

# The Meaning of Simultaneity:

***From Spacetime to Timespace***

Workshop with Elie During

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Indian Institute of Technology Delhi***

14<sup>th</sup> January 2019, 10 am to 2 pm  
HSS Committee Room 5<sup>th</sup> Floor Main Building

**REGISTRATION:**

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScbRXy4JILkvnFXrHLMsUj7JcPsLICnKQ\\_QiopGKDY37PDq-ag/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScbRXy4JILkvnFXrHLMsUj7JcPsLICnKQ_QiopGKDY37PDq-ag/viewform?usp=sf_link)

**ABSTRACT:**

“Spacetime” has been the mantra of so many 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual and artistic endeavors, it has lent itself to such uses and abuses that one wonders what residual appeal it may still hold by now. What can we make of it and what can it do for us? The concept is still in circulation across a wide array of academic disciplines, from anthropology to visual studies through philosophy and literary theory, but does it still resonate on a deeper level? Aren’t physicists themselves already “beyond spacetime,” or “over” it, as some recent advances in quantum gravity seem to suggest? The wider cultural implications of these new developments need to be assessed. Yet in order to address these questions with sufficient precision, it is important to first focus on the original meaning intended by the mathematicians and physicists who introduced the new spatiotemporal scheme in the wake of Einstein’s 1905 “special” theory of relativity. We shall see that “spacetime” involves more than the mere coupling of spatial and temporal concerns. It suggests a new vision of the way multiple mobile viewpoints—cinematic *perspectives*—can be distributed across space and articulated in a consistent way. Unsurprisingly, the idea rapidly took up

among painters, architects and filmmakers, as illustrated by the critical discourse surrounding cubism, futurism, constructivism, De Stijl, etc., or the lasting impact of Giedion's *Space, Time, and Architecture*. "Spacetime" was *the* motto of avant-gardist experimentations in the twenties, just as "simultaneity" circa 1912, and for basically the same reasons. Indeed, the whole matter turns around our understanding of simultaneity or *coexistence*: the fact of being together in time. As Bergson and Whitehead quickly realized, what is at stake with Einstein is the formalization of the simultaneous unfolding of local processes within the temporal wave of universal becoming. In that respect, the blurring of the "now" achieved by relativity—and by quantum mechanics, though in a different sense—is arguably more disconcerting than the oddities of spacetime warps and black-holes associated with Einstein's name, because it forces the scientific and philosophical imagination to reframe global intuitions of connection at a distance (for the "eye," so to speak) according to strictly local concepts such as field-like causality (waves propagating across space, from place to place, in a way that the "hand" could in principle survey). This may well prove an impossible task, as demonstrated by Italo Calvino in his *Cosmicomics* (the short novel entitled "The Light Years" will serve as an imaginative introduction to the basic principles behind the relativistic concept of simultaneity: I recommend that every participant in the workshop reads it beforehand). A glance at recent artistic experimentations on "time-space" (rather than space-time, to follow Heidegger's suggestion) will help us make sense of the asynchronous and somewhat staggering quality that temporal experience acquires when it is approached from the perspective of simultaneity.

**Suggested reading:**

Bergson, H. (1999). *Duration and Simultaneity: Bergson and the Einsteinian Universe*. Manchester: Clinamen Press, chap. 3.

Calvino, I. (1968), "The Light Years", in *Cosmicomics*, trans. W. Weaver, New York, Harcourt and Brace.

During, E. (2016). "Coexistence and the Flow of Time" (English version of a paper published in Japanese).

Einstein, A. (1921). *Relativity: the Special and General Theory*. New York: Holt, chap. 8 and 9.

Kant, I. (1770). *Inaugural Dissertation*, §13-14.

Sartre, J.-P. (2012). *War Diaries: Notebooks of a Phoney War, 1939-1940*, trans. Q. Hoare, London, Verso, p. 65-66.

Whitehead, A. N. (1971). *The Concept of Nature*. Cambridge: The University Press, chap. 3.

Whitehead, A. N. (1925). *Science and the Modern World*. New York: Macmillan, chap. 7-8.

**ELIE DURING** is associate professor of philosophy in the University of Paris Ouest – Nanterre. His research circles the philosophical reception of the theory of relativity and the notion of spacetime at the juncture of metaphysics, science, and aesthetics, where the durations of mind and matter appear to intersect. He is the author of *Bergson et Einstein: la querelle du temps* (PUF, forthcoming, 2018) and a forthcoming book on *Physics and media* co-written with Christina Vagt.