

# EVERYTHING FLOWS

THE ART OF GETTING 'IN THE ZONE'

## THE ZONE SUKHDEV SANDHU

The zone. It's such a resonant word. Resonant like half-remembered dreams. Resonant like woozy memories of events I'm not sure if I witnessed first hand or saw via video cassettes. Or perhaps I'm suffering from trace residues of an adolescence watching re-runs of *The Twilight Zone*, a spooky American science fiction television series from the early 1960s. In those days 'zone' - the word itself - seemed remote, exotic even. Not just because, starting with a 'z', it felt distant from the rest of the alphabet, but because - and I'm happy to be proven completely wrong about this - it just wasn't heard very often; it had a spectral, eerily inviting quality that was a product of its semantic scarcity.

Nowadays, zones appear to be all the rage. They are - in the most literal sense - big business. Open *The Financial Times* or *The Economist* and almost every page will be studded with reports of Ecozones and Industrial Zones and Free Trade Zones and Export Processing Zones. They are the emerging cartographies of globalisation, in-between spaces that are neither national (being established as market-driven, laissez-faire alternatives to the rest of the country from whose laws they may be exempt) nor international (they still employ mostly locals). They're both distinctive and yet, at least in the popular imagination, generic non-places, soulless landscapes given over to warehouses, shipping containers and industrial parks.

But why do I still assume these zones, both as places and as ideas, exist somewhere 'out there'? They've been around in this country since the early 1980s. The Conservative government introduced them. The Isle of Dogs, home to Canary Wharf and London Docklands, was one of them. And now another twenty one are due to be created at blurrily-monikered spots such as Boots Campus in Nottingham, Greater Manchester Airport, and Humber Estuary Renewable Energy Super Cluster where they will act as part-hubs, part-symbols of Britain's status as a high-tech, high-knowledge citadel.

That symbolic bit is key: 'zones', at least to 'experience engineers' and naming consultants, connote freshness, modernity, regeneration. Is it any wonder that the Millennium Dome was made up of zones (such as 'Body', sponsored by Boots, 'Learning' by Tesco)? Or that, with everything from Event Zones to Brand-Exclusion Zones, Airspace Security Zones to the Olympic Zone itself, this summer's Games are too? Maybe it's an age thing, but this zonal impulse among politicians and planners always sound off-key to me; the funky freshness of the re-labelling sits at odds with, is maybe even contradicted by, the creakiness of civic life as most British people experience it - crappy infrastructure, mediocre transport networks, declining public services. Lots of people, for all sorts of reasons, feel out of step with the present day; the language of zones, their lexical imprint if you like, contributes to that estrangement and unbelonging, that sense of being a victim of a coercive and flawed modernity.

But maybe I'm wrong. I often am. Zones aren't always as militaristic or threatening as the Korean DMZ. They don't have to evoke ghastly memories of the incredibly named Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Zone of Alienation created after the reactor disaster there in 1986. There's a different kind of Zone - again, part-physical, part-pure headspace - that Hakim Bey (originally christened Peter Lamborn Wilson and himself simultaneously a mainstay of modern cultural thought and rather fugitive) discusses in his work on the 'Temporary Autonomous Zone': it's something that exists without the permission of the State, something that's joyous, impermanent, uninterested in money or class or partitions. It could be a squat, a party, a free festival. It's a terrain that defines itself by the kind of society to which it's an antidote (you drop out), but also by the kind of anything-goes ambience it in turn creates (you tune in).

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The Burning Man Festival is sometimes described as a TAZ, but not many other places are. So is a TAZ more of a speculative cartography? Is it a theory masquerading as a real site? I ask that question, but I'm a bit embarrassed by it. Why? Because 'masquerading' sounds too heavy, too negative. And also because the question assumes there's a clear-cut separation between an idea and a physical site. Perhaps a philosopher may be able to justify one, but I can't: like Jay-Z rapping on 'Empire State of Mind', or Iain Sinclair writing about psychogeography, I don't think it's very interesting to talk about 'real places' as such; rather, I prefer to think in terms of 'mood-spaces'.

