

## Lost in the City: Cognitive (social) Mapping and Contemporary Fiction<sup>1</sup>

... London is an old man with bad breath. If you listen, you can hear the sob of weariness catching in his lungs. Unlovely London. Even the name holds heavy stress.<sup>2</sup>

When considering how, in contemporary fiction, subjectivity may be negotiated and contested by notions of physical space, the city emerges as particularly interesting; not least because much postmodern fiction focuses upon the disorientated protagonist's plight to escape the apparent alienation which the ever-degenerating city imposes upon him. Within such texts, the city is often presented alongside characters as an omnipotent nemesis, constantly contesting, and subsequently mediating, identity. As such, characters are frequently seen as being both conditioned by, and an extension of, their surrounding urban environment. Prior to exploring specific literary examples, and as a means to illustrate some of the concerns I will be exploring in this paper, I should like to start with a brief analysis of two visual representations of the city.

Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson's 1920 painting *The Soul of a Soulless City*<sup>3</sup> - originally entitled *New York Abstraction*, the piece was renamed following the artist's subsequent disillusionment with the city – offers an interesting representation of the modern city. The painting presents the viewer with an image of a rail track running towards a cluster of skyscrapers, and clearly seeks to epitomize the growing tension in the modern metropolis between man and technology; certainly, flanked on either side by what one can assume to be tenement housing blocks, the track encapsulates the assault of modern dynamism upon the city space. Moreover, the track itself appears to serve as a transcendental corridor, transporting one from the dreary browns and beiges of the residential zone into the Utopian commercial centre; the clouds seemingly part, allowing the sunlight to beam through in an almost celestial manner. Such an apotheosis is perhaps suggestive of capitalism's movement from the personal to the economic. Indeed, the fact that there are no human subjects present in the painting, but rather only the iconic representations of Western

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally conceived as 'Lost and Found: Anonymity, Cognitive Mapping and Urban Archiving in the Fiction of Jon McGregor' in *Nottingham Working Papers in Contemporary Fiction (1): Jon McGregor* ed. Sean Matthews (Nottingham, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note* (2005), p. 85

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=26401&roomid=2658>

capitalism (i.e. skyscrapers), further attests to the debilitating impact of the city onto human consciousness; for it would seem that in the city, the individual is fundamentally irrelevant.

Similar concerns are present also in more recent representations of the city. Captured by American photographer Roe Etheridge in 2003, *14<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, Atlanta*<sup>4</sup> again displays a tension between the city and technology, with the highway creating a large rupture within the cityscape. The dowdy browns and beiges of the foreground are, like those in Nevinson's painting, contrasted with the brighter tones that depict the commercial area. The trajectory of the highway, in a similar way to the earlier piece's railway track, helps draw the viewer's eyes towards the commercial region, again seemingly suggesting the dominance of the economic over all other districts. Moreover, the evidence of construction work, depicted on the left of the photograph, is usefully suggestive of the potential of the city to alter and shift its landscape; this is by no means a static, constant zone, but rather a fluid space, able to continually morph into more and more (economically) desirable forms. Similarly to Nevinson's portrayal of the city, however, perhaps of most interest is the apparent negation of the human subject. This is an environment in which the commercial and the technological collide, leaving absolutely no space for the individual. It is telling that the presumed drivers and passengers of the various vehicles are absent from view, suggesting that those wishing to enter or leave the city are able to do so only through sacrificing their identity and embracing the technological; within the city the individual ceases to exist. Furthermore, the blurred outline of a mesh fence, evident in the immediate foreground of the photograph, serves as an effective framing device: such an image can be captured, and indeed viewed, only in a space that is *external* to the city itself. The observer too, then, is excluded from the space, with the fence serving both as a physical and a metaphorical barrier separating the individual from the city.

