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

Date: 2012-11-28

Introduction: Reflections of/on

In the course of the twentieth century, the city has become the principal “site” of Western culture and the human condition has become a markedly *urban* condition. This is true not just for the Western world, but increasingly for the entire globe. This development is reflected in all cultural fields, such as art, cinema, and of course literature – the primary focus of this study. Ever since the rise of the modern metropolis, with its origins in the nineteenth century, the city has come to play an important role in literature, not just as an incidental setting or backdrop, but as an important feature, almost as an “actor” – think of Dickens’ London, the Paris of Zola and Balzac, or the New York of Dos Passos. The development of cities and urban culture has always been an important topic in the social sciences, but over the past 25 years or so, the humanities have also increasingly taken an interest in cities and their representations in literature and art.

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The question is why this is yet another one of those studies. After all, there are already many studies of the city in literature. Richard Lehan’s *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (1998), for example, provides an outstanding historical overview from the Enlightenment period to the present. However, far more attention has gone to the modern city of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (and modern art and literature) than to the late twentieth century.¹ More importantly, though, many studies explore the city *in* literature, thereby remaining within the disciplinary boundaries of literary studies (and the humanities more generally). The focus is often on the role of the representation of the city in the literary work, often letting the work, author’s oeuvre, or literary period set the limits to the scope of investigation. Such approaches are based, generally, on the idea of a work of literature as being a reflection of the city.

However, I contend that there is more to it than that: *the representation of the city in literature is not only a reflection of, but also a reflection on the city.*

¹ Notable studies focusing on the modern city include Burton Pike’s *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (1981), Edward Timms and David Kelley’s *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art* (1985), William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock’s *Visions of the Modern City: Essays in History, Art, and Literature* (1987), and Hana Wirth-Nesher’s *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (1996).

This double reflection is crucial for the present study, for it is the foundation for looking beyond the limits of the humanities and adopting an interdisciplinary approach.² My aim is – in quite simple terms – to look at the way in which literary works represent the city and in doing so have something to say about the city.

This raises the more theoretical and methodological question, though, whether what literature has to say about the city is actually worthwhile. After all, if one sticks to conventional disciplinary demarcations of terrain, an initial thought might be that insights in the city would belong to the domain of the social sciences (sociology, geography, or the “umbrella term” field of urban studies) or of urban planning and architecture (if one focuses specifically on the city as a built environment). However, in my view the city itself calls for an interdisciplinary perspective, in which an approach coming from the humanities can be a valuable contribution.

In the social sciences, for example, the idea of “the city” has always included more than just buildings and streets, and also more than measurable social/economic structures and behavior. This can be illustrated by one of the key passages that lay at the start of my own interest in interdisciplinary approach of the city: Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City* (1960), a classic study of the city (in sociology and geography) that is also a cornerstone for the idea of cognitive mapping. This short study looks at urban form by analyzing people’s (mental) images of their cities (Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles; three socially and historically different cities), by way of interviews and having people draw maps of

2 A considerable number of studies with a broader scope (under the label of cultural studies, for example) has emerged over the past three decades as well, often with the same focus on the late twentieth century and contemporary city. Notable studies include Mary-Ann Caws’ *City Images: Perspectives from Literature, Philosophy, and Film* (1991), Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires’ *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (1993), Anthony D. King’s *Re-Presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the Twenty-First Century Metropolis* (1996), Sallie Westwood and John Williams’ *Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memory* (1997), Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy’s *Urban Space and Representation* (2000), and the Ghent Urban Studies Team’s *The Urban Condition: Space, Community, and Self in the Contemporary Metropolis* (1999) and *Post Ex Sub Dis: Urban Fragmentations and Constructions* (2002). While there are exceptions – such as Kevin McNamara’s *Urban Verbs: Arts and Discourses of American Cities* (1996) and Anthony Vidler’s work, e.g. his thorough *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (2000) – these are all collections of shorter articles rather than sustained explorations. This often entails the risk that it becomes difficult to assess how a particular case (a city, or a representation) is illustrative for a more general phenomenon, or whether it is merely incidental. A broader scope thus tends to go hand in hand with limitations as well.

