



The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918

Stephen Kern

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Stephen Kern writes about the sweeping changes in technology and culture between 1880 and World War I that created new modes of understanding and experiencing time and space. To mark the book's twentieth anniversary, Kern provides an illuminating new preface about the breakthrough in interpretive approach that has made this a seminal work in interdisciplinary studies.

From about 1880 to World War I, sweeping changes in technology and culture created new modes of understanding and experiencing time and space. Stephen Kern writes about the onrush of technics that reshaped life concretely--telephone, electric lighting, steamship, skyscraper, bicycle, cinema, plane, x-ray, machine gun--and the cultural innovations that shattered older forms of art and thought--the stream-of-consciousness novel, psychoanalysis, Cubism, simultaneous poetry, relativity, and the introduction of world standard time. Kern interprets this generation's revolutionized sense of past, present, and future, and of form, distance, and direction. This overview includes such figures as Proust, Joyce, Mann, Wells, Gertrude Stein, Strindberg, Freud, Husserl, Apollinaire, Conrad, Picasso, and Einstein, as well as diverse sources of popular culture drawn from journals, newspapers, and magazines. It also treats new developments in personal and social relations including scientific management, assembly lines, urbanism, imperialism, and trench warfare. While exploring transformed spatial-temporal dimensions, the book focuses on the way new sensibilities subverted traditional values. Kern identifies a broad leveling of cultural hierarchies such as the Cubist breakdown of the conventional distinction between the prominent subject and the framing background, and he argues that these levelings parallel the challenge to aristocratic society, the rise of democracy, and the death of God. This entire reworking of time and space is shown finally to have influenced the conduct of diplomacy during the crisis of July 1914 and to have structured the Cubist war that followed.

The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918 Details

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Nicole says

Cultural history has come a long way since 1983, when Kern's book was first published. It may draw more criticism for its approach and style now, but it was crucial in helping to solidify and expand the field at the time, and it's still worth reading.

I used it in my graduate historiography class in Fall 2013, and that experience definitely drove home the point that the book requires significant prior knowledge of turn-of-the-century art and science.

Read the 2003 edition for HST 301: Graduate Historiography in Fall 2013.

Andrew Dolbeare says

I accidentally finished this book when I was supposed to be using it for research for something else. It's incredibly informative. Anyone who is interested in literature, art or anything for that matter from the late 19th/early 20th century should read this. You'll be surprised and how different the concept of time was and how it changes the way you look at work and invention from that period.

Jenni Link says

This engaging cultural history details how a rapid succession of scientific, administrative, and intellectual innovations - from the theory of relativity to the telephone, standardized time zones to Freudian psychology - profoundly altered the concepts and everyday experiences of time and space from the late Victorian age through WWI. These changes were reflected not only in the art, architecture, and literature of the period (Kern gives ample and fascinating examples), but in the frenzied activity of July 1914 that led to declarations of war. I really enjoyed this book and regret that I wasn't aware of it when I had time to study art and literature in more depth as a student. This was written in the 80s, before the internet and smart phones transformed the experience of time and space all over again, and the obvious parallels between the era being examined and the present day, in terms of a general sense of dislocation and uncertainty about the future, were hard to ignore. I see that the author is working on an updated version focused on the present day, and I look forward to reading it.

Andrew Nolan says

I have become increasingly biased against cultural histories, though i wasn't always this way.

Kern offers a largely superficial list of expanding/ changing modernist views on the meaning of time and then the meaning of space.

Like most cultural histories it's a bland and endless list with occasional pitstops at a piece of art/ literature/ film/ etc that you don't necessarily need to know about, a few modernist thinkers along the way, and very little substance to grasp a hold of. Perhaps that's a condition of modernity? Endless listing and connecting lines, but little to stop the free fall into panic of "gosh, truth is all subjective and i'm lost in the information overload". Maybe.

This another long book that you could probably read in a few hours and would never come to mind again.

Joshua Buhs says

Perhaps the problem is so much time has passed since the book was published.

