

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/20182> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Wesselman, Daan

**Title:** Reflections of/on the city : literature, space, and postmodernity

**Date:** 2012-11-28

# 1 – Representations and Spatialities: “The Balloon” and *City of Glass*

In exploring questions of the postmodern city and literature, the first authors under consideration are Donald Barthelme and Paul Auster. My starting point is Barthelme, whose work is not only often described as postmodernist, but he himself has also written about postmodernism explicitly. His work is therefore a good starting point for taking head on the matter of moving from the postmodernism of his writing to the postmodernity that his works relates to – even more so because the issue of how to produce literature as both a reflection of and a reflection on the real world was also a concern for him as a writer.

As Brian McHale argues in his seminal *Postmodernist Fiction*, “postmodernist fiction *does* hold up the mirror to reality” (39), contrary to many views of postmodernism (such as those departing from a Baudrillardian “desert” where the real has become inaccessible through simulacra). The ontological dominant he identifies as characteristic in postmodernist fiction can be seen most directly in the visible processes of the construction of a fictional world, or rather worlds, in a literary text – in contrast to the worlds of earlier fiction, whose stability and coherence as a single world have usually gone unquestioned. Postmodernist fiction reflects on contemporary reality, argues McHale, “[p]recisely by foregrounding the ontological themes and differences” (39). The postmodernist concern with language, representation and the construction of fictional worlds is, as McHale argues, not just an aesthetic concern, but a way of reflecting on a reality that itself cannot be simply regarded as a single, understandable reality.

Yet this leaves the question of how a fictional world’s relation to the real one actually *works*. This is an issue that McHale barely addresses – mainly because this is beyond the scope of his study, but the issue does underlie his argument. This chapter starts by picking up this issue in a consideration of Donald Barthelme’s story “The Balloon” as a case-study for examining the relation of fiction to reality, by specifically looking at the representation of space and how a fictional space can address spatial issues in contemporary society and “open up” critical concepts for the analysis of postmodern urban space. Specifically, what emerges through

Barthelme’s story is that the city of the late twentieth century calls for a new way to relate to urban space, a different framework for the subject to come to terms with the city. This perspective develops out of (or, in a sense, even on top of) a representation of the space of Manhattan, illustrating that the postmodern city is not just a matter of new spaces, but also (if not particularly) of new spatialities. Barthelme’s story provides a critical and conceptual perspective, while Auster’s novel focuses on practices – together providing a framework for understanding postmodern urban spatiality and the position of the individual in the city.

### **Barthelme & the postmodern**

32 Barthelme’s fiction is primarily known as (humorous) metafiction. Larry McCaffery emphasizes the “metafictional quality of his writing, the way he uses his fiction to explore the nature of storytelling and the resources left to language and the fiction-maker” (qtd. in Patteson, 6). Likewise, Charles Molesworth asserts that “[w]e can easily enough identify Barthelme as a writer of metafiction” (1). However, in an interview with Barbara Roe, Barthelme himself clearly resisted such readings of his work: “The chief misconception is that this kind of writing is metafiction, fiction about fiction. It’s not. It is a way of dealing with reality, an attempt to think about aspects of reality that have not, perhaps, been treated of heretofore. I say it’s realism” (107-8). Taking this point a little further, Lois Gordon attests that “there is implied social criticism in all his work” (23). Some tension thus seems to exist between Barthelme’s postmodernist metafiction and its relation to contemporary society.

While for Barthelme these two aspects – metafiction and a bearing on reality – are by no means mutually exclusive, his work addresses the general problem that postmodernist literature has often had to be defended against a range of critical allegations of having nothing to do with reality. These are nicely paraphrased by Barthelme in his essay on postmodernism, “Not-Knowing”:

The criticisms run roughly as follows: that this kind of writing [i.e. postmodernism] has turned its back on the world, is in some sense not about the world but about its own processes, that it is masturbatory, certainly chilly, that it excludes readers by design, speaks

only to the already tenured, or that it does not speak at all, but instead, like Frost’s *Secret*, sits in the center of a ring and Knows. (15)

Barthelme contests these points but recognizes that they stem from what he sees as three important difficulties with which the contemporary writer is faced, concerning language. Firstly, there is “an effort toward finding a language in which making art is possible at all” (“Not-Knowing” 15 – subsequently abbreviated as “N-K”). This first question that a writer has to face is how to retain freshness in a much-used language. Secondly, there is the difficulty of finding a language that is not contaminated by other (political) discourses. Barthelme summarizes this issue as the problem of finding a language free from “totalitarian” influences in a post-WWII world. Lastly, there is “the pressure on language from contemporary culture in the broadest sense” (“N-K” 15) in which the only common world of reference is that of the *Love Boat* and *General Hospital* (“N-K” 17). In representing the contemporary world, the contemporary writer is faced with a language hollowed out by pop culture. These problems make it difficult to write simple, honest, and straightforward fiction. Therein lie only the things that have already been said or can already be said, whereas, as Barthelme says, “what we are looking for is the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken” (“N-K” 15).

In order to take on these problems, the use of language in contemporary fiction is difficult, though not for the sake of difficulty. This difficulty is inherent in art and literature, which means that the art object “at once invites and resists interpretation” (“N-K” 20). The art object, or literary text, on the one hand invites interpretation by being a fundamentally communicative entity, relating to a viewer/reader and his world. But on the other hand, the communicative difficulties inherent in the art object resist interpretation. When this resistance through the difficulties of poetic language is foregrounded, the art object or literary text is often considered to have a certain degree of autonomy, to be independent of the world in some respects. But Barthelme suggests that it is precisely by engaging these problems of language that art and literature relate to the world: “I suggest that art is always a meditation upon external reality rather than a representation of external reality or a jackleg attempt to “be” external reality” (“N-K” 23).

Barthelme’s concerns with language and looking for things that are

as-yet unspoken are apparent on all levels of his fiction. His concern with innovation in fiction is most visible in the narrative constructions in his work. His stories and novels rarely follow a straightforward plot – if there is one at all. As Thomas Leitch notes, Barthelme’s fiction expresses a profound “lack of commitment to any teleology” (91). None of Barthelme’s works are “stories” in the usual sense, with a beginning, middle, and end. For example, some of his stories only have the most minimal plot (if any), some are in a Q&A form, and some are just short sketches. Yet even the more “traditionally” constructed stories resist any final resolution. Concerning language, Barthelme focuses particularly on the ways in which language drifts apart from reality. As Couturier and Durand point out, Barthelme “gives the impression that reality has lost its power to force words upon him and his characters, that language is at last free from it and constitutes a private world where everything is possible at any moment” (22). This freedom of language thus opens up new possibilities. The representation of reality in text is no longer constrained by the straightforward and material/visible aspects of that reality. However, the converse also applies: language also no longer simply connects to reality. As a means of representing the world, language in Barthelme’s work presents a spectrum of difficulties ranging from an inadequate means of relating to reality, to becoming almost autonomous and devoid of (referential) meaning. The basic material for Barthelme’s stories is therefore the process of signification itself, implicitly at every turn, but also explicitly, as one of his characters in his story “Me and Miss Mandible” discovers: “signs are signs, and some of them are lies” (34). The result is an altered use of language. Barthelme constantly plays with and upon the residual meaning that is still left in words, only to ultimately demonstrate the malfunctioning of language.

Barthelme’s concern with language – and implicitly also the doubts about the capability of language to relate to reality – is consolidated in one of his central motifs, formulated by one of the characters in his novel *Snow White*:

We like books with a lot of *dreck* in them, matter which presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed, at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of “sense” of what is going on. This “sense” is not to be obtained by reading between the lines

(for there is nothing there, in those white spaces) but by reading the lines themselves – looking at them and so arriving at a feeling not of satisfaction exactly, that is too much to expect, but of having read them, of having “completed” them. (106)

Between Barthelme’s aim of finding things that are as-yet unspeakable, language can no longer easily convey meaning (the freedom of language that Couturier and Durand discuss). As a result, “sense” (as mentioned in the passage from *Snow White*) becomes difficult to ascertain. What is left, then, is a level playing field of words in which one cannot (before-hand) distinguish matters that are lofty or grand from random noise and pointless drivel. This stance towards language has consequences for the realm of literature and the act of reading: without a predetermined frame to make the words on a page “wholly relevant,” one cannot presume a meaning “behind” them or between the lines. One can only “complete” (i.e. read) them, taking them at face value – and in a world where *General Hospital* provides the only readily available frame of reference, the level playing field for words is at the level of junk and rubbish.

35

Barthelme thus combines his main concerns – the functioning of language in fiction and his concern with contemporary society – in the *dreck* that is the common denominator in his fiction. This *dreck* is not only an approach to the problems of signification, but Barthelme extends this motif to the representation of the contemporary world. In the story “City Life” one of the characters describes the city as “the most exquisite mysterious muck. This muck heaves and palpitates. It is multi-directional and has a mayor. To describe it takes many hundreds of thousands of words. Our muck is only a part of a much greater muck – the nation-state – which is itself the creation of that muck of mucks, human consciousness” (158). The implication here is not so much that the city has become more complex, but that one can no longer assume (or pretend) to have recourse to a “straightforward” mode of speaking about reality, to simplify it and make it neat. There is no single “right” way of describing the reality of the city, certainly no *mot juste*, but one can only turn to hundreds of thousands of words to approach the plurality, the irreducible muck that is the city.

This concern with the intricacies and fallacies of language is also one of Barthelme’s strategies to represent the contemporary world. Paul

Maltby highlights that through “the proliferation of dreck and other forms of language which lack critical potential,” Barthelme’s fiction focuses on “the diminished use value of language” (56). Barthelme uses language for pastiche of both “high” and “pop” cultures, strange pairings, and striking inversions and reversals of common orderings. Hierarchies of meaning are thereby destroyed: linguistic junk, drivel, and *dreck* have the same use value as the scientific and literary discourses that Barthelme invokes through irony and pastiche. Barthelme’s fiction portrays a flattened view of the meaning of words: nothing surpasses the level of *dreck*. Barthelme thus not only reduces the process of signification – or use value – to the level of rubbish, but also the power of language to be socio-culturally meaningful. He uses the inability of language to (straightforwardly or transparently) relate to the contemporary world for his ironical and critical perspective on American consumer culture of the 1960s and 70s, the world in which the only common frame of reference is set by *Love Boat* and *General Hospital*. As Maltby also points out, Barthelme thus presents not only the problem of language as a (metafictional) matter of signification and epistemology, but also a critical reflection on contemporary mass-media consumerism.

Barthelme’s use of language and narrative techniques thus addresses issues of representation in (metafictional) literature and offers a critique of contemporary culture at the same time. Barthelme’s theme of *dreck* joins his literary concerns with language, representation and metafiction with his critique of American society. His textual detritus is not just inherent in the spaces constructed in his fiction, but also represents the muck of the contemporary city. In a sense, both language and the city drown in the same muck. This has implications that go even further than the passage from “City Life”: even hundreds of thousands of words cannot describe (in the sense of delimit and circumscribe) the heaving, palpitating, and multi-directional muck of the city. The city can only be represented (or perhaps rather approximated) through the different “mucks” (language, city, consciousness) coming together, as they are – hence the preference for books with a lot of *dreck* in them. The opacity of Barthelme’s theme of *dreck* therefore stresses the interconnectedness of the issues of representation and society.

## “The Balloon”

Barthelme’s story “The Balloon” illustrates this view of the relationship between fiction and contemporary reality, precisely as an issue in urban space. The story describes how a gigantic balloon is suddenly placed against the Manhattan sky, covering forty-five blocks north-south and around ten cross-town blocks. The balloon has no ostensible purpose, defies interpretation, and conveys no message. The balloon is simply *there*, as a “concrete particular, hanging there,”<sup>1</sup> that bulges and moves about a bit. The people of the city mostly remain calm and enjoy the pleasant colors of the balloon – “muted grays and browns for the most part, contrasted with walnut and soft, forgotten yellows” (55). Numerous interpretations of the balloon are considered in the story, but none of them sticks. As the narrator points out, the balloon would have been easily understood “had we painted ‘LABORATORY TESTS PROVE’ or ‘18% MORE EFFECTIVE’ on the sides” (55). The balloon thus also does not carry a commercial message. One man, then, considers the balloon an imposture, something inferior to the original sky, interpreting the balloon-as-sign as a lie. This interpretation is dismissed as quickly as the others. Other people have dreams of losing themselves in the balloon or engorging it. However, the balloon also resists such psychological/psychoanalytic symbolization. Critical opinion, finally, was divided, seen in diverse comments like “inner joy,” “conservative eclecticism that has so far governed modern balloon design,” “abnormal vigor,” “Has unity been sacrificed for a sprawling quality?” and “*Quelle catastrophe!*” (56-7) Critical opinion of the balloon thus ranges widely and amounts to nothing but nonsensical linguistic *dreck*. The only conclusion that can be drawn about the balloon in the story is that it is the prototypical “floating signifier”: it is taken as a sign, but it persistently resists to signify.

