

Writing Cities: a postgraduate workshop

This collection of papers is the outcome of a workshop entitled ‘Writing Cities’ that took place on 9th June 2009. The workshop represents a continuation of previous events, all of which are unified by the exploration of intersections between ‘space,’ geography and literary studies.¹ The Writing Cities workshop was organised as a forum for the discussion of work by postgraduates at the University of Nottingham across the arts, humanities and social sciences. The theme was chosen in order to reflect the way questions relating to the urban have become central to discussion across a range of academic fields, and particularly to explore how strands of urban thought are emerging from postgraduate research in Nottingham. The workshop therefore aimed to explore the break down of boundaries relating to the area of ‘urban studies’ which is reflected in a broad research agenda that is interdisciplinary in outlook and considers the cultural alongside the economic, the political and the social.

An interest in questions relating to ideas of what it means to be urban, how we conceptualise cities, what impact researchers have when they write about ‘the city’, and how scholars conceptualise urban research emerged from discussions that took place during meetings of the Cities Reading Group. The Cities Reading Group is a group of postgraduates spanning American and Canadian Studies, Architecture, Cultural Studies, English Studies and Geography at the University of Nottingham who first came together after the inaugural postgraduate workshop in June 2007. The involvement of the workshop organisers in the Reading Group heavily influenced the choice of the theme. With discussions spanning the ‘canon’ of urban theorists (de Certeau, Benjamin, Harvey), literary responses to the urban condition (Sinclair, Self, Raban), and artistic/creative reactions to city life - be it in architectural form or bodily reactions to the urban ‘jungle’ as seen in recent interest in ‘Parkour’.² The Reading Group and its cross-disciplinary membership prompted reflection on the multiple ways that cities are represented and how we, as researchers, actively construct the urban environments that we inhabit (both literally and academically).

¹ Papers relating to the ‘Space, Place and Landscape’ and ‘Negotiating Space’ workshops can be found at: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/landscape/publications.php>

² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out For the Territory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin., 1997).

David Pinder has asked: ‘What other stories can be told about urban spaces? How can alternative possibilities and different trajectories be uncovered, whether this is in relation to present or historical urban developments?’³ It was exactly these questions that the workshop looked to address. As seen in the papers that follow, research relating to urban themes is a rich field of postgraduate enquiry at Nottingham. The five papers in the collection cover geographical, literary and philosophical perspectives; additional papers presented on the day also spanned classics and archaeology, indicating the range of postgraduate researchers who are writing cities and actively constructing cities discursively and imaginatively by drawing on texts, images, practices and the built environment.

Three of the five papers presented here detail fictional, novelistic attempts to re-envision archetypal metropolitan spaces. Read together, the three pieces testify to the plurality and specificity inherent in the writing of *cities* (as opposed to a homogenising writing of *the city*) and to the diversity of experience that the responding panel at the workshop recognised as one of the main themes developing out of the day. In addition, these three papers all draw attention to the ways in which the cultural and commemorative politics of space are underwritten by a material contestation of organisation and meaning. Will Smith’s paper, ‘Writing the Anishnabe City’ addresses fictional attempts to redress the under-representation of Aboriginal urban experience in the Canadian literary field. Whilst Canadian literary theory has previously engaged with issues of space and place at length, attention has largely been conferred on the rural, the small town, and wilderness. Only now, Smith notes, is the urban being addressed in detail. Working from this new paradigm, his paper focuses upon the experience of First Nations communities in Toronto as represented in Joseph Boyden’s 2008 novel, *Through Black Spruce*. Smith’s paper approaches the specifically urban formations of First Nations language usage and idioms, as well as the ‘positional perspective’ of an Anishnabe newcomer to the city developed by Boyden. By these means, the novel portrays the ‘disjunction between place and practice’ of Anishnabe inhabitation of the city.

Emily Houghton’s account of ‘Gothic, Global Berlin’, shares with Smith’s paper a focus upon the perception of a metropolitan space by an outsider in its approach to Chloe Aridjis’s novel, *Book of Clouds* (2009). Berlin is a ‘gothic’ city due

³ David Pinder, ‘Commentary – Writing Cities Against the Grain’, *Urban Geography*, 25.8 (2004), 792-795, (p. 792).

to the ‘ghostly presence’ of its past ‘haunting’ its present day manifestation.

Following Benjamin, Houghton argues that the choice available today is not simply between destroying or commemorating signs of the past; but rather, new active forms of reflection need to be developed. For Houghton, Aridjis’s novel contributes to this process: ‘rather than merely *exploiting* Gothic structures to create suspense or fear’, Aridjis ‘highlights and challenges Gothic responses in order to *redefine* modern historical anxieties.’ *Book of Clouds* thus signifies a reassertion of reflection as a tool with which to oppose the ‘looming spectres’ of Berlin’s past.

