies using the terms the real Varkaus and the unreal or nebulously imagined Varkaus. It is then presumably also a matter of spatialities related to the home region as well as to complete strangerhood, i.e. a random destination.

I would nevertheless not suppose that anyone possesses a particular “receptive organ” which would enable them to reach into the essence of spatial Varkaus. What is needed to solve the issue is not mysticism but an insight into the way the existence of time and space are intertwined. This is the very reason that the topic interests me. Into this broad fabric there is also woven a view of the importance of childhood and memory, The time-curve presented by a photograph likewise denotes my memory of home and my memory of childhood.

I would claim that a photograph contains a memory: an invisible and remembered past has gouged itself into the shot. Depending on when you carry out your examination, you may even find a hidden future in the existential grooves of the photograph. For me, this time-spanning view means the entrance hall to the future from which I moved into the world of adulthood.

The personal relevance of a memory nevertheless does not turn a shared memory into a “mass memory”. It probably makes most sense to completely forget the concept of mass memory. Even though a collective memory might indeed contain elements common to several people, its most outstanding dimension is nevertheless always its uniqueness. The experiences of those who experience cannot be interchanged. This is why my spatial Varkaus is different from everybody else’s spatial Varkaus. And correspondingly, I will never be able to completely grasp the contents of anybody else’s spatial Varkaus. The same photograph, then, displays the spatial Varkauses of both a private person and an entire community. Together then they create
a story of spatial Varkaus. It is equally true for each of those experiencing it and those narrating it.

Perhaps a person driven by a herd instinct is that sort of individual who cherishes the absoluteness of the Varkaus narrative he regards as the only correct one. If somebody makes so bold as to disagree with him, it becomes a matter of “infringing human rights”. I wonder if I have the nerves of the nobility and instincts of the aristocracy when I shamelessly dare to claim that spatial Varkaus has shaped my essential human nature and my existential idiom of being, in other words the language of my being at home. It also invariably means the primacy of the mother tongue. So, philosophical muses have lingered close to me and recited in poetic verse the inimitable story of my spatial Varkaus. Only I am capable of understanding it in depth. It is my spatial Varkaus that sings the words of my - a person from Savo - existential poetry.

Translator’s note. The town described in the article is called Varkaus, which in Finnish also means ‘theft’. The title could equally well be Spatial Theft or Stealing Space. I have coined the word ‘Varkausian’ to describe an inhabitant of Varkaus.

English translation by Glyn Hughes

References


**Picture sources**

Picture archive of Varkaus Museum. A. Ahlström Ltd. Collection / Ivar Ekström.