The only response to the balloon that is not made ridiculous or rejected is *using* the balloon. Children play on top of it, people take strolls there, and they begin to locate themselves in relation to it: “I’ll be at that place where it dips down into Forty-seventh Street almost to the sidewalk” (57). Everyday practical use is the only adequate response, as opposed to interpretation. After twenty-two days the speaker – who placed the balloon there and for whom it was “a spontaneous autobiographical

<sup>1</sup> The edition of the text here is the one reproduced in the collection *Sixty Stories*. The story was originally published in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968).

disclosure” (58), having to do with the absence of his lover and sexual deprivation – has the balloon removed and stored for further use.

38 The basis for the representation of the city in this story is the confrontation of the people with a fantastic object that destabilizes the regular urban environment. Its sheer magnitude and apparent purposelessness offer the possibility of new definitions of the meanings of the city. In this respect, Barthelme’s balloon can be compared to Roland Barthes’s (roughly contemporary) reflections on the Eiffel Tower. In his piece “The Eiffel Tower” Barthes points out the purposelessness of the tower – whether religious, scientific, artistic, or ceremonial – and its lack of an “inside” as a structure. It thereby “achieves a kind of degree zero of the monument” (7) in its monumental uselessness. In its useless omnipresence in the Paris skyline it is also a “pure signifier ... a form in which men unceasingly put *meaning*” (5). The Tower signifies both the city of Paris as a whole for the tourist, but can also assume any meaning projected on it by the people. The eponymous balloon in “The Balloon” is basically as useless as the Eiffel Tower, but it goes one step further as a “degree zero” object (if only because the Eiffel Tower is real, stationary, and permanent, and the fictional balloon is air-borne, flexible, and temporary). At first the balloon is open to the possibility of having just about any meaning (people try to a number of interpretations), but the story actively undercuts such modes of conceptualizing this urban object. More explicitly than the Eiffel Tower can, the fictional balloon resists interpretation, for the initial exploration of the “meaning” of the balloon quickly subsides, “because we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena” (“The Balloon” 54). Its apparent purposelessness is maintained and it does not partake in any process of signification, but only allows the people to form limited personal opinions.

The balloon thus undermines the possibilities of language and the process of signification, as meaningful tools of relating to the city. Despite the fact that it is posited from the start as only a concrete particular and the search for meaning seems to have been given up, the people still try to make sense of this anomaly by taking it as a sign, because “[t]he apparent purposelessness of the balloon was vexing (as was the fact that it was ‘there’ at all)” (55). As Paul Maltby comments on the balloon, “it exposes the inability of our established meaning-systems to

impose meaning that is other than stultifying or superficial, and it seeks to resist and, ultimately, to transcend the habitual modes of perception” (45). The balloon thus raises the issue of the limits of representation through language, or the fact that language in itself is not adequate for coming to terms with the world. “The Balloon” thus raises the difficulties of language that Barthelme discusses in “Not-Knowing.” Moreover, the balloon itself behaves precisely as the art object that Barthelme describes in “Not-Knowing”: it at once invites and resists interpretation. Herein lies the metafictional character of this story: the balloon as (art) object fulfills a function that is similar to the function of the literary text as a whole.

Yet the balloon does more than just comment on signifying practices. Its resistance to signification and the foregrounding of (spatial) practice, as opposed to interpretation, amount to a clear social commentary. For the people of the city, the balloon is appealing precisely for its reluctance to signify:

39

It was suggested that what was admired about the balloon was finally this: that it was not limited, or defined... This ability of the balloon to shift its shape, to change, was very pleasing, especially to people whose lives were rather rigidly patterned, persons to whom change, although desired, was not available. The balloon, for the twenty-two days of its existence, offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet. (57)

Barthelme’s fantastic representation of the city juxtaposes the rational and rectangular patterning of the city streets, which shapes people’s lives and gives meaning to them, with an anomaly that is only a concrete particular, hanging there, that defies any attempt to include it in the regular order of urban signification. More outspokenly than the Eiffel Tower (as a “pure signifier” that can take on any meaning), the undefined and amorphous balloon (re)presents simply *non-meaning*. It refreshingly denies signification and definition of the self. The non-alternative of the balloon can thus be taken as a critique of the rigidity and regularity of city life as imposed by urban planners and presents an alternative that allows only for non-signification and everyday social practices.

“The Balloon” is thus typical for Barthelme’s work: it addresses the impossibilities of language, the balloon stands in a metafictional relationship to the text as a whole, and it presents social commentary. But the relationship between this text and the real world does not, of course, hinge solely on the final point about the rigidity of people’s lives in Manhattan. It is rather the fictional world, or more precisely the fictional urban space, of the story that makes up Barthelme’s meditation upon external reality and the reflection on the grid is only its conclusion. In the construction of urban space this story addresses several issues that are relevant in a much broader consideration of contemporary space. These spatial issues in “The Balloon” can therefore be used to engage several critical approaches of urban space, which conversely can also be brought to bear upon the story.

40

### Heterotopian alternatives

The first question that the space of “The Balloon” raises is what kind of space this is. The story obviously provides a representation of Manhattan, but the superimposition of a gargantuan balloon complicates matters somewhat. In effect, the story juxtaposes two worlds – that of Manhattan and of the balloon – in one space. An answer for how to see this space is given by McHale. Based on a consideration of the empire of the Great Khan in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* – which includes several cities that encompass the entire world – McHale draws on Foucault’s notion of *heterotopia* to describe this space: “Radically discontinuous and inconsistent, it juxtaposes worlds of incompatible structure” (44). A defining characteristic of postmodernist fiction, according to McHale, is the concern with a plurality of (fictional) worlds and the space in which the contrasts and conflicts between these worlds take place is heterotopian. McHale does not elaborate much on this issue – since space is not the main concern of his book – but more can be made of heterotopia as a worthwhile concept for understanding space in postmodernist fiction, and postmodernist reflections on the space of the real world. The space of “The Balloon” can indeed also be conceived as a heterotopia, but inspiring as Foucault’s term is, it cannot be used without some clarification.

The theoretical appeal of the concept of heterotopia has always been greater than its clarity. In Foucault’s writing the term occurs in two main places – in the preface to *The Order of Things* (1966) and in his essay “Of

Other Spaces” (originally a lecture delivered in 1967) – but neither instance is elaborate in the development of the term, and the meaning differs as well.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in its subsequent usage the term has been employed in a variety of ways and for a wide range of spaces.<sup>3</sup> Most writers share the basic idea that heterotopias refer to “a relational disruption in time and space” (Johnson 78) and that they “inject alterity into the sameness, the commonplace, the topicality of everyday society” (Dehaene and De Caeter, “Heterotopia in a Postcivil Society” 4). However, many studies use the term without much critical consideration, which has led to an array of (unspecified) interpretations. Consequently, in the prevailing application of the term, as Genocchio notes, “‘Of Other Spaces’ is invariably called up (within a simplistic ‘for/against’ model of conventional politics) to provide the basis for some ‘alternative’ strategy of spatial interpretation which might be applied to any ‘real’ place” (39). As a result, most usages of heterotopia share a “persistent association with spaces of resistance and transgression” that is “often asserted with little substantiation” (Johnson 81). Hence, the lack of elaboration in Foucault and the wide-ranging subsequent mobilization call for further critical reflection upon the concept of heterotopia itself.<sup>4</sup>

41

In *The Order of Things*, the earlier text, the term heterotopia is raised in relation to a taxonomy of animals in a Chinese encyclopedia in a story by Borges. The animals are divided into: “(a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a very long way off look like flies” (xvi). To describe this odd taxonomy – in which category (h) destroys the very attempt at classification – Foucault coins the term heterotopias, in contrast to utopias, to refer to “the disorder in

2 The ambiguity caused by the lack of elaboration in Foucault is compounded, as Peter Johnson notes, by his inconsistent terminology regarding space (particularly in his usage of *espace*, *lieu*, and *emplacement*), a difficulty that is not entirely resolved in any of the English translations. The same difficulty is acknowledged in Dehaene and De Caeter (*Heterotopia and the City*), who provide a new translation that takes these issues on board. This edition of Foucault’s text is used here throughout.

3 Some examples of usages of the term include Vincenzo Guarrasi’s article on landscape and cartography, Kevin Hetherington’s excellent book on modernity, Charles Burdett on fascist Italy, Jia Lou on shop signs in Chinatown in Washington D.C., Bruce McCoy Owens on a Buddhist site in Nepal, and Katrien Jacobs on Internet pornography.

4 For example, Ritter and Knaller-Vlay (1998), Sohn (2008), and Boyer (2008) indeed do this, with a more nuanced usage of the term as a result.

which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclite*” (*Order* xix). Heterotopias, says Foucault,

are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together’. (*Order* xix)

42 While Foucault does marginally associate space with the term heterotopia – by way of the double usage of “table” as a place but also a grid for ordering information (*Order* xviii-xix) – the term heterotopia here does not designate anything directly spatial, but rather a structural (dis)order. The context in which heterotopias like in Borges’ story need to be seen is precisely the “non-place of language” (*Order* xviii).

In contrast, the essay “Of Other Spaces” – often the “core” text for discussions of heterotopia – uses the term in a directly spatial sense. Here Foucault is interested in sites “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations designated, mirrored, or reflected by them” (“Of Other Spaces” 16-17). These spaces are linked to all other spaces, but at the same time contradict them. In contrast again to utopias – “emplacements with no real place” (“Of Other Spaces” 17) that offer a perfect or inverse form of the societal space to which they relate – Foucault uses heterotopia to describe places that are “outside all places, even though they are actually localizable” (“Of Other Spaces” 17). Furthermore, these heterotopias have “the power to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible” (“Of Other Spaces” 19).

While these characteristics are rather abstract, Foucault also gives numerous examples of heterotopias and although he does not do so himself, a tentative classification can be drawn up. Heterotopias are: (a) honeymoon trips, (b) museums and libraries, (c) Oriental gardens, (d) retirement homes, (e) places that are moveable, like boats, (f) theaters

and cinemas, (g), cemeteries (h) all places that are counter-sites, outside the reality of all places, but with a location in reality, (i) hammams and Swedish saunas, (j) brothels, (k) fairgrounds, and of course (l) prisons, and (m) psychiatric hospitals.

The contrast between the abstract description and the array of examples poses some problems. Firstly, the concept is intended for “other” spaces and counter-sites within which “the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (“Of Other Spaces” 17). This basic definition in “Of Other Spaces” seems to offer great potential for the critical analysis of space, particularly in human/urban geography (cf. Bonazzi for a discussion of heterotopia in geography, particularly in Soja). However, when reconsidering “Of Other Spaces” critically, the concept becomes problematic, since some of its features seem to diverge. For instance, Foucault underlines on the one hand what he calls “heterotopias of deviation,” in which “individuals are placed whose behavior is deviant in relation to the mean or acquired norm” (“Of Other Spaces” 18) – of which psychiatric hospitals and prisons are his main examples.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, he also discusses fairgrounds, cinemas, and honeymoon trips as typical heterotopias. It would seem difficult to align these spaces of voluntary leisure with his initial emphasis on deviancy and discipline, at least without further differentiation in the understanding of spatial otherness. Moreover, Foucault’s examples range so widely that heterotopias seem distinct from only the most basic everyday spaces, like houses, streets, shops and workplaces. Yet the list can easily be extended to include many ordinary everyday spaces, like schools, universities, gyms, or shopping malls.<sup>6</sup> The question can thus be raised as to how “other” these counter-sites really are when they are so common and prolific, or as Genocchio puts it, “what cannot be designated a heterotopia?” (39). As an axiom for their critical appraisal of Foucault’s concept, Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter claim that “not everything is a heterotopia” (“Heterotopia in a Postcivil Society” 6) – but the very necessity of this axiom already illustrates the possible (and problematic)

5 Cf. Cenzatti for an extended discussion of heterotopias of deviation, in the context of post-Fordism, Lefebvre, and public spaces.

