

ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS



Tim Ingold

Lines

ROUTLEDGE



Lines

‘ . . . this is a vibrant read – at times when reading I shouted aloud, “Yes, spot on!” At other times I paced the room and exclaimed in frustration “No!” That Ingold’s writing can produce such dramatic effects is a testament to the quality of his argument. Do I recommend reading this book? Definitely.’

Cambridge Archaeological Journal

‘ . . . it is difficult to see the world the same way after reading this book. As Ingold shows, earlier conceptions of speech and writing were intimately interconnected with movement, and as wayfarers journey through the world, neither they nor the book’s reader are the same as when they started . . . Highly recommended.’

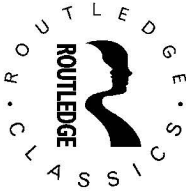
CHOICE

What do walking, weaving, observing, storytelling, singing, drawing and writing have in common? The answer is that they all proceed along lines. In this extraordinary book Tim Ingold imagines a world in which everyone and everything consists of interwoven or interconnected lines and lays the foundations for a completely new discipline: the anthropological archaeology of the line.

Ingold’s argument leads us through the music of Ancient Greece and contemporary Japan, Siberian labyrinths and Roman roads, Chinese calligraphy and the printed alphabet, weaving a path between antiquity and the present. Drawing on a multitude of disciplines including archaeology, classical studies, art history, linguistics, psychology, musicology, philosophy and many others, and including more than seventy illustrations, this book takes us on an exhilarating intellectual journey that will change the way we look at the world and how we go about in it.

With a new preface by the author.

Tim Ingold is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, UK. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He is the author of several other renowned works of anthropology including *Being Alive*, *The Perception of the Environment* and *Making* (all available from Routledge).



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Tim
Ingold

Lines

A Brief History

With a new preface by the author



London and New York

First published in Routledge Classics 2016
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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First published by Routledge 2007

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested.

ISBN: 978-1-138-64039-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-62532-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Joanna MT by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was conceived in July 2000, when I received an invitation from Fionna Ashmore, then Director of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, to deliver the Rhind Lectures for 2003. These lectures, delivered annually on a subject pertaining to history, archaeology or anthropology, have been given since 1876. They commemorate Alexander Henry Rhind of Sibster (1833–63), a noted Scottish antiquary, born in Wick, who is remembered above all for his pioneering work on the Ancient Egyptian tombs of Thebes. I felt very privileged to have been invited to deliver the lectures and, thinking that the three years' notice would give me ample time to prepare, I eagerly accepted. I had been looking for an excuse to set aside some time to work on a topic by which I had long been fascinated but which I knew little about, namely the comparative history of the relation between speech, song, writing and musical notation. For my title I chose 'Lines from the past: towards an anthropological archaeology of inscriptive practices'.

Of course the time I thought I would have to prepare the lectures never materialized. It never does. The years from 2000 to 2003 were hectic. I had arrived at the University of Aberdeen only the year before, charged with establishing a new programme of teaching and research in anthropology, and this had absorbed the greater part of my energies. Indeed the programme had got off to a very good start, and by 2003 we already had our own Department of Anthropology, a nucleus of highly committed staff, and a growing cohort of research students. The first students from the University with honours degrees in Anthropology would be graduating in the summer of that year. With all this going on time flew by, until it suddenly dawned on me, around March 2003, that I had little more than a month left to prepare the lectures. Putting everything else on hold, and without much of an idea

of how my topic would develop, I set to work on my theme of language, music and notation.

It was slow going at first, but somehow – and much to my surprise – the subject ‘took off’ in a way that I had never anticipated, so that what I had initially set out to accomplish turned out to be but a launch pad for a much broader and more ambitious inquiry into human line-making in all its forms. It was as though, almost by accident, I had struck intellectual gold. From then on, I am not sure whether it was I who was writing the lectures or the lectures that were writing me. They just seemed to tumble out. Still scribbling on the train down to Edinburgh, with the series due to begin that evening, I had all but the final lecture written – and for that I had to improvise once the script ran out. Fortunately, I don’t think anyone noticed. Thus the lectures were duly delivered, at the Royal Museum of Scotland, over three days, 2–4 May 2003. To be able to set out my ideas ‘in the raw’, to an appreciative audience, over six 50-minute lectures all crammed into one long weekend, was a unique opportunity and an unforgettable experience. It was like the kind of conference you can only dream about, when you are the only speaker, when everyone has come to listen to you and no one else, and when you can have all the time you could possibly wish for to set out your ideas. For this opportunity, and for the hospitality extended to me and my family, I would like to express my appreciation to Fionna Ashmore, to the then President of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Lisbeth Thoms, and to the Society itself.