The notion of the negation, or effective dislocation, of the individual from the urban space is further apparent in fictional treatments of the city. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would appear to be the obvious encapsulation of such an idea and clearly, the text presents concerns similar to those evident in the previous examples discussed. Winston, surveying his immediate environment, concludes that:

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.thecontemporary.org/gallery\\_2004.asp](http://www.thecontemporary.org/gallery_2004.asp)

the truly characteristic thing about modern life was not its cruelty and insecurity, but simply its bareness, its dinginess, its listlessness. Life, if you looked about you, bore no resemblance not only to the lies that streamed out of the telescreens, but even to the ideals that the Party was trying to achieve. [...] The reality was decaying, dingy cities where underfed people shuffled to and fro in leaky shoes, in patched-up nineteenth-century houses that smelt always of cabbage and dustbins.<sup>5</sup> He seemed to see a vision of London, vast and ruinous, city of a million dustbins.<sup>5</sup>

Seemingly pre-emptive of Foucault's assertion that 'we live in a society where panopticism reigns,'<sup>6</sup> Orwell's representation poses the city as a space which, subject to the manipulation of the Party, serves to inhibit individuality and instead impose subjective servitude through the functioning of both repressive and ideological apparatuses. William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* further suggests the negation of the individual within the urban space:

All benches were removed from the city, all fountains turned off, all flowers and trees destroyed. Huge electric buzzers on the top of every apartment house (everyone lived in apartments) rang the quarter hour. Often the vibrations would throw people out of bed. Searchlights played over the town all night (no one was permitted to use shades, curtains, shutters or blinds).<sup>7</sup>

The motif of the identity-suppressing city remains central within more recent fiction, with Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* offering a salient depiction of the constantly shifting, but ever-oppressive city:

When you live in the city, you learn to take nothing for granted. Close your eyes for a moment, turn around to look at something else, and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone. Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you [...] Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it.<sup>8</sup>

The city is here presented as a space which, in its festering state of degeneration, gorges itself upon its inhabitants until all that remain are vacant humanoid shells. Everything in the city, including human consciousness, is seen to be transient. Moreover, as the cityscape decays and crumbles, so too consciousness and self-awareness appear to rupture and fragment:

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<sup>5</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eight-Four* (1989), p. 77

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Juridical Forms' in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Vol. 3 ed. James D. Faubion (2002), p. 58

<sup>7</sup> William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (1993), p. 32

<sup>8</sup> Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things* (1989), pp. 1-2

Wherever buildings have fallen or garbage has gathered, large mounds stand in the middle of the street, blocking all passage [...] You never know which streets to take and which to avoid. Bit by bit, the city robs you of certainty.<sup>9</sup>

Victim to the continually shifting urban environment, the individual becomes disorientated, evermore vulnerable to the pernicious influence of the decaying terrain; as the city disappears under an ever-growing mound of rubble, so too does any semblance of humanity. While perhaps extreme in their portrayal, the above depictions of city life would seem to be part of a larger literary tradition that is keen to emphasize the symbiotic relationship between the individual and his environment. From Dickens' Artful Dodger to Ellison's eponymous Invisible Man, characters are seen as being both products of the city and as tools formative to its construction. It perhaps follows, then, that any form of crisis within the individual is symptomatic of, and further reflected in, a more general crisis of the city.

Through an analysis of Jon McGregor's 2003 novel *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, I hope to argue that the city is never an impartial space into which individuals can be innocently inserted. The city is instead presented as a constant mediating force, impacting upon subjectivity to the extent that inhabitants are constructed, organized and arranged. Certainly, this idea is epitomized in the text by the 'man with the carefully trimmed moustache' and his continuing demands that the council clear the detritus accumulating within his backyard. As his immediate environment slips further into decay, so too, it seems, does his sense of selfhood: 'My backyard is full of rubbish he says, full, and none of this is mine. I feel I am losing control.'<sup>10</sup> Inserted into the urban space, individuality is soon subsumed as the subject takes on characteristics of the city and effectively dissipates into the environment. Moreover, edging ever closer to an existence of zero identity, the man displays an incessant need to reassert the self, as telephoning the local council later in the day 'he says I just want you to note that last time you wrote to me my name was spelt incorrectly, because you used an S and not a Z. This is close, but it is not close enough, he says. These things are important, the way you spell a man's name, it matters, yes?'<sup>11</sup> The irony of this statement is clear, for, as far as the reader is concerned, the man, along with many of the other characters in the text, remains nameless. Indeed, if a character list were to be generated from the text, it would