6 For example, Kern (2008) on malls, McNamee (2000) on the spaces of childhood, and Low (2008) on gated communities.

extent of the concept’s scope in Foucault’s limited description. Closer scrutiny of the diversity of Foucault’s descriptions and examples thus simply makes it impossible to speak of heterotopia as a (single) “type” of space with a recognizable and stable set of features. Or, phrased more positively, the concept inherently leaves room for different kinds of spaces to be differently “other.”<sup>7</sup>

44 This diversity leads to another difficulty which stems from some of the terms in “Of Other Spaces.” For example, heterotopias are “absolutely other than all the emplacements that they reflect, and of which they speak” (17), but Foucault does not indicate how they are other, or what would actually constitute such difference. Likewise, he unproblematically posits the juxtaposition of “incompatible” sites (“Of Other Spaces” 19) without considering “spatial compatibility,” let alone how the bringing together of such sites in common heterotopias reflects on their “incompatibility” in the first place. In Genocchio’s words, Foucault relies on “some invisible but visibly operational difference which ... provides a clear conception of spatially discontinuous ground” (38-39), which the text does not address. In effect, if one follows “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault’s discussion entails that heterotopias cannot exist in reality, but only in thought or language – making the heterotopia of “Of Other Spaces” a heterotopia in the sense of *The Order of Things*.

So then how should the concept be used? In my view, one should always see Foucault’s two perspectives – primarily structural in *The Order of Things* and primarily spatial in “Of Other Spaces” – as two sides of the same coin. The point of heterotopia is not that it designates a type of space, focusing purely on spatial arrangements or material/physical elements, but that it approaches spaces as expressive or constitutive of (other) discourses – just as the Chinese encyclopedia in Borges’ story creates a different structural order. It allows for the discussion of the *spatial-as-discursive*, of spatial configurations (be they material/physical or social) that establish a certain order. This view is supported by the discussion of a mirror in “Of Other Spaces,” which presents an image that is a utopia, a place where one is not that gives visibility to oneself.

---

7 Similarly, in their overview of heterotopia in the context of architecture, Ritter and Knaller-Vlay comment on the impossibility to delimit heterotopia, by noting that in Foucault’s wide-ranging list of examples in “Of Other Spaces” “he creates a systematic inconsistency with which he protects the list from being completed. The list of heterotopias suggests an open-ended series that can be continued” (16).

The mirror itself, though, exists in real space and “exerts on the place that I occupy a sort of return effect” (“Of Other Spaces” 17). It acts as a heterotopia because it simultaneously makes real the place where one is standing, and unreal since it achieves visibility through the virtual place/utopia that the mirror shows. It thus determines one’s position through the projection of the non-place of the mirror image. The key here is that the mirror *works* as a heterotopia. The point is not so much that it refers to a space itself, but that it opens up the spatial-as-discursive, involving a discourse of visibility and subjectivity in this example. The concept is therefore neither a label for any non-dominant space, nor a theoretical “yardstick” to measure actual spaces against; rather, it enables the discussion of how parts, aspects, or qualities of spaces fit in and establish conventions, structures, and orders.

45

This take on heterotopia also points to where to look for the difference that lies at the heart of the concept, namely in spatial elements *insofar as* they establish a different order. For example, a boundary or “system of opening and closing” (“Of Other Spaces” 21) is not heterotopian *per se*, but because it can demarcate a different (spatial) order. The point is to examine how the elements and the “set of relations by which a given site can be defined” (“Of Other Spaces” 16) in a space work, taking on board that difference is always specific and contingent – dependent upon the (dominant and disruptive) discourses at play in certain spatial arrangements. Accordingly, there is no fixed or exhaustive inventory of heterotopian features, as they always need to be considered along with their (dominant) surrounding spaces/discourses. As a result, any idea of spatial difference as absolute, radical, or complete may hold up in theory or fiction, but cannot be maintained when considering actual spaces; instead, spatial difference should be seen in light of how and what a space is *other to*.

It is precisely in opening up the spatial-as-discursive that heterotopia can be a useful tool for looking at literature. In general, the concept can be taken as a description of literature’s relation to the real world. The fictional world of a text can be conceived as a heterotopian space that reflects on the socio-cultural reality in which that text was produced, or in other words, Barthes’s idea of literature as a meditation upon external reality. Heterotopia can thus be used to view the capability of literature to reflect on reality – in line with Foucault’s focus in *The Order*

*of Things* on the “non-place of language,” aligning spatial and linguistic means of representation. But on the face of it, using heterotopia for this is nothing particularly new; there are many ways of conceiving of the relationship of literature to the real world and heterotopia would be only one of many. However, the concept of heterotopia does add something that is relevant for postmodernist fiction, namely the stress on spatiality. As McHale argues throughout his book, postmodernist fiction is especially concerned with the construction of fictional worlds – in a single text – that raise issues of what constitutes these worlds and how these worlds “work” within the text, but thereby also raise the issue of our ideas about how the real world – that in itself comprises a plurality of worlds – works. The spatial is a key dimension in these worlds. Although the use of the term heterotopia for generally perceiving fiction’s connection to reality may not add a great deal, in cases when a text particularly foregrounds concerns with space – as “The Balloon” does – conceiving of a literary text as heterotopia helps to set the frame of reference for analyzing that text.

The fictional world of “The Balloon” can be taken as exemplary case of how a heterotopian space can be constructed in a literary text. The balloon acts as a mirror for the society over which it is suspended, thereby forming a heterotopian space for Manhattan. Allowing itself only to be looked at or strolled upon, this milestone in the history of inflation precisely fulfills the role of an alternative space that reflects and inverts the “regular” space of the city. The only thing the balloon ultimately achieves is the positioning and definition of the self (through the “mislocation of the self”) in the existing space, *vis-à-vis* the alternative of the balloon. The story revolves around juxtaposition; the balloon is not a heterotopia in and of itself, but only as a shapeless space, foregrounding physicality and immediate use, in contradistinction to the (dominant) flat space of the grid, as the embodiment of a discourse of rationality and economic logic, and its associated structuring of people’s lives. Neither space nor discourse takes precedence here – both the grid and its (socio-spatial) rigidity and the amorphous balloon’s alternative stand in direct and simultaneous relation to each other. What the balloon stands as a prototype or rough draft *of*, therefore, is exactly heterotopia – as a means of conceiving spatial and structural orders in conjunction.

Using the concept of heterotopia to read “The Balloon” also provides

a framework for understanding its critique of the grid. The spatial juxtaposition of balloon and grid also underscores that language (be it the lack of advertising on the balloon, or the inability of critical opinion to attach meaningful labels to the balloon) cannot bear a direct and unproblematic relation to reality – a point persistent throughout Barthelme’s work that goes well with the view that heterotopias “secretly undermine language” (*Order* xix). The story uses one specific strategy for its critique, for despite its pleasant colors, the balloon is mainly characterized by refusal and negation: it is amorphous, bears no signs, has no purpose, allows no interpretation, and thereby engenders mislocation. It is constructed to consist chiefly of the *absence* of the imposition of a dominant discourse on space and its users; its otherness is constituted negatively, by *not being the same* as the dominant space. It achieves this otherness not only spatially or discursively, but precisely in the coming together of the two, in the spatial-as-discursive. This constitutes its social criticism of the rigidity of the city below; otherness and critique are combined in the same gesture of non-cooperation.

47

Yet the critique offered in the story should not be taken to suggest a simple replacement of one model for another. The balloon has limitations as an alternative – after all, it is only a temporary, *rough* draft – which also nuances how the concept of heterotopia can be used (for either real or fictional spaces). The story exactly illustrates that there is little point in understanding the balloon on its own; the crux is its relationship to the dominant space. Accordingly, only little can be gained by saying that a space *is* a heterotopia; the concept becomes more productive when looking at how a space (structurally and spatially) *works* as a heterotopia (as with the mirror). The concept then serves as a way of looking at or thinking about a space, much more than that it describes properties of a specific space. Simply put, one should not aim for heterotopia to provide alternative solutions or new ways forward (a conceptual mistake frequently made but also criticized in urban studies, as discussed above), but one should use the concept to (critically) examine spaces and discourses both dominant and other.<sup>8</sup> The point of “The Balloon,”

---

8 In the light of her discussion of the medical roots of Foucault’s term, Heidi Sohn reaches a similar conclusion in saying that “treating all spaces and human groups that deviate from the established order as potentially subversive, challenging and resistant formations, and hence reading into them all sorts of positive, utopian transformative powers endowed by their liminality, is to miss an essential point of Foucault’s heterotopia: as an ambivalent formulation meant to destabilize discourse and language, as a rather obscure conception endowed with negativity, defying clarity, logic and order” (48).

then, is not to look at the balloon as a solution in itself (giant balloons are not the answer), but to consider both grid and balloon together. The balloon provides a rough draft of how heterotopia can comprise a critique of dominant urban space.

The social commentary of “The Balloon” is thus manifestly spatialized, and thereby also critiques contemporary society particularly in its spatial aspect. While the story is certainly concerned with language and processes of signification, these issues are raised specifically in a contemporary urban context. The balloon reflects particularly on a spatial expression of society, taking the Manhattan grid – symbol of modernity and the implementation of instrumental rationality in a spatial form – as emblematic of the adherence to pre-existing frames of reference that Barthelme wishes to critique. Taking this story as an allegorized rumination on the impossibilities of language and signification as most critics do – e.g. McHale (140) – would thus be taking for granted the fact that the issues raised are particularly spatialized.

48

### **Lefebvre and the critique of abstract space**

With an understanding of the space of “The Balloon” as heterotopian and the story as a critique of the contemporary society in its spatial aspect, the next issue is to examine more closely what this critique consists of and what it implies. Explicitly, Barthelme’s critique is brief: the existing Manhattan grid is a rigid imposition on people’s lives and the amorphous balloon offers a welcome relief from that rigid structuring. However, the critique goes deeper and the reflection on urban space – or rather the perception of urban space – in Barthelme’s story raises further issues and questions. The story does not simply reject the grid in favor of an amorphous shape, for it does not seem to directly advocate a drastic change in urban form. An alternative to the status quo is apparently desired, but whether this implies a new urban form, an alteration, or different perceptions or practices remains the question. These issues can be linked to several other critiques of space, the most relevant of which is perhaps that of Henri Lefebvre – a towering figure when it comes to theoretical approaches of urban space, and a major influence in urban studies (e.g. with Soja as prominent proponent). Coincidentally, Barthelme was also at least familiar with his work, since Lefebvre is referred to in the story “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne,” also

the title of one of Lefebvre’s major works.

In his main work on (urban) space, *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre brings together a philosophical tradition of thinking about space and Marxist analysis of production. At the heart of Lefebvre’s ideas on space lies a rejection of the traditional modes of thinking of space that are caught between two analytical extremes. The problem in conventional theories of space is concisely highlighted by Rob Shields in his analysis of the city (which is the concrete social space that Lefebvre mainly focuses on): “‘The City’ is a slippery notion. It slides back and forth between an abstract idea and concrete material; between the abstract universal of ‘The (ideal) City’ and concrete particular of ‘This (my) City’” (“Guide” 235). Shields identifies the problem of a tendency to make a distinction between a “real/material” city and an “imaginary” city.

49

On the one hand, there is the conception of space that is confined by the (material) particularities of a specific space. In this perspective – which is often a pragmatic one – space is defined by objects that *occupy* it, making space itself a subsidiary category. An exclusive focus on the material/physical aspects of space – e.g. in material analyses of physical in geography and urban planning – is too limited in Lefebvre’s view. Space here becomes an end-product of social activity and with such a limited concept of space, analysis can yield only an extensive inventory of space.

On the other hand, there is the conception of space as an abstract and mental category, and this is where the main problem lies for Lefebvre. Philosophy has appropriated this field of analysis of space in which the mental is privileged. The physical is subordinate, while the social is neglected altogether. Lefebvre points out that the Cartesian model of space as a void that acts as medium and container for objects – “which over time became the stuff of ‘common sense’ and ‘culture’” (*Production* 297) – reduces the spatial, as element of human existence, to a matter of epistemology. Space is isolated from society and reality and reduced to a mental category, which in turn becomes the object of theoretical analysis. Knowledge of space is thereby claimed by a field that effectively only analyses its own construction. In the hands of philosophy, according to Lefebvre, space is divorced from (social) reality and results in circular reasoning that sustains the privilege of mental space (6).