Once the lectures were over, thoughts turned to publication. Realizing that it would take decades of work to do justice to the subject, and that this was probably beyond my competence anyway, I initially resolved to write up the lectures more or less as they were, in a rough-and-ready form, without even attempting to refine them further. I knew there were gaps to fill, and that I needed to reorder some of the material, but otherwise that would be that. But once again, the usual pressures of academic life took over. First I was going to do the work over the summer of 2003, then it was put off to the following summer, and then to the summer following that, but there was always something more urgent to do. And all the while, my ideas were moving on.

I had opportunities to present what eventually became Chapter 1 of this book to the Laurence seminar on ‘Sensory Perceptions’ in the Faculty of Classics, Cambridge University, in May 2003 and some time later to the Anthropology Seminar at the London School of Economics. An early draft of Chapter 2 was presented at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Oxford, and subsequently, in May 2005, as an invited lecture at the Department of Archaeology, University of Porto, Portugal, for which I have particularly to thank my host Vitor Jorge. Chapter 3 acquired its current form and title through having been presented as part of a seminar series in the School of Anthropological Studies at Queen’s

University, Belfast, and was later presented to the conference 'Culture, Nature, Semiotics: Locations IV', in Tallinn and Tartu, Estonia (September 2004) and the Fifth International Space Syntax Symposium, Delft University of Technology (June 2005). Although the material of the remaining three chapters (4–6) has not otherwise been presented, I should note that Chapter 5 actually began life as a Munro Lecture presented at the University of Edinburgh way back in 1995. Although almost everything about it has changed since then, I think this is where my interest in the theme of 'writing technology', the subject of the lecture, first began to bear fruit.

My ideas over the past few years have also been influenced by my involvement in a major project of research funded by the (then) Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) for the three years 2002–05, with the hopelessly cumbersome title 'Learning is understanding in practice: exploring the interrelations between perception, creativity and skill'. Indeed in many ways this book is one outcome of the project, and I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to the AHRB for its support. The project was carried out in collaboration between the Department of Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen and the School of Fine Art at Dundee University, and involved an ethnographic study of the knowledge practices of fine art, conducted among students at Dundee, complemented by an Aberdeen-based study of the applicability of practical, studio-based approaches in fine art to teaching and learning in anthropology. As a context for this latter study, I designed and taught a course called 'The 4 As: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture', which I first presented to advanced undergraduate students in the spring semester of 2004, and have repeated in the subsequent two years. Not only did the students taking the course hear a lot about lines, they also contributed a great many ideas of their own from which I have directly benefited, and I am grateful to them all.

I am indebted, moreover, to Murdo Macdonald, who co-directed the project with me, to Wendy Gunn, who carried out most of the work and whose ideas have – over the years – profoundly shaped my own, and to Ray Lucas, whose AHRB-funded doctoral research was an integral part of the project. Ray's research, a wide-ranging and cross-disciplinary study of inscriptive practices and notations as tools of thought, meshed extremely closely with my own interests in line-making, and it has been a privilege to work with him. Two other outcomes of the project should be mentioned, both of which have influenced the present book. The first was the exhibition 'Fieldnotes and Sketchbooks', designed by Wendy Gunn and displayed at Aberdeen Art Gallery from April to June 2005. The exhibition explored notational and descriptive uses of the line across the disciplines of art, architecture and anthropology. The second was the conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists on 'Creativity and Cultural Improvisation', which

my colleague Elizabeth Hallam and I convened at the University of Aberdeen in April 2005. It was a pleasure working with Liz, and many of her ideas, along with ideas arising from the conference itself, have found their way into this book.

People draw lines, of course, not only by gesturing with their hands but also by walking around. This is a theme of Chapter 3 of the present book, which to some extent embodies the results of a project entitled 'Culture from the ground: walking, movement and placemaking', funded by an award from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (February 2004 to April 2006), in which we explored how walking binds time and place in people's experience, relationships and life-histories. I am indebted to the ESRC for its support, and to Jo Lee, who carried out the ethnographic research for the project and has been a constant source of ideas and support. However, I have more reason than that to be grateful to the ESRC, for in 2005 the Council awarded me a three-year Professorial Fellowship for a programme of work entitled 'Explorations in the Comparative Anthropology of the Line'.