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 6

<sup>10</sup> Jon McGregor, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2003), p. 85

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 131

consist largely of visual descriptions of people rather than actual names: ‘the boy with the white shirt’, ‘the short girl with the painted toenails’, ‘the boy with the sore eyes’, ‘the boy with the pierced eyebrow’ and so on. This insistence upon visual markers is clearly important, as the presentation of characters would seem to reflect the nature of encounter within the city, where individuals can be recognized merely through repeated sightings. The city, then, ostensibly breeds anonymity; one is categorized, primarily through visual means, but never really known.

While the text seems to reinforce a conceptualisation of the city as a space which fosters amorphous identity and subjective insignificance however, as its opening chapter demonstrates, *If Nobody Speaks* simultaneously emphasizes the importance of exalting the individual:

The city, it sings [...]  
It's clearest at night, when the sound cuts more sharply across the surface of things, when the song reaches out to a place inside you.  
It's a wordless song, for the most, but it's a song all the same, and nobody hearing it could doubt what it sings.  
*And the song sings the loudest when you pick out each note.*<sup>12</sup>

The song is more pertinent when each individual note is realized, yet at the same time the implication is made that each separate note can only function within the context of the song. ‘The song reaches out to a place inside you’ that individual notes cannot reach. Just as the presence of the note is validated only within the song, so the individual gains significance only within the wider context of the city. A clear problem emerges, however, as to how the individual can locate himself within a space which is constantly shifting; how can the note be validated if the song is continually changing?

One potential way that the text implies self validation can occur, is through constructing an image of the immediate environment and then locating oneself within it; or rather, arranging the changing unknowable totality into something knowable, and then locating oneself in relation to the produced image. A salient example of this process in action occurs with the meeting of the student outside number eleven and the young girl from number nineteen. The student, ‘sitting on the wall, outside number eleven [...] is drawing a picture of the street’<sup>13</sup> and, evidently keen to impress his tutor with an architecturally sound sketch, works on a graphic representation

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 1

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 58

which is both technically sound and empirically accurate: ‘He begins to measure the widths of the houses, squinting along the length of his arm, looking for the correct proportions. [...] He measures the distances between the ridges and the eaves, calculating the angles.<sup>14</sup> The young girl, curiously watching the image take form, fails to recognize the skeletal sketch as representative of the street, despite its apparent architectural accuracy. Absent from the student’s depiction are the markers that she requires to arrange the environment into something knowable: ‘where are the windows, she says, in a very still and quiet voice [...] Where is the dog she says in the same voice.’<sup>15</sup> For the young girl, urban, and indeed architectural accuracy, are irrelevant; rather the image is formed by experience, and thus must, above all, possess subjective resonance. Only through a sketch which evokes such resonance can the image be recognized as representative of the street; the image could otherwise be a depiction of any row of houses on any street. A similar process can be seen to be at work when Kate thinks back to a past summer, and specifically to the event which continues to haunt her consciousness. Only through intricately arranging the scene is she able to locate her position to it:

I don’t remember seeing it, not the actual moment itself, I remember strange details, peripheral images, small things that happened away from the blinded centre.[...]

There was a woman leaning out of a high window, shaking a blanket.

There were some boys over the road having a barbecue, pushing a knife into the meat to see if it was cooked.