Tim Foster also engages with recent spatial theory in his work on the ‘exurb’. Arising from reconfigurations of American urban space, the exurb is ‘a polycentric economically, culturally and politically self-sufficient new metropolitan form’, and ‘a reflection of the way in which metropolitan sprawl has dissolved previous formal categorisations.’ Foster’s paper charts these issues as they arise in T.C. Boyle’s novel, *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995). Boyle’s narrative records the diversity of experience of Topanga Canyon in Los Angeles, contrasting the lives of immigrant Mexicans to that of the privileged white inhabitants of a nearby gated community, and constantly working to draw links and intersections between the two ways of living. In this establishment of dialogue, Foster suggests, ‘Boyle’s novel complicates a cultural conception of suburbia by suggesting that the simple binary of suburb and city is no longer viable’. Consequently, ‘the postsuburban spaces of Los Angeles actually represent an environment that is undergoing a socio-spatial transformation akin to the processes of deterritorialisation and decolonisation.’

Kevin Milburn’s paper, ‘Following the *flâneur*’, steps back from a direct engagement with text to offer a methodological critique. His paper constitutes an account of the development of the figure of the *flâneur*, and the new ways of seeing and writing that such a persona embodies. Milburn’s paper shares with others presented here an attentiveness to the connection between material alterations in the fabric of the city and the cultural formations resulting from them. In this context, he recognises the building of the Parisian arcades as a necessary material determinant of the advent of *flânerie*. However, the thrust of Milburn’s paper is to ‘sketch a family tree of *flânerie* that extends beyond the self-referential and rarefied confines of French literature.’ He looks outside the Parisian model to chart both antecedents in De Quincey and Poe, and later manifestations of the *flâneur*, particularly in the mid-twentieth century American cityscape. In the last of these focal points, the comparison

between the Private Investigator, along with his *noir* urban milieu, and the *flâneur* of nineteenth century Paris is drawn. For Milburn, all of these instances share a distanced perspective and totalizing gaze in their apprehension of the metropolis.

Finally, Daniel Barnes's paper approaches the 'architect's paradox' arising out of the need to fulfil aesthetic and functional requirements in building design.

Something akin to the distanced perspective of *flanerie* is required if we are to contemplate a building in anything other than practical terms: we must 'momentarily step aside' from everyday concerns and uses of buildings to appreciate its aesthetic qualities. Barnes proposes that 'architects must imbue their buildings with a clear sense of the city's history, so the experience of space constantly engages us in contemplation of history as we go about our business.' Buildings will thus carry the imprint of history. He argues for the special place of architecture in the preservation of history: in and on buildings, history is 'embodied and entirely conspicuous to even the most casual observer.'

The root metaphor of urban studies across the arts and humanities is that of negotiating the city as text; however, the diversity of responses to the chosen thematic angle, that of 'writing cities', compelled us to question how not to become ideologically bound by this theoretical angle and to interrogate the critical apparatus we use to examine our relationship with urban spaces. The workshop as a whole brought together a diverse collection of arguments whose range and depth is exemplified by the summaries offered above. This diversity became the initial preoccupation for the panel that closed proceedings for the day. Professor Steven Daniels from the School of Geography and Professor Julie Sanders, Dr David James and Dr Neal Alexander from the School of English Studies drew together the particularising elements that emerged as dominant themes from the workshop and opened the discussion by considering the frameworks we use to guide and inform our research.

Firstly, the written city is not necessarily just a literary activity but also comprises other disciplinary angles. The city can be mapped or planned, it can be represented through diverse artistic medias; the city can also be written or drawn through its architectural manifestations, as well as its public and commercial spaces. It can be written through its political context in particular spaces and even through the use and function of its inhabitants: the movements through spaces and utilization of spaces by individuals came to be seen as a particular incarnation of writing a city.

Writing cities refers more generally to cities that are inscribed in a certain way. The focus on the written city led to a more specific consideration of which cities were being discussed, both on the day and in current academic criticism, and also how they are written about. It emerged that despite the differences in disciplines there is a common and distinct vocabulary used to understand how the city is portrayed, defined and understood whether it is literarily, geographically, historically, culturally or politically. Words such as interpretation, imagination and memory repeatedly surfaced when considering the role of the individual in the space, terms which became complicated by the range of spaces encountered; the idea of community and citizenship, the position of suburbia to the centralizing urban forces, the tension between the local and the global and the search for authenticity in experience makes negotiating the space and the importance of connection a dominant concern for the solitary individual in whichever context.