Lefebvre sees this abstract/mental space as the dominant mode of conceiving of space in society. In his view, the primacy of abstract space

over spatial practice entails that abstract space involves a “logic of space” that, “with its apparent significance and coherence, actually conceals the violence inherent in abstraction” (306). Like any tool or sign, abstract space violently reduces and oppresses the reality of space, “no matter how rational and straightforwardly this space may appear” (306). This logic of space simplifies and homogenizes space as something having content, without acknowledging any possible particularities of space itself. The problem lies in the fact that space, when conceived of as abstract, can in turn only be conceived of by way of a repressive reduction: “*Abstract space* can only be grasped *abstractly* by a thought that is prepared to *separate* logic from the dialectic, to *reduce* contradictions to a false coherence, and to *confuse* the residua [sic] of that reduction (for example, logic and spatial practice)” (307, emphasis in the original). For Lefebvre, the fundamental irreducibility of space entails that a logic that prefers abstract space is not only a violent reduction, but also cannot exist in its own right without a number of flawed and damaging intellectual operations.

Lefebvre argues that this philosophical tradition that cedes primacy to abstract space over spatial practice has affected actual spaces and, for example, spatial planning. In other words, the idea of abstract space is not limited to the abstract, but it has a bearing on the reality of space, ultimately serving to construe real space as an “embodiment” of an abstract logic. The distinctive feature of real spaces that are dominated by abstract space – as opposed to (mainly historical or future) spaces free of such domination – is the inescapable imposition of the “logic” or program of that particular space. In other words, “real” manifestations of abstract space are as real and material as any other kind of space, but what sets them apart is the primacy of the discourses of abstract space. These basically reduce a space (and its uses) to a single discourse/program, which cedes control over space to a (pre-determined) order rather than to the space’s users and spatial practices. An example Lefebvre gives is the difference between some Parisian squares: “When an urban square serving as a meeting place isolated from traffic (e.g. the Place des Vosges) is transformed into an intersection (e.g. the Place de la Concorde) or abandoned as a place to meet (e.g. the Palais Royal), life is subtly but profoundly changed, sacrificed to that abstract space where cars circulate like so many atomic particles” (312). For Lefebvre,

the enclosed Place des Vosges allows for (non-pre-determined) spatial practice, whereas the Place de la Concorde has been reduced to a single usage and a single discourse of motorized traffic. The “openness” of the former space to spontaneous (inter)action contrasts with the one-dimensional logic of the latter – which is not the result of spatial practices, but of an imposition through conscious urban planning.

Invested with the primacy of abstract space in the tradition of Cartesian philosophy, the field of urban planning employs operations like zoning and assigning of functions – such as Haussmann’s rebuilding of Paris – which constitute the imposition of abstract space, where designed functionality takes over from the reality of spatial practice. For Lefebvre, “[a]bstract space is thus repressive in essence and *par excellence* ... through reduction, through (functional) localization, through the imposition of hierarchy and segregation” (318).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as Lefebvre notes, “[t]he meanings conveyed by abstract space are more often prohibitions than solicitations or stimuli (except when it comes to consumption)” (319). The conception of space as abstract space is thus based on a philosophical tradition, but also has relevance in the practical reality of urban space in the sense that abstract space is not just theoretically repressive, but also in practice.

51

The repressive quality of abstract space affects the experience of space accordingly. In the reduction of urban space to an exclusive space of motorized traffic, for example, “the driver is concerned only with steering himself to his destination, and in looking about sees only what he needs to see for that purpose; he thus perceives only his route, which has been materialized, mechanized, and technicized, and he sees it from one angle only – that of its functionality: speed, readability, facility” (313). This in itself seems fairly obvious: the space of motorized traffic – be it the Place de la Concorde, any busy thoroughfare, or a regular highway – has one function (i.e. transportation) and all aspects of that space have been geared towards that one function, and usage is accordingly oriented solely to that function. According to Lefebvre, however, the consequences run deeper and affect the relation of the individual to the surrounding space: “Space is defined in this context in terms of

---

<sup>9</sup> Lefebvre adds to this list the possibility that abstract space represses through art. Lefebvre here generally points to abstract painting that (analytically) arranges viewpoints. However, Lefebvre’s view on art (and literature) is complicated and often ambivalent, and will be addressed below.

the perception of an *abstract subject*, such as the driver of a motor vehicle, equipped with a collective common sense, namely the capacity to read the symbols of the highway code, and with a sole organ – the eye – place in the service of his movement in the visual field” (313). Lefebvre continues to argue that such organization of space in effect flattens it, reducing the three-dimensionality of space to a visual surface. The primacy of abstract logic and the imposition of a single program confuse space and surface to a point where “[t]his abstract space eventually becomes the simulacrum of a full space (of that space which was formerly full in nature and in history)” (313). The consequence for usage is that movement in abstract space merely follows a pre-existing “program,” organized in terms of an abstract subject. Conversely, the experience of this space reduces the subject to the abstract subject for which this (abstract) space was designed. In other words, abstract space also affects the (possible) experience of space and reduces the subject in space to that belonging to the logic of abstract space. The dominant discourse/program imposed by that space dictates the (possible) experiences of and practices in that space, which in turn reaffirm – or reify, in keeping with the Marxist context of Lefebvre’s work – the dominance of an abstract logic. Abstract space is therefore anything but an isolated abstraction; in practice it reduces both space and the individual experience of space.

Lefebvre’s critique of abstract space can be used to view the critique of urban space offered in “The Balloon.” Barthelme’s comment on the rectangular pathways of the Manhattan grid can be taken as a concise critique of abstract space and its consequences as Lefebvre addresses them. In contrast to the “natural” development of older cities, growing outward from a historical core, the grid structure exemplifies the spatial implementation of a program of instrumental rationality, geared towards maximizing the efficiency with which (scarce) space can be used. Barthelme explicitly mentions the precision of the grid (indicating its premeditated and organized nature), but the heterotopian alternative of the limitless and undefined balloon, by contradistinction, also indicates the space of the grid as limited, pre-defined, and confined. Barthelme associates this space with a rigidity in people’s lives and the unavailability of change. In other words, Barthelme here makes a connection between the rigidity of the space of the grid and a limiting effect on the possible experiences in that space. In other words, “The Balloon” presents the

grid along the lines of Lefebvre’s idea of abstract space: predetermined, flattened, reductive, and repressive. The story posits the limitations imposed by the grid as affecting not just the direct experience of urban space, but as a more pervasive factor in the everyday lives of the people. Furthermore, immediately after the comments on the repressive nature of the grid, the story directly associates this with a general primacy of totalizing discourses and the compulsion to incorporate everything into that discursive order through interpretation, which the balloon disrupts:

The amount of specialized training currently needed... has been occasioned by the steadily growing importance of complex machinery, in virtually all kinds of operations; as this tendency increases, more and more people will turn, in bewildered inadequacy, to solutions for which the balloon may stand as a prototype, or ‘rough draft.’ (57-8)

53

In “The Balloon,” therefore, (urban) space is presented not as an autonomous or subordinate category, but as an aspect of society that itself is a factor in the social reality of the city – for which the eponymous balloon offers an alternative, or at least another model for using, understanding, and coming to terms with urban space.

Likewise, in *The Production of Space* Lefebvre does not nostalgically lament the loss of a previously existing mode of spatiality, but he also seeks an alternative to the opposite extremes of a restricted view bound to the specifics of a particular space and the repressive view of space as abstract category. Lefebvre therefore argues for re-including the *social* in the consideration of space. In fact, this forms the starting point of Lefebvre’s analysis: “(social) space is a (social) product” (26). As a social phenomenon space embodies social relations, and is therefore also a means of power and control. Lefebvre’s succinct motto thus incorporates the notion that, being a product, social space – or, society in its spatial aspect – is dominated by conceptions of space that privilege the mental and disregard the social, thereby maintaining the status quo and keeping the spatial out of the conception of (social) existence.

The rejection of an opposition between physical and mental and the re-incorporation of the social are the basis for Lefebvre’s familiar “conceptual triad” for the analysis of space. He distinguishes three “moments” or facets of space that can “intersect” in any given space. *Spatial*

*practice* refers to daily (urban) reality and everyday practices. This “perceived” space basically involves the material reality of the (urban) social environment. By *representations of space* Lefebvre refers to mental space, or “conceived” space. It is “conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived... This is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production)” (38-9). While this category includes abstract space, which Lefebvre views negatively because of its dominance, the category of conceived space is not negative in and of itself, since it is a constitutive part of his conceptual triad – i.e. the *dominance* is what Lefebvre objects to. Lastly, he distinguishes *representational spaces*, or “lived” space. This is “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’, but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who *describe* and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” (39). Lefebvre stresses that this triad of perceived, conceived, and lived space “loses all its force if it is treated as an abstract ‘model’” (40). The analysis of space must be able to deal with the “reality” of space if it is to be useful at all. Also, this triad is in all instances exactly that; none of its elements occurs independently. Lefebvre thus offers a way of thinking about space in which sociality regains its primacy and *all* levels of the spatiality of existence are considered in conjunction.<sup>10</sup>

The presentation of the heterotopian alternative of the balloon in Barthelme’s story also incorporates the search for an alternative mode of conceiving of space, as a part of the critique offered in the story. The treatment of the balloon exposes the people’s normal approach to (the objects in) urban space, in a way that can be said to work through the three “moments” of Lefebvre’s conceptual triad. With the concrete

---

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that, perhaps in accordance with his political and Marxist frame of reference, Lefebvre’s work is heavily value-laden. The implicit (and often explicit) value judgments are only partly justified because Lefebvre attempts to redress a balance (challenging the dominant conceived space in favor of lived space). On the surface, abstract and conceived space is negative, and lived space is positive. However, this only really applies insofar as these terms are used to argue against the contemporary capitalist mode of production and capital accumulation. If one takes this into account, it is nevertheless possible (and best) to draw on Lefebvre’s theory without going along with his judgments.

particular of the balloon as a starting point, the reactions of the people are initially directed by the dominant mode of conceiving of an object in the city. Hence, the most likely interpretation of the balloon would have been as an advertising blimp. In effect, the first response is to incorporate the balloon as a “regular” sign in urban space, which proves to be an imperative of consumption. Yet this interpretation is denied and the people cannot accept the balloon as just a “regular” object. The people’s imaginations require it to be incorporated in the symbolic universe of the people’s urban lives and for the people the balloon needs to be subsumed in the existing discourses of the city. The “apparent purposeless” of the balloon is vexing, since the dominant mode of “conceived space” requires that objects have clear (and single) purposes that act as directives for the people. Here, too, the limited and limiting facets of abstract space become apparent.

55

As the balloon resists being incorporated into abstract space, it successfully challenges the dominance of conceived space. As an object, it challenges the “logic of space” that belongs to abstract space by being both surface *and* volume. The balloon’s exterior is one of its most striking features, with its muted grays and forgotten yellows as an alternative to the sky, yet it is not a visual image. Lefebvre argues that in abstract space geometric visuality and surfaces take over from volume and practice, through which space can be reduced to and understood as a “code” or “logic.” The surface of the balloon is prominent, but it cannot be separated from the balloon as a volume too. Its appeal especially lies in its three-dimensionality, for example in its ability to shift its shape and to be used for strolls. The balloon therefore maintains a successful connection between surface and volume, which undercuts the logic of abstract space. Furthermore, refusing to allow it to be taken as an object that can be interpreted within existing frames, it ultimately allows itself only to simply be used for spatial practices – and be enjoyed for that very reason. It thus becomes a “lived space” that is also an explicitly social space. People do not use the balloon alone, but use it for taking strolls together or as a meeting point. The story does not show people interacting anywhere except in the usage of the space of the balloon. Implicitly, the dominant “conceived space” of the grid thus seems to neglect the social in the city, while the balloon reinstates this sociality in urban space.