There was a man with a long beard, up a ladder at number twenty-five, painting his windowframes, he’d been there all day and he’d almost finished.<sup>16</sup>

The process of locating oneself spatially, alluded to in *If Nobody Speaks*, can be usefully aligned with the theories of cognitive mapping explored by Kevin Lynch and Fredric Jameson in their respective studies *The Image of the City* and *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Evaluating the importance of possessing knowledge of one’s immediate environment, Lynch conducts surveys with the inhabitants of three cities (Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles), and from his findings surmises that ‘a distinctive and legible environment not only offers security but also heightens the potential depth and experience of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. pp.58/59

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.59

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.8

human emotion.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the ability to map one's location within the constantly evolving social space – for as Lynch suggests, the individual should have ‘the power to change that image to fit changing needs’<sup>18</sup> – is to fight against the omnipresent fate that the city seems to offer: that of urban and social disorientation. Drawing on the work of Lynch, Jameson further proposes that this threat to subjectivity is symptomatic of the period of postmodernity, and illustrates this idea with his much-quoted analysis of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel. Posing the labyrinthine form of the Bonaventure as a microcosmic representation of the city itself, Jameson suggests that ‘postmodern hyperspace’ has ‘succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings in a mappable external world.’<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in the constantly shifting space of the city, orientation is problematic, and this is perhaps reflected in *If Nobody Speaks* by the eye condition experienced by the boy at number eighteen: ‘It’s the light that makes his eyes hurt, mostly, bright or sudden light, and the dust in the air. [...] It’s worse in the city, with all the dust and the dirt.<sup>20</sup> The city can be seen, then, to impair the senses, making orientation all the more problematic. While a possible remedy for the alienation of the subject materializes in the practice of cognitive mapping, then, one clear problem remains: namely, how to produce a coherent image of an environment which is ever more shifting and fluid.

As the above examples suggest, the practice of cognitive mapping must be understood as an entirely subjective process. On producing his own mental image, the individual is able to locate himself within a given environment, despite the possibility that his map might be entirely unrecognisable to a fellow inhabitant. Indeed, Lynch concludes:

The city is not built for one person, but for great numbers of people, of widely varying backgrounds, temperaments, occupations and class. Our analyses indicate a substantial variation in the way different people organize their city, in what elements they most depend on, or in what form qualities are most congenial to them.<sup>21</sup>

The cognitive map produced by an individual, then, will not necessarily take the form of a typical cartographic model, but rather will be determined by those aspects of the

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (1960), p. 5

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 6

<sup>19</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1999), p. 40

<sup>20</sup> Jon McGregor, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2003), pp. 31-2

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (1960), p. 110

environment that are most salient to the subject's everyday experience. While this idea is reflected in the text, specifically in the quoted example of the student and the young girl, *If Nobody Speaks* implies the need to go beyond the models of cognitive mapping outlined by Lynch and Jameson.

Rather than creating a map which locates the individual spatially to the environment, *If Nobody Speaks* emphasizes the importance of social location. As demonstrated by the text, however, such a process is clearly problematic to the city dweller, whose existence is seemingly characterized by transience: 'people were slipping out of the city unexpectedly, like children getting lost in a crowd, leaving nothing but temporary addresses and promises to keep in touch.'<sup>22</sup> The city emerges as a space that breeds anonymity; any relations that are made appear to be only temporary and, as Kate discovers, once connections are broken, it is almost impossible to re-establish them: 'I live in a different city now I say, it's difficult to see people so often.'<sup>23</sup> Despite this, however, the desire to forge relationships remains strong: 'Once a month, maybe less, one of us will call the other and we'll say oh hi it's been ages we should try and meet up, and a plan will be made, and cancelled, or not quite made at all.'<sup>24</sup> It might be argued, then, that through interacting with others, and thus acquiring a knowledge of those within the immediate social sphere, a sense of self is increased.