In the longer term, the extended period of research leave that this affords will give me the possibility to develop further some of the ideas that are only adumbrated in this book. In the immediate term, however, I have to confess that without this leave I would never have been able to finish the book at all. Having already put it off by two years, my plan had been to complete the book in the summer of 2005, before my Fellowship started. Ironically, however, it was the ESRC itself that scuppered that plan, by requiring me – along with numerous colleagues up and down the land – to devote the only time we might have had for research to collecting data and filling up forms for its postgraduate training recognition exercise. Indeed between the massively bureaucratized and time-consuming operations of funding research on the one hand, and of having it assessed on the other, only the smallest chinks remain to actually carry it out, and one must be grateful for any opportunity for these chinks to be opened up. Even as I write, having put all else aside for the past month to finish the book, I am being chased for my now delayed draft of our Department's entry for the next Research Assessment Exercise!

I do not, however, wish to end on a note of complaint. I would rather like to acknowledge, and indeed to celebrate, the support I have been lucky enough to have had from so many people. Ideas, information, suggestions for reading and so on have literally poured in from all quarters. Too many individuals have helped for me to be able to list them all, so rather than naming names I shall simply say a big thank-you to everyone. You know who you are. An especially big thank-you goes to all my colleagues at the Department of Anthropology at Aberdeen University, who are the finest set of colleagues that anyone could wish for, to my students from whom I have

learned so much, and to all the members of my family who have kept me alive. One, in particular, played a rather crucial role in bringing me into the world in the first place. Now 101 years of age, he will be the first to read this book, and it is his line that I am carrying on with it. He, too, knows who he is, and I dedicate the book to him.

TIM INGOLD
ABERDEEN

September 2006

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PREFACE TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

'Is it a theory? Is it a metaphor?' Seated around a large rectangular table, my inquisitors – a panel of distinguished social scientists charged with selecting among candidates for the award of prestigious professorial fellowships – wanted to know what, exactly, I had in mind in proposing a project of research on 'the comparative anthropology of the line'. The line is not the name of a theory, I responded, nor do I invoke it as a figure to conjure up, by analogy, some property or properties of the world that would form the topic of my inquiry. Lines, I insisted, are phenomena in themselves. They are really there, in us and around us. Indeed there is no escaping them, for in any attempt to flee we only lay another one. Whether the panel got the point, I do not know, as I was not party to their deliberations, but they awarded me a fellowship anyway – which was just as well, for had they not done so, it is certain that *Lines* would never have been completed. But I have often pondered their question, as it is one that many others have subsequently posed. Why should theory and metaphor be thought to be the only alternatives for the line? Why cannot the line be just as real as whatever passes along it, if indeed the two can be distinguished at all? And if the idea that lines can be real is alien to our sensibilities, then what was it that tipped me into this strange world of entanglement? So far I have come up with three possible answers, each of which – I think – contains a grain of truth.

The first possible answer lies in my upbringing. My father was a mycologist, whose specialism was the study of microscopic fungi that would accumulate in the brackish water of riverside pools. His was a homely science, involving walks along river banks from which he would return with phials filled with water samples to be investigated under a microscope set up on our dining room table. He had rigged up a contraption involving a pile of volumes of the

Encyclopaedia Britannica, a glass plate, and an early version of the anglepoise lamp, which allowed him to project the forms of the fungi revealed under the microscope so that they could be accurately drawn. This he did with the utmost care, using a mapping pen, Indian ink and Bristol board. Though he would never say so, this was his way of honouring the forms of nature – of not just contemplating their beauty but knowing them from the inside – and the results were true works of art. He loved his fungi. What I did not fully realize at the time, however, was that as a field of the botanical sciences, mycology is a deeply subversive discipline. For fungi simply do not conform to our normal intuitions of what living organisms should be. They do not have insides or outsides, nor do they interact with the environment along any external boundary. Rather, the fungal mycelium is a web of linear fibres, radiating in all directions, with no inside or outside, no coherent skin, permeating its surroundings rather than set over against them. What if we were to take the mycelium as our exemplar of the organism? Arguably, the whole of biological science would be different. And so, too, would the science of society be different, were every person to be considered – like the mycelium – as a thing of lines, and the social as the domain of their entanglement. Perhaps that is why my interlocutors, seated around their rectangular table, found the idea of an anthropology of the line so disconcerting.