Hence, the critique of urban space in “The Balloon” is not pessimistic

or nostalgic – just like Lefebvre’s is not. The story can be read as an argument for lived space and for reinstating the social in urban space, but that does not in any way detract from the balloon as a concrete particular or from the grid as “conceived space,” but seeks to redress the balance between the different aspects of urban space. Barthelme’s story here follows Lefebvre’s triad in that it basically leaves the three “moments” of space – perceived, conceived, and lived – intact, seeking not a replacement of the dominant system but a different approach to spatiality. After all, the balloon does not constitute a triumph, but a “rough draft.” In presenting Manhattan and a heterotopian alternative, “The Balloon” is therefore, as Barthelme commented, a meditation upon external reality in the form of a critique of (conception) of spatiality in the contemporary city.

56

## Representation and spatiality

With critique as a reflection upon external reality, “The Balloon” presents not only a departure *from* a modern(ist) mode of (representing) urban spatiality, it also offers a view on what it departs *for* – if only by implication. However, while the story offers a view on the abstract space of the Manhattan grid and the repressive dominance of conceived space, it does not directly present a new type of urban space – after all, imposing colossal balloons over urban skies does not seem to be a viable option for contemporary cities. Instead, one should read the story more as a (conceptual) model for how to come to terms with the city after one can no longer turn to a modern(ist) mode of viewing the city. In other words, through critique the story presents a view of a new, postmodern urban spatiality.

The representational character of the space of the balloon and its problematic status are key in this respect. The interpretation of the balloon’s meaning is dismissed, as are numerous interpretations of the balloon as sign – which, through contradistinction, underscores the fact that urban spaces are filled with signs and meaning. However, the balloon obviously means something to the people: an alternative to the rigidity of their lives. In accordance with the story’s dismissal of interpretative activity when it comes to meanings, this ultimate meaning comes out through spatial practice, the way in which the people incorporate the balloon as an element of their lives in the space of the city. The bal-

loon therefore carries meaning, not by being a sign or signifying surface, but simply by being a space. It serves to highlight the fact that not just signs, but spaces themselves are representational and carry meaning.

The notion of heterotopia – which represents, contests, and inverts other “real” spaces in Foucault’s discussion – can also be brought to bear on the story’s perspective on spatiality. The concept draws precisely on the idea that space is itself representational. If one aligns heterotopia with the “lived” space of Lefebvre (as Soja does in *Postmodern Geographies*), the result is a representational space that offers an alternative to spaces that do not readily acknowledge the representational character of space in the first place – in other words, the dominant “abstract” and “conceived” space to which Lefebvre objects. This is precisely how the balloon in Barthelme’s story functions. It is not so much the balloon as concrete particular that is valued, but its status as a space that (through contradistinction) represents aspects of society, the fact that it is a representational space. The closing passage of the story therefore sharply analyses the balloon through its choice of words. Insofar as it is a solution, the balloon “may stand as a prototype, or ‘rough draft’” (58), and not as a blueprint. The difference may seem slight, but the relevance of the balloon lies precisely in the fact that it is not a *representation* of space (like a blueprint, a conceptual representation of a future space), but a *representational* space in its own right.

57

This is, then, the key aspect in which Barthelme’s story relates to its contemporary society. “The Balloon” deals with urban space by representing the Manhattan grid as rigid, but more importantly by constructing another urban “world” in a balloon that highlights the representational character of urban space. The story illustrates that representation here does not require any fixed system of representation, nor does it necessarily involve realism or mimesis. With the superposition of a fantastic object above the city, the story obviously does not pursue any kind of realistic representation of the city. Yet since the story effectively addresses issues in contemporary urban space, the story could function as a model for how to *understand* the representational character of real space. As Barthelme noted in “Not-Knowing,” a straightforward, honest, and simple relation between fiction and the real world is no longer available. Rather, the attempt to get at “the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken” (“Not-Knowing” 15) offers an entry point for reflection upon

urban space in “The Balloon.” The story offers a strategy for bringing into view the representational and discursive aspects of urban space that lie beyond the realm of the scientifically measurable and quantifiable.

One can also point out here that the difficulty with postmodern space here parallels Barthelme’s view of literature in his essay “Not-Knowing.” The same dynamic apparent in Barthelme’s view of the art object (or literary work) as something that at once invites and resists interpretation seems to be operative in postmodern urban space. This does not entail that the city needs to be seen as an art object, but it does indicate that similar strategies for framing and understanding art or literature could be useful for the city as well (which can be facilitated, for example, by Barthelme’s recurring theme of *dreck*, both urban and verbal, acting not only as reflection of the city but also as a vehicle for reflecting upon it). Conversely, the fictional space of Barthelme’s story should not be taken as in any sense comparable to real urban space. After all, in “Not-Knowing” Barthelme stresses the point that “art is always a meditation upon external reality, not a jackleg attempt to ‘be’ external reality” (23). Nevertheless, reflections upon external reality such as “The Balloon” can open up aspects of contemporary space that are difficult, problematic, or merit discussion. Therefore, the alternative that Barthelme offers to complement his critique of his contemporary urban space does not lie in a new kind of actual space, but rather in a new view of space as being itself representational, which also offers new possibilities for everyday life and spatial practices.

58

This leads back to a final loose end to be tied up, namely the position of representation in Lefebvre’s work, where it is both central and problematic through the lack of a clear discussion by Lefebvre himself. In his conceptual triad, the idea of “representations of space” (the spatial “moment” of philosophers, urban planners, journalists, etc.) speaks for itself. Lefebvre also explicitly associates linguistic systems with the representation of space. What Lefebvre means precisely with “representational spaces” is, however, less clear. Representational space is space as experienced in everyday practices by the people inhabiting social space. Based on lived experience, “representational spaces may be said ... to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs” (*Production* 39). What this space represents, then, is lived experience itself, whereby “representational space” basically rep-

resents the production of social space – in other words, it is posited as self-representative. Lefebvre does not elaborate much on this and leaves a certain degree of ambiguity in his sense of representation.

A problem arises when it comes to literature (and art). Since he posits linguistic representation firmly in the category of “conceived” space, literature would seem to fall into the “bad” category, complicit with the repression through abstract space. In Lefebvre’s earlier work *The Right to the City*, on the other hand, he is far more positive towards literature and art. He likens the city to a literary *oeuvre* and speaks of the city as a book, a language, and a written text: “On this book, with this writing, are projected mental and social forms and structures ... The whole is not immediately present in this written text, the city” (102). Art is also necessary for the city, bringing to urban society its meditation on life as drama and pleasure: “art restitutes [sic] the *meaning* of the oeuvre, giving it multiple facets of *appropriated* time and space” (*Right* 157). This attitude towards art and literature has changed in *The Production of Space* and Lefebvre’s negative stance towards language and literature seems to go hand in hand with an explicit aversion to contemporary French thinkers like Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, and Kristeva on this point: “This school, whose growing renown may have something to do with its growing dogmatism, is forever promoting the basic sophistry whereby the philosophico-epistemological notion of space is fetishized and the mental realm comes to envelop the social and physical ones” (*Production* 5). He accuses them of trying to appropriate space for their own field, thereby effecting the same repression of the social as in Cartesian philosophy.

59

This makes the centrality of representation for Lefebvre’s argument even more difficult. He acknowledges that (lived) space carries and transmits meaning, but insists that space is “*produced* before being *read*; nor [is] it produced in order to be read and grasped, but rather in order to be *lived* by people with bodies and lives in their own particular urban context” (*Production* 143). Lefebvre posits representation as crucial to his conceptual triad, but closes off all possible entry points for semiotics or semiology to enter into his analysis, motivated by a sometimes vicious dislike of poststructuralism and deconstruction. This makes it difficult to gain a definite understanding of representation in Lefebvre’s terminology. Yet precisely because Lefebvre points out that social space *signifies* and that it transmits *meaning*, cultural representations of social space

could supply a perspective on these very processes of signification and meaning into view that has other (critical) possibilities. In *Right to the City* Lefebvre certainly considered this possible approach. He considers literature as starting point for analysis in *The Production of Space*, but dismisses this possibility since he doubts whether literary texts “deal with socially ‘real’ space” (*Production* 15). Yet rather than criticize Lefebvre here for what seems a rather reductive view of literary representation, one can see Lefebvre laying out here exactly what literature and art can provide.

60 For this is precisely where Barthelme’s defense of literature as *reflection upon*, rather than “jackleg attempt to ‘be’ external reality” is relevant. As “The Balloon” shows, a literary text can go beyond representing space as “backdrop” for addressing other issues. A literary text can spatialize issues in contemporary society through the construction of a fictional world, or simply take spatial issues head on. A story like “The Balloon” is therefore not necessarily complicit in the dominance of “conceived” space, but offers strategies – such as the imposition of a heterotopian balloon – to precisely critique and challenge that dominance. While the fictional urban world constructed in “The Balloon” is certainly representational, it is not in any way socially “real” space and it does not constitute a “lived space” in its own right. Yet since the representation of space in literature can also be a representation of representational space (a possibility that Lefebvre does not discuss), a literary text is capable of (critically) addressing issues that are a part of socially “real” space. “The Balloon” offers an effective critique of the repressive nature of abstract space and also offers a view on representational space through the heterotopian balloon. The story addresses and opens up the idea of representation in relation to space – paradoxically making matters more “concrete” on this point than Lefebvre actually does in *The Production of Space*. If one bypasses Lefebvre’s aversion of certain of his contemporary French thinkers, therefore, one can open up a productive avenue of exploration in considering literary reflection of and on urban space.

Ultimately, then, “The Balloon” does not offer a view of any concrete alternative for the urban space that it critiques, but it offers a model for a new approach of spatiality. The story presents urban space as irreducible in its particularity, and as representational – not as a sign or image, but simply as a lived space. The story advocates spatial practices and

counterbalances the dominance of a mode of spatiality that stresses the “conceived” and abstract. The story takes on board typically postmodernist concerns with language and metafiction, but by spatializing these concerns, it makes a literary concern relevant for contemporary society. Like in McHale’s main view of postmodernist fiction, the ontological juxtaposition of two worlds in the story both reflects and reflects upon issues in the real space of the postmodern city. The story’s fictional world offers a way of viewing urban space as being itself representational, exploring aspects of urban space to which theorists like Lefebvre and Foucault do not readily have access, and thereby also offering strategies that can add to the analysis of real urban space. Finally, yet another metafictional dimension can be added to the story: just like “a single balloon must stand for a lifetime of thinking about balloons” (“The Balloon” 55), “The Balloon” may stand as a prototype, or ‘rough draft’ for considering how the reflection of/on urban space in literature can produce new ways of thinking about the everyday space of the contemporary city.

61

### **Walking in Auster’s *City of Glass***

Barthelme’s story thus argues for a new spatiality in the postmodern city, and the critique in the story opens up a framework for thinking about urban space, in which theoretical notions from Lefebvre and Foucault can be mobilized. In “The Balloon,” the subject in the city seeks relief in the form of the “mislocation of the self” that the space of the balloon offers, which hinges on usage of space rather than on interpretation. However, the story does not bring into view what the connection between the subject and usage of space would involve.

Paul Auster’s short novel *City of Glass* (1985) will serve here as a second literary work to highlight precisely that connection. Like in Barthelme’s story, *City of Glass* uses the Manhattan grid to develop a new way of coming to terms with the city, but does so by focusing not so much on urban space itself, but particularly on *practices* in urban space. After all, spaces are not simply “lived” or “other” in and of themselves, for if one conceives of space as a product (as Lefebvre does), this requires that space is made and maintained, that something is *done* as well as thought. Auster’s novel addresses precisely questions of spatial practices, not just in a physical and material sense (namely walking), but it also spatializes the use of language as a practice. Auster thereby provides precisely the

“ingredient” that is needed (via the work of Michel de Certeau on walking) to supplement the model that emerges from combining Lefebvre and Foucault.