This book aims to build on and extend approaches like the ones listed above. However, I hope to overcome the common limitations on three key points. Firstly, this study adopts a markedly interdisciplinary perspective, but remains grounded in a solid and coherent corpus of literary representations – thereby avoiding the risk of case studies depending on the contingencies of (the choices for) the particular cases. Secondly, this approach entails a take on interdisciplinarity as an enrichment of the disciplines involved (such as literary studies and urban studies), without aiming to detract from or invalidate traditional disciplinary perspectives. Lastly, this study aims at a sustained exploration of its questions, with a set of compatible concepts that complement each other (rather than an ad hoc interdisciplinary blend).

their cities. The “image” in this study thus explicitly focuses on perception and visual representation, all combining into a “sense of a whole” through certain urban elements (paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks) as a basis for urban design. However, towards the end of his book, right before the appendices, Lynch argues the following:

It is clear that the form of a city or of a metropolis will not exhibit some gigantic, stratified order. It will be a complicated pattern, continuous and whole, yet intricate and mobile. It must be plastic to the perceptual habits of thousands of citizens, open-ended to change of function and meaning, receptive to the formation of new imagery. It must invite its viewers to explore the world.

True enough, we need an environment which is not simply well organized, but poetic and symbolic as well. It should speak of the individuals and their complex society, of their aspirations and their historical tradition, of the natural setting, and of the complicated functions and movements of the city world. But clarity of structure and vividness of identity are first steps to the development of strong symbols. (119)

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This passage illustrates many facets of the traditional framework in which cities are understood, and is accordingly illustrative of their inherent problems. Lynch acknowledges complexity, plurality, and diversity as fundamental qualities of cities. However, the last sentence of the quotation indicates how to (preferably, in its 1960s perspective, which builds on a long tradition) come to terms with this urban plurality: a structuralist framework of analysis and a (Cartesian) emphasis on perception and clarity.

Yet Lynch’s emphasis on a “poetic and symbolic” city that “speaks” of its people are most pertinent to me. These suggestions are easy enough to subscribe to, and would seem to incorporate more than the empirically measurable dimensions of the city. However, the importance ascribed to a “poetic and symbolic” environment could lead one to expect this to be a starting point, underlying the analysis of the image of the city, but the assertion of their importance is in fact a *conclusion*, at the end of Lynch’s book – without it actually having explored the poetic and symbolic at all. In his study of images of the city, what those images *mean* re-

mains thoroughly under-theorized; his use of “poetic and symbolic” can then be read as basically unconceptualized, dense and allusive phrases to close off the avenue of inquiry that focuses on meaning. Therefore, even though it sounds evocative, it is entirely unclear what it would mean or require for an urban environment to be “poetic and symbolic.”

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Yet my point here is not to offer easy criticism of a classic from 1960 – rather, I take it to be indicative of a strong tradition in the social sciences: namely that the objects under study tend to be conceived in terms of observable, preferably quantifiable, phenomena, relegating meaning and interpretation to the background in many cases. This is not surprising, for one can justifiably make the case that *meaning* is beyond the scope of what the available conceptual apparatuses of the social sciences are equipped for.³ Nevertheless, even with a conception of the city as a material or empirically observable entity, the importance of the “poetic and symbolic” remains prominent, as in Lynch. In fact, the idea of the city as possessing important immeasurable features has a long heritage in the social sciences. For example, one can trace the “immaterial” roots of the city in the social sciences to Simmel’s work on the mental life in the metropolis (1903 – discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters) and the suggestion by Robert Park, Simmel’s American student and major influential figure in the Chicago School, that the city is a “state of mind” (13). Another classic from 1958 is an article by Richard Wohl and Anselm Strauss, who suggest that “city people must respond psychologically to their urban environment; they must, to some extent, attempt to grasp the meaning of its complexity imaginatively and symbolically as well as literally” (523). Another example worth mentioning is Peter Langer’s overview (1984) of the four most commonly used metaphors in sociological studies of the city: the bazaar, jungle, organism, and machine (systematically represented in a matrix of micro/macro and positive/negative views – typical of a sociological approach). While each of these articles targets a “symbolic” dimension of the city that is presented as being important, none of them develops the conceptual tools for con-

3 Interestingly, 20 years later, in an article “Reconsidering *The Image of the City*,” Lynch acknowledges the difficulty of getting purchase on meaning: “Meaning always crept in, in every sketch and comment. People could not help connecting their surroundings with the rest of their lives” (158). The negative associations of “crept in” and “could not help” are telling here: meaning is not what he was looking for primarily.

structively investigating this dimension in greater depth.⁴ Accordingly, the non-material or symbolic aspects of the city have remained difficult to get to grips with within the coordinates of empirically oriented work in urban geography or sociology. This easily leads to a (conventional) distinction between the realm of the social (accessed through external observation) and the realm of the cultural (involving interpretation of meaning and the symbolic), which goes a long way to describing disciplinary boundaries.