Certainly, the characters in *If Nobody Speaks* who appear to be most content, that is, those individuals who have a strong sense of selfhood, are those rooted firmly within a specific social network; or rather, those individuals who are able to locate their position within the larger social structure. Indeed, apparently now alone in an 'endless city,'<sup>25</sup> Kate is able to access a sense of self-awareness only through reminiscing on her student days, where her interaction within a specific social network would appear to have validated her existence. Now physically and socially disorientated within a new city, all that remains is a bittersweet nostalgia: 'I tried to remember what it was like to be near so many people who knew me.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Jon McGregor, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2003), p. 37

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 80

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 21

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 23

The desire, experienced by the characters in the novel, to connect with others can be paralleled with Jonathan Raban's assertion, in his text *Soft City*, that it is no surprise that

making connection should become such a central obsession in the life of big cities. To meet and hold on to other people is to fly in the face of what the city threatens to do to us; when isolation and loss are so casual and likely, we have to work as hard as novelists to keep our society going, to keep in touch.<sup>27</sup>

As an individual seemingly functioning outside of any specific social group, the idea of obsessional networking is perhaps most evident in the behaviour of the boy at number eighteen, whose desire to connect leads to an over-inflated sense of significance being apportioned to seemingly everyday events. Such a hyperbolic interpretation of events is apparent as he muses over his encounter with Kate at a party:

They talked a lot, and laughed, and poured each other drinks and he'd felt comfortable and good and real with her, and she'd touched his arm once or twice, and looked him in the eye without saying anything, and although they hadn't kissed he thinks probably they could have done.<sup>28</sup>

The event, for Kate, holds little significance, to the extent that the encounter is entirely forgotten. For the young man at number eighteen, however, having now experienced social connection and the inflated sense of self that comes with it ('he'd felt comfortable and good and real with her'), the banal incident is metamorphosed into a seminal event with life-altering potential; the initial connection pre-empting him to plan, in his mind, a future with her.

It could perhaps be argued then, that the encounter gains significance for the young man precisely because the connection made serves to locate him within the larger social structure. Already integrated within a specific group, for Kate, the event has little significance, but for the young man, it is 'remarkable', precisely because it offers him a possible reprieve from the anonymous existence imposed upon him by the city. Indeed, despite his occasional protestations of love, the young man himself appears aware that the need to connect with Kate is based upon something more than friendship, for 'he wonders [...] why he thinks about her so much when he knows so

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (1988), pp. 133-4

<sup>28</sup> Jon McGregor, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2003), pp. 55-6

little to think about.<sup>29</sup> Rather, through establishing a social connection with her, the young man is able to locate his sense of self and be ‘real’.

The idea of knowing the self through interaction with another would seem to find a parallel in Sartre’s assertion that ‘what I constantly aim at across my experiences are the Other’s feelings, the Other’s ideas, the Other’s volitions, the Other’s character. This is because the Other is not only the one whom I see but the one who sees me.’<sup>30</sup> Yet such a conceptualisation of identity is clearly problematic, not least because the creation of a semi-communal living space, as encapsulated by the street in which *If Nobody Speaks* is set, does not necessarily culminate in the development of community spirit. Indeed, the potential of such a practice is clearly undermined by the young man at number eighteen’s comment on the back of a photograph: ‘there are so many people in the world [...] and I want to know them all but I don’t even know my next-door-neighbour’s name.’<sup>31</sup>

What hope is there for establishing social connections within the wider community, when those who are (spatially) closest to us remain anonymous? Despite being set within a neighbourhood, the novel demonstrates that such environments seem rather to foster a sense of isolation, where residents are ostensibly enclosed within specific social or familial groups, dictated essentially by the four walls of their home; not an environment that is entirely conducive to social cognitive mapping. It would seem then, that despite declarations of self-affirmation and attempts at social connection, the status of zero identity ebbs ever closer to the residents of the city street.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 89

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (2000), p. 228

<sup>31</sup> Jon McGregor, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2003), p. 216

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