

3841

Trans/Form/Ação

ISSN: 0101-3173

ISSN: 1980-539X

Universidade Estadual Paulista, Departamento de Filosofia

Tong, Jie

Comment on "Paul Auster and August Brill's solitary rooms: the spatiality of solitude"

Trans/Form/Ação, vol. 45, no. 4, 2022, October-December, pp. 205-212

Universidade Estadual Paulista, Departamento de Filosofia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2022.v45n4.p205>

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=384272683017>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's webpage in redalyc.org

UNEM  redalyc.org

Scientific Information System Redalyc

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America and the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Project academic non-profit, developed under the open access initiative


## COMMENT ON “PAUL AUSTER AND AUGUST BRILL’S SOLITARY ROOMS: THE SPATIALITY OF SOLITUDE”

*Jie Tong*<sup>1</sup>

Commented Article: CHEN, Ru; LIU, Song; LIN, Jiaxin; KAN, Muhammad Khail. Paul Auster and August Brill’s solitary rooms: the spatiality of solitude. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp journal of philosophy, v. 45, n. 4, p. 183-204, 2022.

In “The Invention of Isolation”, “The New York Trilogy”, “Man in the Dark”, “Winter Journal”, and other works, Paul Auster explores the meaning of solitude as “[...] one of the requirements of being human.” (ADAMO, 2002, p. 32). Auster is essentially a reclusive author who spends a lot of time alone in a room engaged in intense meditation. Invoking the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, the author makes the case that only complete separation of self and other, subject and object, is necessary for true transcendental solitude. We are in relation to what is other than the self. As long as we are aware of our separation from the other, we cannot assert our solitary position. Since each person’s sense of himself largely depends on that perception, isolation in this instance is “intersubjective.”

The solitary chamber is a recurrent theme in Paul Auster’s fiction, works, and life because of its complicated architectural, psychological, and

<sup>1</sup> Associate professor, Zhedong Culture Institute, School of Humanities and Communication, Ningbo University, Ningbo, 315000 - China.  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8703-5246>. E-mail: [t8250101@126.com](mailto:t8250101@126.com).

<https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2022.v45n4.p205>



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License.

narrative existence. According to Auster, a room is really “the substance of solitude itself,” an isolation that is defined by space. It has transcended its physical bounds and taken on existential and philosophical significance in this way. His thorough investigation of the space also gives his trip into solitude more depth. A room is primarily an architectural design that houses a single writer. It is also one of the substances that Auster’s fiction depicts the most frequently. The writer’s mind is then represented figuratively by a room that contains all of her or his thoughts and memories. The three depictions of chambers invariably form an interlinked trio in Auster’s study of the spatiality of isolation, expressing solitary in terms of intersubjectivity – the relationship and intersection of different people’s cognitive views.

Solitude is defined simply as “[...] the condition or situation of being alone” in the “Oxford Dictionary of English”. In “Solitude, A Philosophical Encounter”, philosopher Philip Koch argues that solitude is a state of mind or condition of aloneness along with aloneness, isolation, alienation, and privacy. In a different study, researchers made the argument that isolation is distinct from other modalities due to its ability to encompass a range of contradictory emotions, its status as a voluntary act of will, and its innate exclusion of other people from consciousness. In addition to being a condition of loneliness, it has also been described as a “realm,” a “room,” or a “world,” a place that a person creates in his mind where they have spiritual, psychological, and philosophical experiences that are very different from those they have in a real society. In addition, authors and thinkers have been known to voluntarily lock themselves in a room and live in complete seclusion. However, there are many differences between the “room” depicted in mental tranquility and the actual space with architectural characteristics. However, “the room of seclusion” is closely related.