It should be stressed that this division works both ways, of course: just as there is an important dimension that remains out of view in the social sciences, the humanities often have great difficulty in tying (literary/artistic) representation in the cultural domain to the actual problems and phenomena to which those representations relate. Hence, many studies of literature and the city remain (comfortably) within the confines of the literary work or oeuvre. In short, scholars in the humanities tend to stick to their own turf just as much as social scientists do, and accordingly there are gaps to be bridged.

These, then, are the general coordinates for the present study. On a more theoretical level, it aims to find ways to bring together perspectives from the humanities and the social sciences, and specifically literature and urban studies. The basis for this study lies in literature and a humanities perspective – but my aim is explicitly not to read works of literature for their literary or “internal” characteristics. Conventional approaches in the humanities that depart from an “overview of the life and works of X” are irrelevant for my purposes. In fact, my aim is not primarily to directly say something *about* literary texts, but to say something *with*, or perhaps better yet *along with* literary texts. With the postmodern city as my topic, I aim to pick up on the issues these texts themselves put forward, and to treat their reflections of urban questions as reflections on them, as two aspects of the same representational gesture. These works raise issues that are pertinent to the contemporary urban worlds to which they relate, which means that they can be brought into play

4 Another direction of inquiry worth mentioning here is urban semiology or semiotics. Roland Barthes opened up possibilities in suggesting that “[t]he city is a discourse, and this discourse is actually a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by inhabiting it, by traversing it, by looking at it” (*The Semiotic Challenge*, 195). The suggestion of an urban semiotics has been notably picked up by Marc Gottdiener (who has done a brilliant semiotic analysis of a shopping mall in his *Postmodern Semiotics* [1995], for example) but this approach has never gained a permanent foothold. One possible explanation might be the structuralist linguistic roots of semiotics (with identifiable signifiers and semes), which are difficult to translate to more dynamic socio-spatial phenomena of the city.

along with theoretical/conceptual discourses on the city, and with perspectives from the social sciences. My argument is therefore that finding ways to combine these approaches leads to a better understanding of the postmodern city.

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On a more immediate level, this study investigates a number of questions that I think are important specifically for the postmodern city, and are therefore also relevant for the urban world we live in today. The overarching question concerns the position of the individual in the city. Compared to the metropolis of modernity, with the classical image of the individual amidst the urban masses, a new mode of subjectivity has arisen in the postmodern city – a mode of subjectivity that is produced in new modes of perceiving, conceptualizing, and experiencing urban space (i.e. new spatialities), but there are also new kinds of space, and a new role for the human body in the city. The question is what these all look like when exploring these issues by means of literary representation, theory, and social sciences. Answering these questions adequately is only possible, I suggest, by developing a new interdisciplinary approach. The point of this study, then, is a double one: answering the questions raised, but equally finding a methodology to answer them.

Postmodern?

Having indicated the scope and aims of this study, I have to further clarify its topic: the *postmodern* city, where “postmodern” requires some explanation. In some regards, the term is a can of worms, for it is never quite certain what it refers to, it is always contested and problematic, and some might think the frustration stemming from these debates should remain an unpleasant memory from the 1980s. The (legitimate) question is then why I am using the term in 2012, and what I mean by it in the first place, of course.

To answer the first question, it is important to stress the historical positioning of this study. It examines a period stretching from roughly the 1960s to the year 2000, focusing on American literature. The combination of the two is not arbitrary: the political and economic dominance of the U.S. in this period went hand in hand with a significant influence of American culture on the rest of the Western world. The label “postmodern” is, in my view, simply the best one available for this combination of a cultural phenomenon and its historical period (which also immedi-

ately frames the Cold War, decolonization, the strengthening of global capitalism, etc.). I should also stress that while this period may be living memory to many, I consider it to lead up to, but not include the present. It is important to understand this period, for many of its features are fundamental to today's world and some of them persist, but the present moment is marked by its own problems and questions. My understanding of the "postmodern" is thus explicitly historically positioned and *retrospective*, and is in that respect less problematic than it was in the heyday of the discussion of postmodernism in the 1980s. This is why I think the term can be used "safely" again today, now that the dust has settled, with considerable distance to the heated debates on the postmodern.

