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The New Hearth: The Creation of a Mobile Space

James C. Mangum
jmang285@live.Kutztown.edu

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James mangum

Dr. Vogel

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Modernity Paper

The New Hearth: The Creation of a Mobile Space.

Possessing the ability to move around and travel, America is a modern society built around mobility. It is our key to modernity. We create buildings, structures, and apparatuses; areas of design we call space. This allows citizens the ability to function in a nation where capital is key and mobility is the means to produce. We can understand how mobility becomes integral in our social views very clearly when a focus on the automobile is placed. As a tool to navigate our social life and the various spaces that we inhabit, the automobile is the means that allow us to function in a life of intersectional relations where work, leisure, and community meet as one. The idea of combining car with the intentional use of a certain space like a home, is a distinctly unique creation of space that speaks to the idea of modernity.

What is space? According to Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, a philosophical analysis that interprets the creation of space a result of the socio cultural influences to landscape, territory, and the creation of structures. Space is referred to by Lefebvre as a "social product"(30), resulting in the manmade infrastructure and buildings that cause the natural physical space of land to disappear or become backdrop to new man made structures that serve a purpose for society. Space is the social creation produced from the intersections of work, play, and home. Lefebvre interprets space as an expression of the different means of production.

Lefebvre explains how every society constructs its own spaces to further exemplify its totality as a society. Lefebvre coins the “conceptual triad” (33) which explains the relation of space with three elements, one is “spatial practice” being the relation between reality, routine, and the networks that connect the places of work, leisure, and home. Two, “Representations of space” being the area for conceptualized ideas and interpretations to be imposed by scientist, planners, and engineers. Finally, third being “representational space”, or the space of the citizens and residents to experience and interpret meaning through their imaginations. These are the elements that determine the idea, creation, and use of space.

One can understand the space an individual is representative of by the automobile he or she drives. Growing up this was always an easy thing to see. Seeing a nice car pass through a rundown neighborhood was rare and usually meant that a person wasn't from this area, this space. You would know this because everyone you usually see around the tenements and housing projects rode the bus, or drove what is referred to as a “hoopty” or “bucket”; terms coined for beat up vehicles ones like the “Jalopy” Steinbeck uses in the *The Grapes of Wrath*. In these areas it not uncommon to see an individual living out of their automobile. Circumstances may render a person to repurpose a vehicle to fit a new use of space by taking a machine built for transport, and ascribing it the unique purpose of serving as residence. Arguably, vehicles are markers of space, but seeing the ability to blend vehicle with the function of space stretches the idea of how one can survive and function in the world. We can characterize this new idea of space by identifying the automobile and how it becomes a social product, or a created space that constitutes Lefebvre's conceptual triad.

When delving into Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the link between space as a means of travel are very evident. The Joad family is displaced from the property by the banks that deem the land no longer valuable after the Depression and the dust bowl deplete the earth. Tom Joad returns from prison to find the community changed. Landowning banks force the community to leave, rendering his family homeless to seek a new life in California. The space that the Joads once inhabited and to which ascribed meaning to has been changed. Their sharecropped community are no longer functioning members of society, evident in the clearing of social structures and its previously ascribed purpose. This is impactful when compared to Lefebvre's "conceptual triad" because we see the space change in relation to its use; it can no longer be farmed, forcing the demolition of the structures by planners, resulting in the representation of the space to change for the people. It no longer has the function of household or community, therefore no longer can be used to serve that purpose. Forced away, the Joads must roadtrip to California to seek new success. Along the way it is evident how they represent a new space by the old Ford Super Six they drive. With part of the car cut off to serve as a truck, and family members packed together in their new home for the next coming weeks, they drive.

This jalopy is a marker of status and ability, serving as a cue to other people that the Joads and Okie community are alien to the Californian function of space. Laura DeLucia examines Steinbeck's ties between class and cars in the context of understanding socio-economic structures in her book, *Positioning Steinbeck's Automobiles: Class and Cars in The Grapes of Wrath*. DeLucia notes the correlation between ownership and certain kinds of cars that link individuals to certain spaces. DeLucia quotes fellow critic Robert DeMott's observation on the Joad vehicle's repurposed use saying, "The Joad Family vehicle...becomes their new hearth and

home, and acts as the site of matriarchal wisdom and the center of domestic relations during the migrant diaspora”(141). New hearth and home seems a fitting description when realizing the function this vehicle serves for the family. After being on the road for some time, the family makes its way into Texas. Steinbeck illustrates the function the car is serving for their manner of life writing, “the highway became their home, and movement their medium of expression. Little by little they settled into the new life”(163). Observing the utility of the vehicle, the “new life” Steinbeck refers to is evident in the time spent in the car, a means produced by their new family hearth rolling on four wheels. It becomes a space of production reminiscent of a home itself. It is a reconstruction of the previous use of space these cars occupied, marking the families position in society and economy due to their living ordeal with the vehicle. As poor outsiders migrating to California in an effort to seek work and prosperity, the jalopy is a revealing cue to others that the use of car as repurposed space illustrates their origin to struggling Oklahoma, as well as their migration status to California.