A second possible answer lies in my own anthropological apprenticeship which long ago, in 1970–1, took me to the northeast corner of Finland for a 16-month period of fieldwork among Skolt Saami people. There, I did what I was supposed to do, participating as far as I could in activities of livelihood such as reindeer herding and fishing, visiting households, collecting material on family, kinship and domestic life, and following the ins and outs of political negotiations between the Skolts and their Saami and non-Saami neighbours, and with the organs of government and their representatives. I wrote everything down in notes, on which I drew for my doctoral dissertation. But these months in the field were also a formative period for me. They were often lonely. In Lapland you are not surrounded by people all the time; on the contrary, you have to go out of your way to find them, and the sheer vastness of the environment, and its hollow silence, can be overwhelming. Here, the fieldworker is thrown largely on his own devices: it was expected of me, as of everyone else, that I should follow my own path and find things out for myself. Everybody has their personal path and is known by it, and familiarity with the landscape lies in the ability to recognize these paths from traces on the ground or little signs placed here and there on rocks or trees, or from old fireplaces. Paths have their stories just as people do. Literally following in the footsteps of my Saami mentors, and endeavouring to learn by example, I also acquired a certain manner of carrying on, of combining movement and attention, which I have come to call ‘wayfaring’. But unlike the observations

that filled my notebooks, this manner crept up on me unawares. I did not really notice it at the time. Without that experience, however, I doubt that I would ever have come to write this book.

The third thing that may possibly have lured me into the world of lines is my experience as a cellist. Just before my twelfth birthday, my mother bought me a cello and arranged for me to have lessons at school. I was still playing when I embarked on postgraduate research, and even had my cello with me in the field – though it felt a little incongruous there. For some two decades after that, as my wife and I had our hands full with raising our own family, the cello was left in a corner, unplayed and unloved, until my mother's death prompted me to take it up again. I felt I owed it to her. I was surprised to find that, though rusty, I had not completely lost the art, and I have been playing ever since, as often as I can. There must be something about this instrument, because I have noticed that of the many readers of *Lines* who have written to comment on one aspect or another of the argument, and who really seem to 'get it', a disproportionate number also turn out to be cellists, or to have played the instrument for some time of their lives. Is it because it is a supremely gestural instrument, from which the player pulls a melody as if he were stretching out a line – much as the spinner pulls a thread from a distaff? Is it because the bow goes back and forth across the taut strings as does the weaver's shuttle across the warp threads of the loom? Is it because the fingerboard is itself like a landscape in which the player has to find his or her way, and in which every note is like a place you find, blessed with its own peculiar vibrational properties, harmonic resonances and timbre? Though these ideas may not be clearly articulated, I think they may nevertheless explain why for many cellists, parallels with spinning, weaving and wayfaring seem to come so naturally.

In *Lines*, my father's mycological investigations, my own fieldwork among the Saami, and my attempts to master the cello, have all left their traces. Chapter 1 includes a page from my heavily notated copy of the sixth of Johann Sebastian Bach's famous set of cello suites; in Chapter 2, you will find one of my father's drawings – of a fungal mycelium, and in Chapter 3, I recall how Saami herdsmen would practise their wayfaring not only when moving on foot or by ski but even when astride a power-driven snowmobile. Personally, I found the experience of writing the book to be particularly satisfying in the way it brought together the musical, the familial and the anthropological dimensions of my life. Indeed for me it opened up a new phase in thinking which is continuing to bear fruit in work I have written since, for example in several chapters of my collection of essays *Being Alive* (2011), in the final chapter 'Drawing the Line' of my book *Making* (2013), and most recently in *The Life of Lines* (2015), in which my particular focus is on the relation between lines and atmosphere. But I have also been astonished by the attention that

Lines has received in the nine years since I completed it. Perhaps as befits the nature of its subject, the book seems to have wormed its way into corners of practice and scholarship that were scarcely known to me, or in which I am still something of a novice, and it has opened up all sorts of conversations as a result – with architects and designers, artists and calligraphers, poets and painters, weavers and basket-makers, musicians and composers, dancers and choreographers, environmentalists and geographers, theologians and philosophers, and students of language and literature in all its forms. The book has inspired at least two exhibitions of contemporary art – one at the City Art Gallery in Edinburgh (May–July 2012) and the other at the Pompidou Centre in Metz (January–April 2013) – and it has been translated into French, Spanish and Japanese.