The question what the term means is a great deal more complicated.⁵ First of all, the term has been discussed in many fields, where it has meant something different every time. Without the pretense of resolving the difficulties that stem from this diversity, I will attempt to briefly give an overview of the positions on the postmodern that are pertinent for my own discussion here. First, though, I want to make a very strict terminological distinction between "postmodernity" (as it appears in the subtitle of this study) and "postmodernism." In my usage, these terms can be taken as analogous to the more familiar "modernity" and "modernism" as used in the humanities. "Modernity" is a broad term that brings together large social, cultural, political, economic, and historical phenomena (encompassing issues as significant and wide-ranging as the development of the Cartesian subject, positivist modes of thought, industrial capitalism, etc.). In comparison, "modernism" is much more narrow, used for cultural objects (such as art and literature) of mainly the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, indicating particular aesthetic and thematic concerns. I suggest a parallel distinction for the works and period this study addresses: to reserve "postmodernism" for the styles and concerns that characterize a specific set of cultural products of the late twentieth century (art, literature, but also architecture, film, etc.). Postmodernity, then, equally pertains to the late twentieth

⁵ Ernst van Alphen (1989) gives an overview of the major concerns relevant within the humanities (with a primary focus on literature) in which he attributes the "opaqueness" of the debates on postmodernism to an "enormous diversity of commitments and points of view," a "prepossessed, partial delimitation of the corpus of objects which can be called postmodernist," and the "separate disciplines" where the discussions take place (820). Although Van Alphen continues to make clear distinctions along other lines than I am doing here (for different purposes), I fully subscribe to his assertions that any strictly disciplinary approach "is arbitrary if it is not motivated by the object but by the traditional divisions in the humanities" and that such an approach would be "automatically reduced to the terms of modernism" (836).

century, but is a term to bring together phenomena in the realms of the social, philosophical, urban, and cultural, for instance. The two terms are thus related (“postmodernism” is part of “postmodernity”), but conceptually the two operate on different levels. “Postmodernism” *delimits* (retrospectively) a corpus of postmodernist (the related adjective) *works*. “Postmodernity,” on the other hand, is an inclusive term that pertains to the world in a much larger sense, indicating the elements from a range of fields (e.g. culture, politics, society) that typify the late twentieth century – for which the related adjective is simply “postmodern.”⁶

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This strict distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity is important here for two reasons. Firstly, it enables a sharper overview of the discussions of the postmodern in different disciplines so far. Particularly in the usage of the term “postmodernism” the tendency has been to not discriminate between broader and narrower senses, which (I conjecture) accounts for some of the difficulties surrounding the postmodern. For example, the Lyotardian incredulity to “grand narratives” should be seen in light of postmodernity, whereas the architecture discussed by Charles Jencks is postmodernist. Likewise, Jameson’s famous *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* speaks about *postmodernity* when it comes to a “cultural logic,” for instance, and *postmodernism* when he discusses pastiche. By way of a last example (and importantly for this study), the *postmodern* city is not a city made up of *postmodernist* architecture; the two terms pertain to different types of phenomena.

Secondly, the distinction between the two terms is important for the orientation of this study. The authors of the literary works I discuss (Pynchon, Barthelme, Auster, DeLillo) all belong to the canon of postmodernist literature, and their texts span the period in question (1960s – 2000). However, my concern is explicitly not the *postmodernism* of these works, but the fact that they are cultural products of *postmodernity*. They reflect and reflect on a *world that is postmodern*; their postmodernist aesthetic is not at issue here.

6 Another question debated in the 1980s, but one that I deem irrelevant for my concerns and would therefore like to eliminate here, is whether the transition from “the modern”/modernism to “the postmodern”/postmodernism was smooth or abrupt, a matter of evolution or radical change, or whether in fact postmodernity is a (late/last) stage of modernity. In my view, the distinctions at stake in such questions are merely definitional or taxonomic, with little or no bearing on matters at hand when considering actual phenomena that are historically specific anyway, such as the postmodern city and its literary representations. It is unfortunate that the prefix “post-” in “postmodern” remains an open invitation to this question, but I think a clear historical framing should quell the need to go down well-trodden and unproductive paths.