When considering urban space the panel observed that the particularity of the city is of utmost importance. Certain cities are marginalised or underwritten whilst over-writing of others leads to a burdening of theoretical preconceptions and histories that may no longer be relevant. This discussion led to a realisation that spaces need to be constantly re-appraised despite their familiarity, or similarly, they need to be recognised for their diversity. Paris, Berlin, London and New York have become laden with imagery and dominated by theory, whilst also dominating theory themselves. Cities become canonical through their very nature, their iconicity, and, in part, due to the way in which they are talked about. The papers published here have questioned, as a whole, other cities that are previously under-written, or specific areas of cities that go under-acknowledged: the provincial, the regional and the cathedral city were reviewed alongside other theoretical giants that encapsulate what we know of cities already. Therefore, the panel discussion initially became preoccupied with the interesting angles inscribed in unfamiliar spaces, spaces that are yet to be celebrated within the urban canon, and the question of whether we can analyse these spaces with similar methodologies, vocabularies and theoretical frameworks. Underwritten cities give theorists great scope to explore the nature of theoretical discourse.

In addition to the concern over which spaces we are considering, or *where* we are talking about, a further problematic area arose over *when* exactly it is we are talking about. An acknowledgement of time and the role it has in defining a space

became paramount to the discussion. Looking at historical cities and their development requires us to consider the role of memory, historical records, evidence, and objects in shaping our present vision of that space. Similarly an awareness of time and transformation is imperative to a consideration of spaces in the present and whether we are able to locate, or position spaces in time. A dominant trope that arose through discussion was that of the palimpsest; writing the city through history and being aware of a city's history, or the theoretical paradigms that have preceded current thought, leads to an awareness of a certain kind of layering which builds the image of the city. Layering is associated both with time and with this idea of over-writing: the montage effect is produced by diverse theories and interpretations of the same space and the ability that spaces have to retain certain characteristics through time. Layering can be seen as both positive and negative as there is a limitation in the realisation that residual ideas can be lost through the need for constant adaptation, but there is also a constructive function for the city as palimpsest in its ability to transform representations of spaces whilst retaining an element of its own history. This trope became a challenging point for discussion throughout the day as it encompasses these ideas of layering, time, identification, observation, experience and association and it also tackles the initial problem we encountered with delineating the city as text due to its ability to amalgamate other disciplinary angles.

A further subsidiary interest point was that of performativity, which arose in a number of fascinating ways: firstly, each individual's interpretation of a particular space is an example of performance through the connection made between a person and the space they inhabit, and the self-conscious nature with which this process can be analysed. Performativity also arises through the methods we employ to represent these experiences in everyday life, in theory, architecture or literary embodiments. All kinds of writing has an impact on social formation and is subject to continual adaptation and re-appropriation in different forms. Performance is also firmly attached to a socio-economic analysis of urban environments as this concept of social formation is constantly re-negotiated between different social groups and in different social contexts. To return to this idea of theory being inscribed in the city, but also dominating the image of particular cities, performance can be used as an interesting way of managing the tension between what is being theorised and how we theorise at all. Urban narratives, architectural and geographical theory and city-planning procedures might perform theory – and there is often a physical element to this

performativity such as in the work of Soja, Benjamin and Debord who visualise movement through space – as previous theories are made real in more modern manifestations that navigate new modes of expression; performance has become an addition to the vocabulary of urban theory in recent times.

The workshop and its consideration of urban studies as a whole dealt with three key areas: people, spaces, and theory, and tried to ascertain which beliefs or ideas are held about these subjects across different fields. As well as discussing theory generally, specific names and theoretical approaches emerged from the discussion. In particular, dominant theorists were discussed in relation to the problem of how to analyse spaces if we are researching from entirely opposed angles and focusing on different preoccupations. Dominant writers and theorists such as Walter Benjamin, David Harvey, Kevin Lynch, Edward Soja and Guy Debord were discussed generally and used to try to ascertain which methods are most convincing for an overall interpretation, or recognition, of the diversity of the city and peoples' reactions to it. The concerns of materialist history, and in particular Raymond Williams's ideas on relationality, networks, movements and flows, helped to enlighten the approach to some of these anxieties over transformative spaces, the tensions concerning understanding spaces through time and the connection between the space and the individual, through a consideration of a specific theory, the particularity of which, the panel acknowledged, helped to dispel some of the abstraction caused by talking generally about theory which was the main aim of this workshop.⁴

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⁴ See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: OUP, 1973).