*City of Glass* takes off precisely from Barthelme’s “mislocation of the self,” taking the desired alternative in “The Balloon” and expanding it as key aspect of its urban world. Barthelme’s story itself is brief on the mislocation of the self: the heterotopian space of the balloon offers an alternative mode of conceiving of urban space and hence another way of conceiving of the self. The story posits this mislocation of the self as something that is desired in contemporary culture, as alternative to the rigidity imposed by the grid as a spatial expression of a pre-determined (discursive) order that structures people’s lives; the mislocation of the self offers an escape from (and possibility for resistance to) the logic of abstract space (in Lefebvre’s terminology) and to pre-determined and oppressive aspects of modernity. However, the term “mislocation” also opens up further issues. It presumes a proper location of the self, perhaps suggesting a “relocation” after “mislocation,” and it supposes at the same time that the self should not be fixed in this proper location, and that this location is itself limiting. Furthermore, one could take “mislocation of the self” to mean two things: either the losing or misplacing of the self, or simply the locating of the self in a place other than its own. The question remains, however, how this mislocation is effected and where it originates. In “The Balloon” the mislocation of the self becomes available in response to the balloon; the balloon facilitates and caters to a dormant need for an alternative. The balloon thus acts as a catalyst for an alternative that – until the appearance of the balloon over the Manhattan sky – was perhaps desired, but not yet available. In effect, then, the mislocation of the self in Barthelme’s story is an (unknowingly) desired possibility thrown into the people’s laps.

Auster’s novel uses the genre of the detective story as its basis, but ultimately subverts the detective form entirely.<sup>11</sup> The protagonist is Daniel Quinn, a writer who lost his wife and child a few years before and now lives a reclusive life in Manhattan. While in his former life as a husband and father Quinn wrote poetry and plays, he now writes mystery novels

---

11 For a discussion of *City of Glass* focusing on writing and “Auster’s detective-as-writer [as] a privileged site for understanding a slightly different impulse within postmodern American fiction” (94) taking off from the work of Blanchot, see Jeffrey Nealon.

under the pseudonym of William Wilson. Nobody, not even his publisher, knows that Quinn is Wilson, or even that Wilson does not exist. Quinn has an agent, whom he has never met in person, to deal with all fees, contacts, letters, etc. Yet Quinn does not feel himself to be the same as Wilson, nor does he feel himself to be the author of the works he writes, which detaches him from any responsibility of need to defend his work (vis-à-vis his earlier, more literary life). For Quinn, Wilson “was an invention, and even though he had been born within Quinn himself, he now led an independent life” (4). However, Quinn does feel close to the protagonist of the books he writes, the private investigator Max Work. Quinn is thus not presented as a singular or unified character, but as being multiple: “In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist. Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise, If Wilson was an illusion, he nevertheless justified the lives of the other two” (6). In the character of Quinn, the formation of this “triad” is placed against the background of the loss of his wife, child, and former life, which defines Quinn as a solitary inhabitant of Manhattan.

63

Like in “The Balloon,” the mislocation of the self is explicitly spatialized and linked to the city in the urban world of *City of Glass*, but the need to get away from a determined and fixed location of the self does not require a marked space/object to facilitate it. The possibility for a mislocation of the self is a feature of urban space itself and Quinn deliberately makes use of urban space for exactly that purpose. The most defining characteristic that is provided about Quinn is his habit of walking in the city: “More than anything else... what he liked to do was walk. Nearly every day, rain or shine, hot or cold, he would leave his apartment to walk through the city – never really going anywhere, but simply going wherever his legs happened to take him” (3). The point of Quinn’s walks is not the physical activity, but walking as means of effecting the mislocation of the self:

New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving

himself behind, and by giving himself up to the movement of the streets, by reducing himself to a seeing eye, he was able to escape the obligation to think, and this, more than anything else, brought him a measure of peace, a salutary emptiness within. The world was outside of him, around him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible for him to dwell on any one thing for very long. Motion was of the essence, the act of putting one foot in front of the other and allowing himself to follow the drift of his own body. By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (3-4)

This passage from the opening of the novel is rich in reverberations. It immediately invokes the image of the *flâneur*, with its roots in the work of Baudelaire. However, the calling up of this figure is deceptive in the opening passage of *City of Glass*. For Baudelaire, the *flâneur* was primarily a figure that represented the position or role of the creating artist. In his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), Baudelaire describes the *flâneur* as someone for whom it is “an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite” (9). Dissociated from the crowd among which he moves, the *flâneur* is then capable of an artistic and transformative vision. This activity also involves a dissolution of the self, which makes of the *flâneur*, for Baudelaire, “an I, with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I’” (9). Yet this figure of the creative artist losing himself through succumbing to the ebb and flow of urban space, being reduced only to a seeing eye, does not return anywhere else in *City of Glass*. There is plenty of walking, but no *flânerie*, with its associated idleness and creative vision, in the rest of the novel.

Instead, the association with the figure of the *flâneur* here does two things. Firstly, it gives background information on Quinn’s past, his love of walking, and his escapism. This escapism is underscored in an explicit reference to Baudelaire later in the novel, when Quinn writes in his notebook: “Baudelaire: Il me semble que je serais toujours bien là où

je ne suis pas. In other words: It seems to me that I will always be happy in the place where I am not. Or, more bluntly: Wherever I am not is the place where I am myself. Or else, taking the bull by the horns: Anywhere out of the world” (110). Quinn’s walking as means of becoming of a “non-I” is not geared towards artistic production, but is an end in itself. In fact, the opening of the novel describes how Quinn’s love of walking is activated particularly when he has finished another mystery novel; in contrast to the *flâneur*, walking serves as a means for Quinn to get away from artistic production. But, more importantly, what the recalling of the *flâneur* in this opening passage achieves, is to establish a figure from which the novel departs. The only aimless walking in the novel is a day-long tour of a good part of Manhattan – after which Quinn writes about Baudelaire in his notebook – but this walk is an attempt to escape from frustration and failure, not a comfortable and leisurely act of *flânerie*. The novel calls up the image of the *flâneur* precisely as a lost ideal, a figure that is no longer possible in the contemporary city. Furthermore, since the *flâneur* is one of the central figures of modern urban culture and in that sense an “embodiment” of modernity, raising this image to make it defunct is one of the novel’s strategies of presenting a world that is other than the modernity of the *flâneur*. In other words, the initial calling up of the figure of the *flâneur* and its non-applicability in the rest of the novel is one of the ways in which the novel presents a world characterized by postmodernity.<sup>12</sup>

65

The novel continues by following – and breaking – the mold of another major embodiment of modernity that walks the city streets, namely the detective. Quinn receives several phone calls, late at night, from someone mistakenly looking for the detective Paul Auster. Quinn decides to assume the role of Auster the detective and takes on the case: tailing an old man, Peter Stillman (Sr.), at the request of his son, Peter Stillman (Jr.). As a child, the young Stillman was locked in a dark room and physically abused by his father for many years. Stillman Sr. was a crazy theologian attempting to get his child to speak the original language spoken in the Garden of Eden by depriving him of human contact, speech, and communication. The young Stillman and his wife have Auster/Quinn tail his father from his arrival in Manhattan after

<sup>12</sup> For other noteworthy discussions of the *flâneur*, see the articles (particularly those by David Frisby, Rob Shields, and Zygmunt Bauman) in Keith Tester’s volume *The Flâneur* (1994).

his release from prison, out of fear that the older Stillman might want to kill the younger. Quinn diligently follows the old man, who does nothing but take long and slow walks in the city, limiting himself to the area around the hotel at which he stays. The itineraries of the old man turn out to have the shape of letters, making use of the Manhattan grid as a notepad and spelling out THE TOWER OF BABEL. After having completed his project of writing/walking, the old Stillman disappears, and Quinn is left with a dead end. After this, things go downhill and the detective form disintegrates. Quinn seeks out the real Paul Auster, who turns out not to be a detective at all, but a writer – a (meta)fictional rendition of the real Paul Auster, author of *City of Glass* – who cannot really help him. Frustrated yet still dedicated to his case, Quinn lapses into madness, becomes a bum, and loses his apartment. It turns out that the old Stillman jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge right after completing his walking project and that the young Stillman and his wife have disappeared. Quinn’s case, his life, and he himself have disintegrated, and Quinn, too, vanishes at the end of the novel. The epistemological quest of the detective, a rational subject looking for answers, is frustrated and dissolved, breaking the conventions of the detective form. As Madeleine Sorapure concludes, the novel “undermines a reading that would reinforce the interpretation of detective fiction in terms of a master plot, master plotter, and master reader” (85).<sup>13</sup> Just as with the early and brief reference to the figure of the *flâneur*, the novel ultimately also shows the figure of the detective to be defunct. Like Barthelme’s “The Balloon,” *City of Glass* thus raises images of modernity, only to show that they are no longer an option in the world that the novel creates – and the world upon which it reflects.

Yet more than just a genre-breaking novel, *City of Glass* also offers a reflection upon contemporary society and does so by spatializing many of the issues it raises. The world constructed in the novel is, more directly than in “The Balloon,” a representation of Manhattan. However, this rendering does not aim at realism, but rather blends the “real” world with the world of fiction. One step onwards from the representational, the fictional is often discussed as a prominent element of postmodern urban space, for example, in Nan Ellin’s thorough

<sup>13</sup> Sorapure is also particularly insightful in connecting the novel’s treatment of the detective genre with questions of authorship, which is also a central concern of the novel – though not of the present study.

overview of postmodern urbanism. Postmodernist architecture, in Ellin’s view, has departed from the modernist adage “Form Follows Function.” In what is almost an echo of Barthele’s view that simple, honest, and straightforward options are no longer available in postmodernism, Ellin notes that “[i]n contrast to modernism’s insistence upon architectural honesty and functionality, postmodern urbanism sought to satisfy needs that are not merely functional and to convey meanings other than the building tectonics” (156). She then identifies four major themes in these “other” meanings, the main one being “Form Follows Fiction.”<sup>14</sup> In Ellin’s analysis, postmodern urbanism features a contextualism that modern urbanism mainly did not. In modern urbanism buildings and planning tended to ignore context, favoring the autonomy of a building and the restructuring of urban areas following ideology independent of the existing situation. This is apparent in, for example, the architecture of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, or in many urban redevelopment projects after WWII – or in Haussmann’s earlier redevelopment of Paris in the nineteenth century, as in the earlier example raised by Lefebvre.

67

Postmodern urbanism, on the other hand, tends to acknowledge the existing urban context. This is achieved by representational devices, such as a focus on (re)constructing history (a point where one can draw parallels with Hutcheon’s take on the postmodern). Hence, Ellin argues that in this contextual awareness and historicism “[e]fforts at contextualism and preservation ... are engaged in inventing a history which largely erases the chapter on the modern period, or re-values it and idealizes selected earlier periods. Once the invention of tradition goes beyond a certain point, it produces ‘hyperreal’ environments which ... must be absolutely fake in order to be better than anything real” (162-3). Such hyperreal urban spaces emphasize appearance and facades, generally to cater to commercial interests, entertainment, and consumption. The crux of such space is its constructed (or fabricated) nature, foregrounding the fictional. However, as Harvey argues, this kind of urban space is also a response to popular needs and is better able to acknowledge the plurality of contemporary cities. He notes that “[o]n the surface, at least, it would seem that postmodernism [in architecture and urban

---

<sup>14</sup> The others Ellin discusses are “Form Follows Fear,” “Form Follows Finesse” (whereby she refers to architecture becoming an individualistic “art for art’s sake”), and “Form Follows Finance” (whereby she refers to the immense influence of (global) capital on architecture).

space] is precisely about finding ways to express such an aesthetics of diversity” (*Condition* 75). Different popular tastes and needs can be catered to – often hand in hand with commercial interests. The result is often an eclectic mix of styles that, in Harvey’s words, “convey a sense of some search for a fantasy world, the illusory ‘high’ that takes us beyond current realities into pure imagination” (*Condition* 97).<sup>15</sup> These fictional aspects of postmodern urban space are of course part of a discourse imposed on space (akin to Lefebvre’s abstract space), but at the same time they also reflect ways in which people make use of urban space. The production of social space, after all, involves imaginative readings and uses for space to become “lived.”