For inner serenity and self-knowledge, authors and intellectuals frequently decide to stay in a room alone. For instance, Montaigne (2003, p. 201) argued persuasively that older men, who have already provided for their families and societies, should retire to solitude. He offers the following recommendation:

We should designate a space specifically for ourselves, leaving it completely unoccupied, and establish our actual liberty, primary solitude, and haven. It should be a space where we regularly converse about ourselves, and with ourselves; hence no outside business or communication should be allowed to take place there. (AUSTER, 2005, p. 270).

In this sense, a room of solitude is where people who have spent their entire lives repressing their sentiments and emotions can come to terms with who they are. It is also important to note that to achieve equilibrium, a person must take a step back and examine his life while distancing himself from outside gazes.

Auster feels his solitude is profoundly influenced by his time spent in lonely spaces, where he is occasionally blessed with the ecstasy of deep thought and inspiration and other times tormented by loneliness and self-doubt. In his life works, especially “The Invention of Isolation” and “Winter Journal”, accounts of experiences in a room of solitude are prevalent. He understands that his solitude has never been contained even with the limitations of solid, enclosed walls (ALLEN, 2020, p. 15; FOUCAULT; MISKOWIEC, 1986, p. 22). “Winter Journal” is a memoir that takes the reader on a journey of the body and spans sixty-three years of the author’s life, with “twenty stopping places, then, a score of addresses leading to the one address that may or may not prove to be permanent.” “The Invention of Solitude” approaches the spatial dimension of solitude through multiple intertextual readings of the rooms once occupied by Van Gogh, Dickinson, Ann Frank, Hölderlin, and many others. An understanding of his embodied consciousness, which begins with his sensual and physical experiences, is made easier by the detailed descriptions of his solitary quarters, the peaceful moments he spent thinking about the connection between “body” and “writing,” as well as the revelation of his numerous near-death experiences. The records are simple and unremarkable. Together, they created a reservoir for lived experiences that nourished his lonesome literary efforts.

According to Auster, a room is “the essence of isolation itself,” not just a reflection. In other words, the space represents the solitary manifested in physical space. He defined his isolation with an architectural signification and gave his room, originally a concrete building, intersubjective and intellectual details by connecting a real room with the substance of solitude. Now, a writer’s room is more than just the physical area they occupy; it also represents their philosophical existence. Auster (1998, p. 342) illustrates the gloomy days in the room at Varick Street when he felt hesitant to leave by describing this actualization of the mind, which he uses to explain the paradox of being in a space that is one’s thinking.

He generally succeeds in filling this space with his thoughts by remaining there for extended periods, which in turn seems to erase the gloom

or, at the very least, renders him ignorant of it. Every time he leaves the room, he takes his ideas with him, and as a result, the space eventually becomes empty of his efforts to occupy it. He needs to start the process again when he returns, which requires significant spiritual effort.

Auster dreads leaving the brick and concrete building because it houses his identity. He even goes so far as to associate his psychological and spiritual makeup with the room itself, remembering the reflective work he must do after leaving the room unattended. Auster imagined a metamorphosis or substitution between his physical body and his thoughts after spending a significant amount of time in the “chamber” that is his head. He gradually believes that leaving would destroy his cerebral inhabitation of space, which would require a lot of work to restore. Faced with this conflict between introspection and adventure, he suggests using memory as a bridge to connect solitudes through epistemic and perceptual dialogue.

Memory as a location, a structure, a series of columns, cornices, and porticoes. The sound of our footsteps as we move from one location to another and the sensation of our body moving about inside the mind give the impression that we are traveling from one area to another.

Memory is a container for the world, the things in it, and the body itself when interpreted spatially and given the quality of “place.” Memory is also a result of bodily observations and mental processes. When Auster asserts that “[...] memory is not only as the resuscitation of one’s history, but an immersion in the past of others,” it is expressed in an intersubjective capacity. In other words, when using memory to cross the barriers between the spatially separated solitary realms, one must be willing to accept their position in their recollections. The people who are alone are compelled to communicate with other embodied awareness. To cross the barriers between the spatially separated solitary realms, one must be willing to accept their position in their recollections. They represent relation, connection, and alteration rather than being distinct architectural existences. The lonely room is where the writer’s creative writing endeavors can bring together seemingly contradictory moments, places, deeds, and beings in a thrilling interplay.