Kern starts out arrogantly enough, suggesting that all other cultural studies are inferior to his because they do not deal with fundamental categories--time and space.

What follows, though, reads like a college paper, with one example listed after another (and each chapter mostly focusing on the same few people, especially Proust.)

Can be read, though, as an extension of Marx's old comment about the annihilation of space and time.

John David says

This could have been a truly impressive book. I have a deep, abiding interest in intellectual history, and the subjects set forth in the title provide a fertile field of interdisciplinary study. The ideas themselves are interesting, if only Kern could have synthesized them in a new way or said something about them that hadn't been said before, or more intelligently – but he simply doesn't. In fact, the book is a little list-y, and what he chooses to write about becomes fairly predictable.

To begin with, Kern presents a clumsy methodology in his forward, in which he tries to explain what originally piqued his interest in the topic, and how he has organized the book. He states that he got his organizing principle and some of his themes from the realm of philosophical phenomenology (that is, the philosophy of perception). He breaks up the chapters thus: 1) The Nature of Time, 2) The Past, 3) The Present, 4) The Future, 5) Speed, 6) The Nature of Space, 7) Form, 8) Distance, 9) Direction, 10) Temporality of the July Crisis, and 11) The Cubist War. The only problem is that the topics discussed in the book make these categories much less useful or intelligible than you would otherwise think. He never discusses why “Temporality of the July Crisis” (the events directly following the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in July, 1914) couldn't go into chapter two, three, or four, or why “The Cubist War,” which mostly discusses changing perspectives of time in Cubism, couldn't be presented in chapter six.

Kern's interdisciplinarity is impressive, though, but this is countered by his unfortunate inability to rally the

history into anything cohesive or compelling. He draws from the visual arts, philosophy, psychology, music, literature, the natural sciences, geographical and international relations theory, cinematography, communications and communications theory, and diplomacy, but leaves the threads all dangling at the end of the text.

The book does have its moments. The chapter on distance discusses how changing perceptions of this quantity shaped the burgeoning field of geographic theory and international relations. The chapter on the outbreak of the First World War looks at how time greatly contracted after the invention of the telephone and radio, and how this affected diplomacy (or attempts at it) leading up to the declaration of war. Both of these are topics which you rarely see dealt with in detail in intellectual history of this type, so I especially appreciated these parts.

If you're familiar with the generation of cultural and intellectual history leading up to the end of the WWI, this book isn't the kind of revisionist history that would enable you to re-conceptualize the way you think about these ideas. You get all the standard questions: Is time continuous or atomized? How do Proust and Joyce create a sense of private time (as opposed to a public time) in their novels? How did inventions like the telephone and bicycle change the public's view of time and speed? These are fascinating questions, but ultimately nothing new to someone who is moderately familiar with the better books in the genre.

Readers looking for a quick-and-dirty intellectual and cultural history of the time could certainly do worse than Kern's book, however they could also do better. Some of the better attempts that I've read recently are George L. Mosse's absolutely stunning "Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars," Modris Eksteins' dependable but conservative "Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age," and William M. Johnston's hay-as-hay but necessary "An Intellectual and Social History, 1848-1938," all of which I have reviewed on this site. None of share Kern's methodology or cover the same territory, but parts of them discuss some of the material much better than Kern does.

Chiara says

Molto interessante, collegamenti a volte forse azzardati tra fatti e correnti storiche, ma piacevole. Peccato averlo conosciuto solo con l'ansia di un esame...

Laura says

Recommended by a student. This is good but dense. Done with the first two chapters, so we move on from the history of timekeeping and the past and now we are 'present'.

Timothy says

It's shocking how many ills of the millennial generation existed over a hundred years ago. While the text message is obliterating the English language today, in 1880 the telegraph was doing the same. Today kids rot their brains with video games, in the 1880s the poison of choice was the serial novel. Go figure.