68

In *City of Glass* the urban world invokes the tradition of the detective story, through which the “real” and the fictional blend into each other. Quinn’s “triad of selves” is reinforced by another triad that Quinn sees in the term “private eye”: not just the seeing eye of the detective as substitute for the lowercase “i” standing for “investigator,” but also an uppercase “I,” constituting a subject in the world. The world of detective fiction, then, is also one from which individual subjectivity springs, which for Quinn undermines the distinction between fiction and reality: “He had, of course, long ago stopped thinking of himself as real. If he lived now in the world at all, it was only at one remove, through the imaginary person of Max Work” (9). The world of detective fiction and the “real” world therefore bleed into each other, for Quinn. In addition, he characterizes the world of the mystery novel first of all as being made up of words. Driven by the desire to solve the mystery, “the world of the book comes to life, seething with possibilities, with secrets and contradictions,” so that “there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant” (8). In such a hyper-significant world in which no detail can be overlooked, “[t]he center, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book comes to its end” (8). However, *City of Glass* subverts this final totalizing vision. The novel presents the urban world of the detective as one made up of language, but without a totalizing whole the details that may not be overlooked remain fragmented, as

---

15 As an example of such a space, Harvey discusses the Piazza d’Italia in New Orleans by Charles Moore, which was created as a reference to the Italian homeland for the local Italian population. This enclosed square features a classic “temple,” an arcade with all types of classic columns, a fountain with an island in the shape of the boot of Italy, and contains a host of other references. It combines commercial interests with a concern for the Italian community. This space therefore (possibly) combines aspects of both Lefebvre’s “conceived” and “lived” space.

signs that appear to be in relation to each other without any center to determine or fix these relations. The total sum of details do not amount to a totalizing vision of a whole; putting together pieces of the puzzle does not at all yield a full picture.

Overall, then, the novel presents a fictional world that is an environment of signification, and that is decentered and resistant to any final totalizing efforts. Bearing in mind that the world of detective fiction is typically an urban one, one can see in Quinn’s description a vision that recalls Soja’s perspective on the postmodern city (as discussed in my introduction here). The key feature in his discussion of Los Angeles is that the plurality of its elements is irreducible to a totalizing narrative, making up a decentered whole that can only be grasped by venturing outside rational/scientific discourses. To address the real world of the postmodern city, Soja needs to turn to a fictional construct – his “LA-leph” – which at the same time addresses the impossibility of language and a plural world to come together. His vision of the postmodern city – one that invites and resists interpretation – therefore posits urban space not just as representational, but also makes the fictional part of postmodern urban space. In effect, this is also the vision that *City of Glass* offers. The novel undermines Quinn’s own view of the world of detective fiction by presenting instead a decentered urban world that resists a being drawn together. Furthermore, the fictional is also needed to come to terms with the world in *City of Glass*. Quinn’s own interest in own mystery novels lies “not in their relationship to the world but in their relationship to other stories” (7). Even though Quinn here expresses a particular orientation, this passage expresses the possible compatibility of reality and fiction, facilitating the slippage or blending of the real and the fictional in the constellation of Quinn/Wilson/Work. Quinn deals with his world precisely through the possibility of the real and the fictional to coalesce – whether in his triad of selves, his pun on the private eye, or in his assumption of the role of a detective to match his (already fictional) alter-ego. In presenting a world that resists totalization, in which there is a fluidity between real and fictional world, *City of Glass* therefore underscores a key aspect of postmodern urban space.

## Walking, spatial practice, and de Certeau

The most important activity taking place in the urban world presented in *City of Glass* is walking. Quinn’s love of walking in the city is continued in the legwork he has to do as a private investigator following the old Stillman. Quinn’s tail job consists of following the old man on walks through the city:

By eight o’clock Stillman would come out, always in his long brown overcoat, carrying a large, old-fashioned carpet bag. For two weeks this routine did not vary. The old man would wander through the streets of the neighborhood, advancing slowly, sometimes by the merest increments, pausing, moving on again, pausing once more, as though each step had to be weighed and measured before it could take its place in the total sum of steps.” (58)

70

On these walks, Stillman carefully collects “broken things, discarded things, stray bits of junk” (59). Initially, Quinn sees no point in Stillman’s walks or in the things he collects, but when reviewing his notes, he realizes that Stillman is walking the letters THE TOWER OF BABEL, using the Manhattan grid and the pavement as his “writing surface.”<sup>16</sup> Stillman’s precise motives for this walking project never become fully clear, but they relate to his ideas when he was still a professor of religion. Stillman constructed a theory of the New World as the place where paradise could be regained through the construction of a new Tower of Babel, in which there would be a room for everyone in which, upon entering, one would forget everything and after forty days one would “emerge a new man, speaking God’s language, prepared to inhabit the second, everlasting paradise” (49). Stillman’s walks thus combine a religious belief, a concern with language, and the spatial practice of walking in the city.

This act of walking-as-signifying is central to the novel and is, beyond a project of a mad theologian, also key in the novel’s urban world and its reflection upon the postmodern city. Within the current framework of analysis, the analysis of walking as a signifying practice in de Certeau’s

---

16 Quinn’s tail job recalls Edgar Allan Poe’s classic story of walking in the city, “The Man of the Crowd,” which was also a key text for Baudelaire and his idea of the *flâneur*. In Poe’s story the narrator follows an unknown old man on a seemingly aimless tour through London in which the narrator learns nothing about the old man. The final comment on the man is that, like an unreadable German book that the narrator referred to in the beginning of the story, “er lasst [sic] sich nicht lesen” (396). The contrast between the unreadability of Poe’s man and Stillman’s linguistic “trace” – the readability of which, however, does not amount to much for Quinn – is yet another way in which *City of Glass* both raises and counters a modernist image of walking in the city.

*The Practice of Everyday Life* can complement the more conceptual approaches in Lefebvre and Foucault. While the text is very familiar, I would argue that his piece on walking is particularly valuable in a larger discussion of spatialities based on Lefebvre and Foucault here. All three authors take on related issues in urban space and find compatible solutions, but de Certeau offers perhaps the most immediately material and practical perspective, in zeroing in on practices – with Lefebvre’s work as more theoretically oriented and Foucault’s heterotopia primarily as a conceptual tool.

In his work, de Certeau focuses on the practices of everyday life and the use that people make of things, rather than the design or intended use behind the elements of everyday life. For this purpose, he distinguishes between what he calls strategies and tactics. A strategy is “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relations that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed” (35-6). A strategy thus involves localization, visibility, and the power of knowledge (and one can therefore see de Certeau’s strategies as compatible with Lefebvre’s idea of abstract/conceived space). A tactic, on the other hand, is “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. ... The space of a tactic is the space of the other” (36-7). Tactics belong to users, are not pre-determined, and take advantage of unforeseen opportunities (and as practices centered on otherness, one could see tactics as compatible with the concept of heterotopia). Simply put, strategies are the actions and plans undertaken by dominant powers, whereas tactics are the actions of users that escape the behaviors prescribed by strategies.

Prompted by an overview of Manhattan from the top of the World Trade Center, turning the city into “a text that lies before one’s eyes” (92), de Certeau discusses a transformation that has taken place (some-time in the past) from “the urban *fact* in to the *concept* of a city” (94). Manhattan exemplifies a kind of city – the “Concept-city” – in which space itself has become almost parenthetical to the existence of that city. The “Concept-city” arose out of three operations. Firstly, it “produces”

its own proper space through a rational organization that must “repress all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it” (94). Secondly, scientific strategies – like urban planning – replace the possible unanticipated uses of the city’s opportunities and the “indeterminable and stubborn resistances offered by traditions” (94). Lastly, there is “the creation of a *universal* and anonymous *subject* which is the city itself” (94). In other words, the Concept-city is a fixed and stable subject in its own right, with a rational and functionalist organization that suppresses any unforeseen actions by its users. Strategies dominate, which for the Concept-city causes “the condition of its own possibility – space itself – to be forgotten” (95). The Concept-city is thus a totalizing and more outspokenly discursive than spatial entity striving to eliminate any random or unexpected elements and actions through a rigid organization that gives primacy to its own strategies and suppresses diversity and spatiality. In this respect, de Certeau asserts, the Concept-city is “simultaneously the machinery and hero of modernity” (95). To establish some continuity with the theories discussed above, one can see de Certeau’s description of the Concept-city as analogous to Lefebvre’s discussion of abstract space and its oppression of the social and lived space.

However, de Certeau is more explicit than Lefebvre in asserting that “[t]he Concept-city is decaying” (95). The totalizing power of the Concept-city is not perfect; while it succeeds to a large extent in imposing disciplinary strategies, there remain “microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay” (96). The spatial practices on the ground level of the city constitute “*forests of gestures*” whose “movement cannot be captured in a picture, nor can the meaning of their movements be circumscribed in a text” (96).<sup>17</sup> There are cracks in the system of the Concept-city and the imposed order is only total on the surface, which is “everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order” (107). The imposed disciplinary order is thus crumbling under the pressure of the minute practices

---

17 De Certeau’s choice of metaphor here (which he draws from Rilke) is interestingly conventional and follows a common opposition between the city as (negative) totalizing machine (the “machinery” of modernity, for de Certeau) and as a (positive) natural environment of diversity. For an evaluation of such common images of the city used in sociology, see Peter Langer’s article “Sociology – Four Images of Organized Diversity: Bazaar, Jungle, Organism, and Machine” (already mentioned in the introduction).

that it sought to, but cannot suppress. Rather than the spaces defined by the application of scientific strategies and technology, de Certeau argues that the important and defining spaces of the city are those invested with (or “haunted” by) the signifying acts of diverse spatial practices: “Haunted places are the only ones people can live in” (108). Again, de Certeau’s idea of “haunted places” here can be taken as akin to the “lived” moment of space in Lefebvre.<sup>18</sup> However, de Certeau posits his opposition between the Concept-city and the spatial practices that take place in the interstices of the urban system as a symptom of a crumbling modernity – the Concept-city being its “machinery and hero.” De Certeau therefore explicitly addresses these spatial practices that disrupt the existing order as a feature of postmodern urban space.

The basic spatial practice that ruptures the discursive order of the Concept-city is the act of walking. Walking in the city, for de Certeau, can be compared to an utterance within the system of language: “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered” (97). The act of walking constitutes an appropriation of the topographic system, expresses the spatiality of the city by using it, and establishes relations between different positions. The city plan, or the geometrical space of urban planners, has “the status of ‘proper meaning’ ... to have a normal and normative level to which they can compare the drifting of ‘figurative’ language” (100). However, walking actualizes only some of the anticipated uses and meanings; it also opens up other possibilities and creates “deviations relative to a sort of ‘literal meaning’ defined by the urbanistic system” (100). Walking therefore “affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks’” (99). Walking is a spatial practice that appropriates and expresses all possibilities within and beyond the imposed order of the city. It constitutes a signifying act that expresses not just a trajectory, but a plurality of spatial practices. One could therefore say that walking

---

18 In his choice of the term “haunted” de Certeau incorporates memory and a history of spatial practices in his perspective on urban space – an issue that Lefebvre, in his effort to redress the balance between history and space, largely avoids. De Certeau explicitly links space and time by saying that “[p]laces are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded, but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body” (108). Spaces, de Certeau argues here, are invested with personal histories and stories of practices of users, who can have fond or unpleasant memories of and feelings about places, for example. One could bridge de Certeau’s and Lefebvre’s perspectives on space on this point by seeing de Certeau’s argument here as one for “lived histories” – as opposed to a codified and scientific (knowledge of) history, to which Lefebvre objects heavily. While Lefebvre focuses on the “lived” moment (in the present), one could certainly see memory and history of practices as part of the representational aspect of space.

signifies the production of the social; it is an act that actualizes urban space as being representational. Hence, de Certeau asserts that “[t]hese enunciatory operations are of an unlimited diversity. They therefore cannot be reduced to their graphic trail” (99). One can map an itinerary, but the lines it would yield “only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by” (97). The signifying act is constituted by spatial practice itself, not by its trace.

74 Stillman’s walks in *City of Glass* can be seen as a rather literal expression of this perspective on walking as a signifying practice. Stillman’s project is to construct a new Tower of Babel in the New World, in order to undo the fall of man. His building material, however, is not brick, but a spatialization of language. As he explains to Quinn when he strikes up a conversation with the old man, Stillman sees New York as the epitome of a fallen world: “I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal” (78). With this decay as the dominant discourse of the city, Stillman’s walks are a means of re-appropriating the space of the city. Walking is Stillman’s tactic to counter the strategies of a world dominated by decay and the city streets become the stage for the resistance against an imposed discourse, like in de Certeau. Although his religious beliefs are in effect reactionary, which lends a different character to the purpose of his enterprise than to his methods, Stillman’s project is an attempt to take down the Concept-city through spatial practices. Beyond the religious angle, these walks also take on the Manhattan grid as embodiment of modernity. Like the amorphous alternative of the balloon in Barthelme, Stillman’s use of the grid undermines its rational functionality by creatively re-assigning its meanings. It ignores the imposed strategies (or the logic of abstract space) and substitutes its own re-signification, which turns the city streets into a “lived” and representational space. Stillman’s method thus provides a model for spatial practices as means of turning conceived space into lived space.