Auster’s concept of “room,” in all its interconnected and all-encompassing manifestations, somewhat echoes Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec’s investigation of “space.” The song “Of Other Spaces” (ALLOA; CHOURAQUI; KAUSHIK, 2019, p. 165). According to Foucault and

Miskowiec, the space we occupy is never a “vacuum” where people and objects are put. The environment in which we live can be described as “[...] a collection of relations that delineates places which are irreducible to one another and not superimposable.” They introduce the idea of “heterotopias” – spaces that can be found within culture but are not limited to any locales and which are “[...] simultaneously depicted, challenged, and inverted” – to emphasize the relational character of space (AUSTER, 1998, p. 342). The two academics have proposed several principles. To start, heterotopias are not exclusive to any culture but are present in all known civilizations. Second, as history progresses, heterotopias may behave differently. An illustration of how “cemeteries” have evolved from representing sacred resurrection to emphasizing personal seclusion, blood ties, and social rank is provided. Thirdly, heterotopias are “[...] capable of juxtaposing in one actual location various places, several sites that are inherently incompatible.” (AUSTER, 1998, p. 356). For instance, the garden reflects the diversity of nature and contains plants from a variety of habitats because it is a microcosm of several geographical and climatological conditions. The fourth kind of heterotopia is the heterotopia of time, in which things that are wholly unrelated to one another and from various historical periods are combined to demonstrate the continuity of time. In their efforts to collect and conserve exhibits from various eras, museums belong here. Libraries, vacation resorts, and theme parks are just a few examples of heterotopias that Foucault and Miskowiec have already highlighted. All of these places are characterized by a concentration and accumulation of moments, natural ways of living, and strong sensations in a single locus (BALSHAW; KENNEDY, 1999, p. 404).

Auster’s “room” and Foucault and Miskowiec’s “heterotopia” might be compared to come to the realization that both notions are spaces anchored in reality and culture. They are not separate architectural systems. They instead suggest relationship, connection, and transformation. Both ideas are also complex and always changing because, in Auster’s view, “room” refers to a space large enough to accommodate both inward reflection and outer travel. The lonely room is a location where the writer’s creative writing endeavours can bring together seemingly contradictory moments, places, deeds, and beings in a thrilling interplay. So, in terms of its interconnected inclusiveness, his concept of “room” might be viewed as a specific illustration of heterotopia.

Exploring the spatiality of solitude, Auster proposes, “Memory as a room, as a body, as a skull, as a skull that encloses the room in which a body

sits,” connecting his mind – an intellectually constructed room that contains his memories – and a spatially structured room that contains his physical existence. As seen in the picture: “A man sat by himself in his apartment.” The core of Auster’s understanding of a solitary mind is this philosophical idea of reciprocal containment. His mind serves as a storage space for his memories of the past, enabling him to write and extending the boundless potential of intersubjective connections. On the other hand, his mind, which is the “room,” is also a part of the actual room with four walls. In essence, a solitary “room,” in all of its expressions, is inclusive and encompassing; as a result, when examined in Auster’s texts, the concept of “room” should never be understood as solely a writer’s location in an isolated space.

When Auster’s idea of solitude is considered in terms of how “room” and “thought” interact, a crucial component – the physical body – deserves special consideration. Without a thought firmly seated in her/his body, a writer, or any person in a room, is indifferent to the excitement, tranquility, or anguish in solitude. She or he must first place in a physical body in order to feel and consider any conjectured thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the space. Auster’s spatial solitary is therefore substantially “embodied.” When a lone person enters a room, muses over his past, and records what he thinks, his solitude within the space expands and diffuses, becoming perceptible and meaningful. In this way, despite their small size, these isolated “rooms” have a lot of promise. The “[...] outside world, the tangible universe of objects and beings, has come to seem no more than an emanation of his thought,” eventually. In conclusion, even in the most isolated space, a person is equipped with endless interaction thanks to the embodied consciousness.