All this attention has been most gratifying. But it has also been a puzzle to me that the one discipline of the humanities in which the book remains an outlier is my own, of anthropology. I have often wondered why this should be. For me, the great thing about anthropology is that it affords a freedom allowed by few other scholarly disciplines to follow one's own bent, to think outside the box of academic convention, and to write in ways that answer to the challenges of lived experience. In this sense, *Lines* is a thoroughly anthropological book. Yet I sometimes think that the book also marks the moment at which anthropology and I finally parted company. Perhaps this should be of no concern. In these days of mandatory interdisciplinarity, in which disciplinary scholarship is frowned upon if not actively discouraged, it should not matter to live one's life – as I have often felt myself to be living mine – as a buccaneer on the high seas of scholarship, raiding any ships that happen to cross my bows for the riches they might contain. Yet like many others, I also find the official rhetoric of interdisciplinarity stultifying. For it is a rhetoric driven by the impatient and incessant demands for data and results imposed by an aggressively neoliberal economy of knowledge. *Lines* stands for a different kind of scholarship – a kind that takes its time, that is generous in its commitments towards those from whom we have so much to learn, open-ended in its resistance to the sorts of final solutions that have wreaked such havoc in human history, comparative in its recognition that things can always be otherwise, and critical in the sense that we can never be content with things as they are. These qualities are, for me, of the essence of anthropology, and they are why, despite all temptations from other disciplines, I continue to think of myself as an anthropologist.

Aberdeen, November 2015

TIM INGOLD

INTRODUCTION

What do walking, weaving, observing, singing, storytelling, drawing and writing have in common? The answer is that they all proceed along lines of one kind or another. In this book I aim to lay the foundations for what might be called a comparative anthropology of the line. So far as I know, nothing quite like this has been attempted before. Indeed when I have broached the idea to friends and colleagues, their initial response has usually been one of blank incredulity. Did they mishear me: was I talking about lions? 'No', I would answer, 'I mean lines, not lions.' Their bafflement was understandable. The line? This is hardly the kind of thing that has served traditionally as the focus of our attention. We have anthropological studies of visual art, of music and dance, of speech and writing, of craft and material culture, but not of the production and significance of lines. Yet it takes only a moment's reflection to recognize that lines are everywhere. As walking, talking and gesticulating creatures, human beings generate lines wherever they go. It is not just that line-making is as ubiquitous as the use of the voice, hands and feet – respectively in speaking, gesturing and moving around – but rather that it subsumes all these aspects of everyday human activity and, in so doing, brings them together into a single field of inquiry. This is the field that I seek to delineate.

It was not, however, with such grandiose preoccupations that I first set out along this path. On the contrary, I had been perplexed by a particular problem that, on the face of it, has nothing to do with lines at all. It was the problem of how we have come to distinguish between speech and song. The fact is that this distinction, at least in the form in which we recognize it nowadays, is relatively recent in the history of the Western world. For much of this history, music was understood as a verbal art. That is, the musical

essence of song lay in the sonority of its words. Yet we have somehow arrived today at a notion of music as 'song without words', stripped of its verbal component. And complementing that, we have also arrived at a notion of language as a system of words and meanings that is given quite independently of its actual voicing in the sounds of speech. Music has become wordless; language has been silenced. How can this have come about? The search for an answer led me from mouth to hand, from vocal declamations to manual gestures, and to the relation between these gestures and the marks they leave on surfaces of various kinds. Could it be that the silencing of language had something to do with changes in the way writing itself is understood: as an art of verbal composition rather than manual inscription? My inquiry into line-making had begun.

I soon discovered, however, that it was not enough to focus only on the lines themselves, or on the hands that produced them. I had also to consider the relation between lines and the surfaces on which they are drawn. Somewhat daunted by the sheer profusion of different kinds of line, I resolved to draw up a provisional taxonomy. Though even this left many loose ends, two kinds of line did seem to stand out from the rest, and I called them threads and traces. Yet on closer inspection, threads and traces appeared to be not so much categorically different as transforms of one another. Threads have a way of turning into traces, and vice versa. Moreover, whenever threads turn into traces, surfaces are formed, and whenever traces turn into threads, they are dissolved. Following through these transformations took me from the written word, whence I had commenced my inquiry, into the twists and turns of the labyrinth, and into the crafts of embroidery and weaving. And it was through the weaving of textiles that I eventually returned, by this roundabout route, to the written text. Yet whether encountered as a woven thread or as a written trace, the line is still perceived as one of movement and growth. How come, then, that so many of the lines we come up against today seem so static? Why does the very mention of the word 'line' or 'linearity', for many contemporary thinkers, conjure up an image of the alleged narrow-mindedness and sterility, as well as the single-track logic, of modern analytic thought?

Anthropologists have a habit of insisting that there is something essentially linear about the way people in modern Western societies comprehend the passage of history, generations and time. So convinced are they of this, that any attempt to find linearity in the lives of non-Western people is liable to be dismissed as mildly ethnocentric at best, and at worst as amounting to collusion in the project of colonial occupation whereby the West has ruled its lines over the rest of the world. Alterity, we are told, is non-linear. The other side of this coin, however, is to assume that life is lived authentically on the spot, in places rather than along paths. Yet how could there be