As merely an observer, Quinn is at a remove from this act of walking as resistance to strategies. Realizing that Stillman’s walks are an inscription in the city streets, Quinn comes to a conclusion similar to de Certeau’s: “Stillman had not left his message anywhere. True, he had created the letters by the movement of his steps, but they had not been written down. It was like drawing a picture in the air with your finger. The

image vanishes as you are making it. There is no result, no trace to mark what you have done” (71). He wonders as to the purpose of Stillman’s walks and whether it is “merely some sort of note to himself, or ... intended as a message to others” (71). Quinn here in effect recognizes spatial practice as being an act of signification, but does not recognize it as being in itself meaningful. Just as with the balloon in Barthelme’s story, Quinn here stumbles upon the fact that spatial practices cannot be reduced to his pre-existing frame for constructing meaning. Quinn identifies this problem by noting the disparity between the actual walks and his own drawings of the itineraries: “the pictures did exist – not in the streets where they had been drawn, but in Quinn’s notebook” (71). The trace of the walks does not lead to any meaning, as de Certeau notes, and the act of walking thereby challenges the dominant mode of “reading” urban life.<sup>19</sup>

75

Quinn’s difficulty in making sense of Stillman’s project originates from a problem that de Certeau also identifies. At the top of the World Trade Center, de Certeau occupies a viewpoint that “transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god” (92). This position “continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text” (92). While this viewpoint that makes the city readable has only become technologically possible in the twentieth century, it has been in existence for centuries, apparent in Medieval and Renaissance paintings of the city (and in old city maps, for example). This totalizing visibility and readability, originating from a “scopic and gnostic drive” (92), are part of the formation of the Concept-city. They are the condition for the application of strategies to suppress the diversity and unanticipated uses of the everyday life that takes place on the

19 Basing himself on the same text of de Certeau, Steven Alford curiously comes to a different conclusion, arguing that “Stillman’s steps have to be transformed from the movements of a pedestrian through space to vectors on a map,” because “[t]he significance of space ... emerges not from the one who moves through space, the pedestrian, but from the one who observes he who moves through space, the person with the red notebook” (626). Alford here argues that the spatial practice of walking is not itself a signifying act, but its recording by a mapmaker who traces the itinerary – which seems to run counter to de Certeau’s argument that footsteps cannot be reduced to their graphic trail. In addition, Alford identifies “the space of signification” as “[t]he space opened between the pedestrian and the mapper” (626), which in effect reduces spatiality to an analytical and mental category – which again seems to run counter to de Certeau’s argument for practices, as well as the work of Lefebvre, to whom Alford also refers. Finally, Alford posits Quinn’s position as that of the mapper, which “represents a space from which perspective has been removed” and is “an impossible one, one which no human could occupy, because to be human is to possess a perspective, a perspective which moves with the pedestrian” (627). Despite this rather confusing “space” of the mapper, Alford accords to Quinn – as observer – a power of signification and knowledge, whereas the novel breaks down, rather than attributes power based on any drive to gain knowledge.

ground, below what de Certeau calls “the thresholds at which visibility begins” (93). In other words, separated from spatial practices on the ground, this bird’s-eye view, whether from the top of a building or from the imaginary perspective of a mapmaker, transforms the city into a transparent, readable, and knowable Concept-city that can impose an order based on the knowledge, or scientific strategies, drawn from this perspective. Radically dissociated from the social in the city, it is the position from which the dominance of abstract space springs and is maintained, in Lefebvre’s terminology. It indeed produces “the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers” (*Production* 38). Quinn’s difficulty in understanding Stillman’s project lies therefore in the fact that he assumes this perspective of the mapmaker. Quinn’s realization that Stillman is walking the letters THE TOWER OF BABEL onto the grid is the point at which understanding is lost. It is precisely in the transition from walking to mapping, from spatial practice to representation of space, that visibility and readability also disappear. Quinn’s effort at playing the detective, trying to figure things out, therefore highlights the irreducibility of spatial practices and the point at which knowledge – whether strategies for de Certeau, or the logic of abstract space for Lefebvre – loses its power. The spatial practice of walking as a signifying act thus also underscores the defeat of the detective, a hero of modernity armed with the logic of the Concept-city.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the physical practice of walking, language itself is another dimension in which a new spatiality is brought about. As with Barthelme and his recurring theme of urban and linguistic dreck, words (and junk) are also key in making (up) the urban world. In other words, the novel presents not just spatial practice as signifying act, but also signifying processes (in language) as constitutive of city space. What Stillman does on his walks, is picking up bits of trash and closely examining them. His project, he explains to Quinn, is inventing a new language: “For our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words have remained the same. They have not adapted themselves to the new reality” (77). He gives the example of an umbrella, which is a tool

<sup>20</sup> For another discussion of space and signification in Auster in relation to Walter Benjamin, see Peter Kirkegaard. However, in this article Kirkegaard does little more than illustrate points in Benjamin’s work with points in Auster’s.

to keep you from getting wet in the rain, but which, when it is broken, loses its function, while the word remains the same. For Stillman, “it can no longer express the thing. It is imprecise; it is false; it hides the thing it is supposed to reveal” (77). To remedy the brokenness of the fallen world, Stillman’s project consists of the lofty aim of taking these bits of refuse and naming them anew, like a new Adam naming the things in paradise. Stillman’s ideas on language raise a problem that is by now a commonplace in poststructuralist theory: signs consist of a signifier and a signified, but have lost a connection with their referent. This is also a common problem for postmodern literature, as for example in Barthelme’s work.

Stillman’s analysis of this problem and his solution spatialize the issue of language. The connection between city and language or text is often made metaphorically, for example in Lefebvre’s view of the city as an “oeuvre” and “book,” and Barthes’ suggestion of the city as “language,” as discussed above. To add another metaphor to the list, when de Certeau views Manhattan from the top of the World Trade Center, he sees skyscrapers as letters making up the text spread out before him: “On this stage of concrete, steel and glass, cut out between two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) by a frigid body of water, the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production” (91). However, Stillman’s concern is not metaphoric and is not a general relationship between language and the world, but a specific relationship between words and the junk he finds on the street. Like de Certeau, he focuses deliberately on everyday life: “My brilliant stroke has been to confine myself to physical things, to the immediate and tangible. My motives are lofty, but my work now takes place in the realm of the everyday” (76). Not just walking as a practice is an act of signification, but Stillman’s interaction with objects in the world – picking them up, studying them, and eventually naming them – is one of signification too. In effect, Stillman puts into spatial and linguistic practice the description Quinn gave of the world of detective fiction as being textual and being made up of hyper-significant details. Stillman’s aim of re-establishing a link between the sign and the referent may be theoretically unfeasible, but what he does accomplish is to connect the issue of language with spatial practice, underscoring practices as acts of signification.

Stillman’s solution to the fall of language constitutes a further step

in the relation between language and the world. He builds his solution on the figure of Humpty Dumpty, whom he quotes: “When *I* use a word, Humpty Dumpty said ... it means just what I choose it to mean” (81).<sup>21</sup> Salvation, for Stillman, lies in becoming “masters of the words we speak, to make language answer our needs (81). The aim of mastery of language in general might be a bit bold, but Stillman is nonetheless in charge of his own acts of signification in naming objects. Moreover, his walking demonstrates a re-signification of urban space. This capability of re-signifying according to one’s own ideas, through spatial practices, changes language from a conception where words are tied to a referent (that is presumed to be stable), to a conception where words are *productive* (creatively) in their relation to the world. In Lefebvre’s terms, one could say that just as space is a product, so is language, and that each is part in the process of producing the other. Stillman thus does not take the world as it is, assuming that things are significant by default, like in Quinn’s view of detective fiction, but he takes an active part in giving significance to the world; he does not draw meaning from the world, but creates it. What Stillman does, then, is (re)construct a world, which is to construct a world of fiction.

The world presented in *City of Glass* is thus one that joins spatiality and spatial practices with the construction of a world that is fictional. Spatial practices, as acts of signification, do not simply take place in the everyday world, but they also *make up* the everyday world as well. The novel’s treatment of practices therefore extends the insight into the representational character of urban space. Lefebvre discusses representational space as “directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (*Production* 39), but is not particularly specific on the relationship between users and these images (or the “living” that they do) since his concern lies mainly with social space within a broader theoretical and societal framework. How representational space works and what it represents therefore remains unclear in Lefebvre. Through the lens of de Certeau’s work, Stillman’s walking as signifying and creative practice – as well as in Quinn’s mislocation of the self which allows fiction and reality to blend – shows how

---

21 For an insightful reading of *City of Glass*, using the fall of Humpty Dumpty (in Auster’s use of the Lewis Carroll incarnation of this figure) as an angle to discuss a regime change in language and the city as a “translation zone,” see Sylvia Söderlind.

spatial practices of users *produce* the “associated images and symbols” of representational space. *City of Glass* presents a world in which the fictional is an integral part of representational space. A space becomes “lived” when users start using that space for spatial practices, which constitutes a process of signification for that space. What representational space represents, one could say, is what its users have *made it* to represent: lived space is the fictional world constructed by users. The world of *City of Glass* thus allows the ideas of Lefebvre and de Certeau to be brought together, underscoring that (social) space is the product of everyday (spatial) practices.

Returning to the original question of how *City of Glass* reflects upon the contemporary city, the novel offers a perspective on the postmodern city as one in which characteristic images of modernity – like the *flâneur* and the detective, and the modes of conceiving of space belonging to abstract space/the Concept-city – are no longer available. Instead, it shows an urban world in which the material dimensions are only the ground, literally and figuratively, for lived, representational space that is constructed through the signifying acts of spatial practices. Typically postmodern concerns, such as the problem of language, are not just spatialized, but prove to be constitutive of urban space. Like in McHale’s view of postmodernist fiction, the construction of fictional worlds in literature is thus not simply a literary device, but a reflection upon the contemporary world that itself consists of processes, practices, and spaces that make up a plurality of (fictional) worlds itself.

To conclude, a difference between de Certeau and Lefebvre concerning literature is worth mentioning. Whereas Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* generally has a negative attitude towards literature, de Certeau does not. For de Certeau, reading is an everyday practice, just like walking, since “the activity of reading has ... all the characteristics of a silent production” (xxi). A narrative is equally productive, being “the traditional act which has always *recounted* practices (this act, *ce geste*, is also *une geste*, a tale of high deeds)” (78). With folktales and everyday stories of the “once upon a time...” and “the other day...” type in mind, de Certeau stresses that such recounting of practices is not a simple representation reducible to a description, but that instead “narrated history creates a fictional space” (79). Since such narratives are an important part of everyday life, de Certeau asserts that “*a theory of narration is indissociable from*

*a theory of practices, as its condition as well as its production*” (78). Science, he argues, cannot do without stories – writing them as part of scientific practices or analyzing them as part of everyday practices. Hence, de Certeau is more open to the relevance of literature to the real world, making a case for “the theoretical value of the novel, which has become the zoo of everyday practices since the establishment of modern science” (78).

80 Overall, then, both *City of Glass* and “The Balloon” provide reflections of Manhattan, but more importantly also new ways of coming to terms with the city, in their critical reflections on the grid. Barthelme’s story does not just revolve around the impossibilities of language and signification, but it expressly spatializes these issues, thereby showing how signification and representation are aspects of urban space itself. The story critiques an existing mode of conceiving of the city – in which abstract space dominates and rigidly structures people’s lives – and argues for a mode of conceiving of urban space as being representational. Auster’s novel, apart from addressing issues of authorship and the demise of the detective form, presents an urban world that underscores the irreducibility of spatial practices as signifying acts and asserts the fictional as element of urban space too. As “representations of representational space” in Lefebvre’s terms, the urban worlds in these texts also allow theoretical concepts of space to be explored further, and to be expanded upon. When brought together with concepts like Foucault’s heterotopia for conceiving of the spatial-as-discursive and de Certeau’s idea of walking-as-signifying, these literary works open up a framework for analyzing postmodern urban spatialities. Finally, as “meditations upon external reality,” in Barthelme’s words, these texts critique the city of modernity and the dominance of its (pre-determined) frames for understanding urban space and urban life, emphasizing instead representational space and spatial practices as being themselves key to a postmodern world.