The resulting impressions of interrelations blur the lines between the interior and exterior of the space, giving the embodied subject a paradoxical sense of restriction and freedom while also giving them the ability to walk through walls. In this way, the experience of body-mind oneness communicates both the enormous freedom of transcendence and the terrible confinement of containment in a solitary space. This is the comments to Chen, Liu, Lin, Kan (2022) paper.

## REFERENCES

- ADAMO, C. Merleau-Ponty. **Philosophy Today**, v. 46, n. 3, p. 32-65, 2002.
- ALFORD, S. Spaced-out: Signification and Space in Paul Auster's The New York Trilogy. **Contemporary Literature**, v. 36, n. 4, p. 13-25, 1995.
- ALLEN, B. Merleau-Ponty: Beauty, Phenomenology, and the 'Theological Turn'. **Theory, Culture & Society**, v. 26, n. 3, p. 15-33, 2020.
- ALLOA, E.; CHOURAQUI, F.; KAUSHIK, R. **Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Philosophy**. Albany: State University of New York, 2019. p. 165-175.
- AUSTER, P. **The Art of Hunger**. London: Penguin Books. p. 342-358, 1998.
- AUSTER, P. **Collected Prose**. USA: Picador, 2005. p. 62-115.
- AUSTER, P. **Report from the Interior**. London: Faber and Faber, 2014. p. 270.
- BALSHAW, M.; KENNEDY, L. **Urban Space and Representation**. London: Pluto, 1999. p. 404-423.
- BOETTCHER, N. Identity Formation in Paul Auster's Fiction Urban Space. **Romanian Journal of English Studies**, v. 10, n. 1, p. 221-234, 2013.
- BROWN, M. **Paul Auster**. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. p. 371-387.
- CHEN, R.; LIU, S.; LIN, J.; KAN, M. K. Paul Auster and August Brill's solitary rooms: the spatiality of solitude. **Trans/Form/Ação: Unesp journal of philosophy**, v. 45, n. 4, p. 183-204, 2022.
- CROSSLEY, N. Mead, Merleau-Ponty and Embodied Communication. **Journal of Pragmatics**, v. 58, n. 10, p. 46-58, 2013.
- EVINK, E. Surrender and Subjectivity: Merleau-Ponty and Patočka on Intersubjectivity. *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics*, **Phenomenology and Practical Philosophy**, v.1, n. 7, p. 13-24, 2013.
- FOUCAULT, M.; MISKOWIEC, J. Of Other Spaces. **Diacritics** 16, v. 1, n. 4, p. 22-29, 1986.
- KHAZAEI, M.; FARID, P. Lacanian Trauma & Tuché in Paul Auster's Man in the Dark. **International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature**, v. 4, n. 4, p. 211-216, 2015.
- KOCH, P. **A Philosophical Encounter**. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co, p. 264-268, 1994.
- LI, J. **The Subject, Language, and the Other – A Research on the Contemporary American Writer Paul Auster**. Shanghai: Shanghai Fudan University, 2019. p. 24-28.
- LOW, D. Merleau-Ponty and Reconsideration of Alienation. **Philosophy Today**, v. 54, n. 2, p. 199-214, 2013.



TONG, J.

MARRATTO, S. **Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity**. Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 61-367, 2012.

MERLEAU-PONTY, M. **Signs Trans**. Evanston: Northwestern University, 1964. p. 311-313.

MILDORF, J. Autobiography, the Literary, and the Everyday in Paul Auster's Report from the Interior. **Partial Answers**, v. 17, n. 1, p. 125-131, 2019.

---

Received: 10/09/2022

Approved: 12/09/2022