This idea of car as new spatial creation is also evident in William Least Heat-Moon’s book *Blue Highways*. As Heat-moon suffers a failing marriage and failing job, he sets out on a journey to explore and discover the backroads of America. Least Heat-Moon sets out chronicling the unique forgotten towns and places seemingly untouched by modernity. Unfulfilled and seeking a new purpose and meaning to his life, Heat-moon is detached from the spaces he once ascribed meaning to. Analyzing it from the idea of Lefebvre’s conceptual triad, his societal functions and meaning as teacher and husband in Missouri are over, which allows him to detach from those previous spaces. Seeking a new narrative for himself, we see Least-Heat Moon embark on a journey of interchanging environments all tied to his van, which he calls Ghost

Dancing. His van serves as the ultimate marker to Heat-Moon's position in space. Ghost Dancing is the culminating space he is tied to, the space he has created for himself to serve the new functions he needs.

Analyzing Ghost Dancing, it is clear how the function of it serves as much more than just transportation, it becomes a space of home, knowledge, as well as travel. Least-Heat Moon retrofits the van, accompanying portable toilet and sink, cooking stove, sleeping bunk, and much more. Embarking on a journey spanning many months and thousands of miles requires this machine to not only mark his space, but become his creation of space; a repurposed machine he fashions to become the intersection of all his societal needs on the journey. Ghost Dancing doubles in purpose functioning as home and automobile. Referred to as "wheel estate"(8), the van assumes the connotation of a space for living. Clearly a play on the word real-estate that merges the use of space and travel, the van becomes a spatial structure in which Least Heat-Moon is the sole proprietor, citizen, and representor for. This new ascribed meaning of the van establishes a private function of space for Least-Heat Moon. Creating an agenda to find the narrative of America, all while trying to tune into his mixed heritage of Native American and caucasian; Least Heat-Moon is seeking purpose and connection in his journey. Ann Brigham authors *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film*, analyzing the view of mobility and democracy in modern texts and film.

Brigham applies her analysis to a piece unrelated to mine called *On The Trail to Sunset*, where she explores the notion of outsiders achieving a sense of belonging by means of travel to different places. Outlining the struggles of two protagonists with differing views of American geography, the car becomes an element that marks importance of space. Ann says "As both

transportation and interior space, the car emphasizes an access and intimacy that result in connectivity”(32). Similar to Least-Heat Moon and his dilemma of self identity and national identity, Ghost Dancing becomes an essential element in the spatial placement of his journey, and his connection to the journey. Stuck in a snowstorm on a Colorado mountain, Heat-Moon begins to reflect to himself, worried if he will be able to survive the night, worried if his sanity has failed him. He ultimately calls on the writings of two figures that parallel to the crisis of his identity, Native American Black Elk and American writer Walt Whitman saying; “Maybe this was the way it happened. Black Elk prays for the Grandfather Spirit to help him face the winds...Whitman too.”(180). Heat-Moon has the urge to connect to these authors and find the intimate relation he needs in his ordeal. Ultimately William is secure in this condition because of his van and it’s solidarity in the elements as a space of intimacy, knowledge, and a space of refuge. Ghost Dancing become an element representative of his physical journey. It assumes a name of importance and meaning which allows him to connect to his purpose. It marks his ordeals, travels, and is the ultimate cue to his own space, because Ghost Dancing is a creation of space utilized to serve his many societal needs.

This notion of vehicle as creation of space is still very popular today. A trend has emerged in modern American called Van Life, in which individuals or families repurpose vans, buses, or trucks to serve the need of living a comfortable nomadic life of adventure on the road. Made popular by the online video site YouTube where individuals chronicle their stories and share their projects and experiences, the Miller family has an interesting story of their mobility on the road. Denver and Vanessa Miller decide to embrace the nomadic lifestyle and move their family of five into a school bus. With this in mind, let's take a look at Emily Eliza Scott and

Kirsten Swenson's curated book called *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics*. Swenson and Scott gather the works of authors and theorists sharing ideas on the creation of space in context of the contemporary, political, and social aspects that influence space over time. Julian Myers-Szupinska authors a chapter in the book analyzing how space can be abstracted to fit a new set of meanings and societal importances.

Szupinska comments on Lefebvre's notion of space taking "the present mode of production"(23). Szupinska gives the example of how industrial urban life was abandoned, adopting the idea of the "nuclear suburban family as reproductive unit"(23). In seeking new adventure and seemingly disregarding this idea of suburban nuclear family being the current reproductive unit, Vanessa states "We wanted to show the boys that less is more"(Tiny House Giant Journey). Even though their friends and family thought they were crazy, the Miller family vehicle becomes repurposed as a home, school, and a place of work for the family. This new space is a product of social relations, directly influenced by family's prominent societal demands outside the typical spaces that traditional families are tied to. Accompanied with L shaped couch, oven, flat screen, work and educating areas; the vehicle blends key elements of social intersections all into one. This new creation of space built around mobility has the distinct quality of embodying a social product of modernity.

American modernity is distinctly tied to mobility. The creation of space to order and function within our society is a imperative to our economics, politics and social life. Societies have to create, they have to connect, there is a constant strive to produce. Mobility is the key that connects it all. The new space, the new mobility has evolved from modernity. The ability to combine our lives of profession, education, leisure has introduced us to a new aspect of

American mobility. One is now able to combine the different intersectional aspects of life into one movable hub or structure. The idea of modernity has transcended our ability to produce space and to travel, we have reached the ability to combine house in vehicle and still live in pursuit of our American values.

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