Still, it's hard to talk about mood-spaces without sounding vague or uselessly autobiographical. Perhaps that's why this essay has been taking me so long to think through and write. I know that lots of people use the idea of the zone – or of being 'in the zone' - in quite a precise fashion; for them it's about being located in a corridor, under spotlights. It's about focus, concentration, clarity. About ridding oneself of mental clutter, disabling hesitations or self-doubt, extraneous baggage. That's why it's a phrase that I'm a little shy of: being 'in the zone' - the art and importance of it – sounds like the kind of slogan an insanely well-remunerated team of sports-shoe creatives would come up with. It makes me feel as if I'm being kettled by modern advertising.

Yet, slightly sheepishly, I find myself using the word – and the phrase – a lot. It's so modern, so *au courant*. Friends use it too. Like them, I'm attracted to and repelled by 'zones'. The term is almost unavoidable, and yet – or perhaps because of that – I want to avoid it. But I can't, at least not for very long, and the reason, or so I'm starting to think, is because of the way it both creates and taps into a contemporary force-field into which questions of space, place and displacement are all equally dragged.

At some level, the idea of the zone – its special resonances, its status as a strange attractor – derives from the kind of place it's not. City, nation, island, state: those are still real entities, people believe in them and are all too often prepared to die in defence or in laying claim to them, and yet - and yet - it's hard not to think they sound a touch old-fashioned, units of identity mired in the twentieth century. Zones are also real things, and underpinned by vast judicial heft, but they're also amorphous, abstracted: how many of us can readily describe what an Ecozone or an Export Processing Zone looks like? These places, proliferating and vital parts in the circuitry and infrastructure of the modern world, are mostly invisible to us. Like quangos. Like tax havens, the EU, the IMF, Scientology. This invisibility imbues them with mystique and power: they are the secret wiring of now.

Huge yet fugitive, everywhere and nowhere, most of us interface with zone logic when we're involved with digital networks. All internet or mobile-phone users, even those in AC-less cybershacks in Peshawar back alleys or living in a ghetto in Kinshasa, navigate and are navigated through by communication technologies. Clicking and scrolling, clicking and scrolling, through and across an infinity of tabs and windows, marinating in the endless flow of text and imagery. One link leads to another, one site opens onto another. Deeper and deeper and deeper. As the hours drift by, can we even remember how and why we found ourselves looking at the page or feed or stream before us? Does it matter? We're in a mood-space. We're buzzed and euphoric. We're in click trance.

Isn't this good? Doesn't it feel right? Don't we feel like one of Hakim Bey's anarchist cosmonauts, liberated from the dead weight of time and place and fixity? Haven't we become – or felt like we've become - digital diviners? We're looking for infomatic Shangri Las, pixellated Lost Horizons. Skipping across eras, continents, media formats, indifferent to roots and origins, set adrift on immemorial bliss. Somewhere, maybe just one click away, is the ultimate gif, the meme that wins, the killer tweet. Trending trending: we can feel the force, share the surge. Scanning, zooming, tracking: you're in constant roaming mode. An outsider seeking to get inside. But where is the inside? Is there one? The zone – its seductive, appalling, ineffable otherness: does it even exist?

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I don't know. This idea of the zone as special or exalted place - be it for the manufacture and delivery of industrial components, the embodiment of an economic idea, arriving at some ROFL 'Eureka!', to realise an ultra-optimised peak of performative brilliance - is intoxicating. But I wonder if it's a mirage. Fool's gold. If it's selling us the chimaera of immateriality, an odourless, streamlined, Feng Shui'd world that exists beyond our own pungent, messy realm. To be in the zone is to be maximally in and of the world. But it's also to be flexibly, liquidly, handily somewhere else. It offers us freedoms but tethers us to the treadmill of post-industrial, hyper-individualised ideology. Allure and danger, pleasures and poisons. Most of all, it promises us a state of exception. But states of exception are, in reality rather than in theory, as ensnaring and deforming as they are empowering or transcendental.

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