J.M. Hushour says

A well-written and thoughtful exploration of the different ways that different facets of life adapted to new technologies. Kern looks at distance, speed, form, and space (among other notions) and relates shifts in how they were all perceived to emerging technologies such as the telephone, the cinema, and so on. In the undertaking, he looks at a diverse spectrum encompassing psychology, painting, physics, music, and so on, to show how the shifts in perception were elucidated and acted on. It seems redundant at times (eg Proust and/or Joyce figure in just about every chapter) and arguably esoteric but Kern admits that he draws no connections between any of these strands, only that they happen to be happening at the same time (there are some links, like de Scevola's development of camouflage based on Cubism). Great book on a pivotal time, with WWI serving as the main axis of the themes discussed.

Michael Primiani says

Enjoyed this read on how time and space impacts our culture. Preferred the time section over the space section. Also, the chapter on the start of WWI (The July Crisis) seemed out of place.

William Stobb says

This is a book about how the concept of time changed in the early twentieth century. It draws from a wide variety of arts & humanities sources. It's one of those books that helps you imagine how different your world could be if you had different social constructs. That's useful for imaginative people.

Anna Hiller says

This book, while very erudite and well-researched, is actually only a very shallow analysis of the major shifts in world-view that occurred at the end of the 19th/beginning of the 20th centuries. I was expecting a more theoretical approach, I suppose, and those expectations were decidedly *not met*. But if you're interested in reading a very broad cultural history of Europe between 1880 and 1918, this would probably be a good place to start. Just don't expect any mind-blowing theories about the actual *nature* of these changes in world-view amid page after page of close readings of the usual suspects: Kafka, Proust, Mann, Stein, and the visual artists Picasso, Cézanne, Braque, etc. IMHO, Marinetti deserved a lot more space than he actually got. But kudos to the author for leaving the Britain-France-Germany paradigm to include work by Ortega y Gasset in his analysis.

Ran says

Stephen Kern argues a universal theory regarding a cultural treatment of the change in perception of time and space from 1880 and 1918. Through varied and vast examples, he contends that technologies such as

telephones, wireless, trains, planes, automobiles, phonographs, cameras, movies, etc. created a vast culture shift in the perceptions of time and space. Using the metaphor of the Titanic, Kern writes about World War I:

"The arrogance, the lack of safety precautions, the reliance on technology, the simultaneity of events, the worldwide attention, the loss of life all evoke the sinking of the *Titanic* as a simile for the outbreak of the war. The lookouts on the *Titanic* were blinded by fog, as the political leaders and diplomats and military men were blinded by historical shortsightedness, convinced that even if war came it would not last long. On the eve of disaster they shared a confidence that the basic structure of European states was sound, able to weather any storm. Europe, they were certain, was unsinkable. The concentration of wireless messages from the sinking ship, the rescue ships, and the coastal stations suggests the flurry of telegraphy messages and telephone conversations exchanged during the July Crisis. Even the icebergs floating in the path of the liner had an analog in the eight assassins who lay in wait for Francis Ferdinand at various points on his parade route the day he was murdered. He had ignored warnings about the danger from terrorists in the streets of Sarajevo, as the captain of the *Titanic* had ignored wireless messages about the dangerous waters ahead. The captain raced against time for the fastest Atlantic crossing. Another race took place between the armies of the great powers, which rushed to mobilize toward the end of July as the diplomacy began to flounder."

The last two chapters of this book are perhaps the best in application of his universal theory to the first World War. This is an essential read for any student of Euro-American history in this period. But if you get lost in his various references to Joyce, Proust, Husserl, Bergman or others, don't worry about it. Just one, two, skip a few; you'll get the gist.

Ned says

The Culture of Space and Time often works better as a compendium of facts and quotes rather than a more engrossing historical narrative. This problem is largely caused by the structural separation of time and space in the text, instead of analyzing these two forces together Kern splits them. This tactic often forces him to repeat himself and disjoints the flow of his argument. In spite of this, his work still constructs a particularly original view of the dissolution of time and space that culminates in the cataclysm of WWI. He also vividly captures the simultaneous disorientation and invigoration that such radical conceptual shifts engendered. Overall a dense, but ultimately useful and informative, view of the role time and space played in the development of 20th century culture.