A quick overview of the relevant perspectives on the postmodern will further clarify how the present study is situated. So instead of falling into the trap of attempting to come up with an exhaustive definition, I will simply provide a sketch of the different “versions” of the postmodern that have a bearing on my approach here. The coordinates set out below are, in many respects, the likely ones. Since the postmodern is a topic about which so little consensus has been reached in the past and likely questions will arise anyway, it is necessary to simply declare my position with respect to the standard body (or rather bodies) of literature on the postmodern. The subsequent chapters, then, build on the conceptual choices laid out below.

Firstly, in the field of literature the major perspectives that should be mentioned here are Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) and Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988). For McHale, postmodernist literature is characterized by what he calls an “ontological dominant”: a concern with questions of an ontological nature, in comparison to the “epistemological dominant” of modernism. In a nutshell, while modernism was concerned with how to know or interpret the world (which presumes a knowable world to begin with), postmodernism’s questions to the world are, for example, “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? ... What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?” (10). Postmodernism does not presume the stability of the world, but instead asks what the world is made up of, or even which world this is. If one asks, like Oedipa Maas does in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (which for McHale is a work on the threshold of postmodernism), “Shall I project a world?” one enters the realm of possibilities and pluralities that is the terrain of the postmodern. In addition, McHale’s use of the idea of a “dominant,” which he draws from the work of Roman Jakobson, bypasses discussions of strict demarcations between the modern and postmodern. One can “push epistemological questions far enough and they ‘tip over’ into ontological questions” (11) and vice versa, for McHale. This allows for a more gradual shift from modernism to postmodernism, with an emphasis on a change of dominant in terms that are not fixed or absolute.

Hutcheon’s focus, on the other hand, is on literary works she discusses under the heading of historiographic metafiction. For Hutcheon postmodernism is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical,

and inescapably political” (4), and she folds the contradictory nature of the postmodern back into the historical as well, suggesting that “these contradictions are certainly manifest in the important postmodern concept of ‘the presence of the past’” (4). Hutcheon stresses the importance of (inter)textuality and the rewriting of history (e.g. through parody) in historiographical metafiction, since “we can only ‘know’ ... the world through our narratives (past and present) of it, or so postmodernism argues. The present, as well as the past, is always already irremediably textualized for us” (128). While the theoretical framing of her analysis is broad and sophisticated (and she expands further on the political in a subsequent book), her explicit foregrounding of the historical dimension of the postmodern makes her approach less immediately pertinent for the present study of postmodern cities with an emphasis on space. McHale’s focus on questions of what kind(s) of world(s) we are dealing with, on the other hand, offers possibilities for bridging the concerns of *postmodernist* fiction and issues in a postmodern (urban) world.

In architecture – a field that is, like literature, often more focused on postmodernism than on postmodernity – the major names are those of Charles Jencks, already mentioned above, and Robert Venturi. Jencks’ concern is primarily an architectural style that departs from modern architecture (e.g. that of CIAM and Le Corbusier, or Mies van der Rohe). His approach is oppositional, contrasting postmodern to “Late-Modern” architecture, and taking off from an analysis of the death of modern architecture (“after having been flogged to death remorselessly for ten years by critics such as Jane Jacobs,” ... “Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972” [7]). Even though the main point for Jencks is contextualization of architecture, his concern is always with the purely architectural – thus remaining well within the confines of his disciplinary perspective, and his focus is firmly on postmodernism, not on postmodernity. His take on the postmodern, therefore, is not immediately relevant for the present study.

The other major work in the context of postmodernism and architecture is *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (1977) by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour (even though the book is often discussed by referring to Venturi only; moreover, it is mostly this book, not Venturi’s architecture, that is discussed). Perhaps their most important contribution lies in their foregrounding of

signage as major component of architecture and the built environment. For example, the façade of a building can operate as a sign, in conjunction with a neon sign along the road, but also with advertising materials, etc. The emphasis on signage does not only pertain to architecture, therefore, but also to other areas of signification. Hence, with architecture falling under the same postmodern model of signification as other cultural objects (texts, films, etc.), this approach allows for a broader perspective on the postmodern (even though this term is not at stake in *Learning from Las Vegas*), and will accordingly return in subsequent chapters here (particularly chapter 2).

Within the domain of the humanities, there are a few other versions of the postmodern that need to be briefly mentioned here. Firstly, Lyotard's work on the postmodern (especially in his lucid *The Postmodern Condition* [1984]), and of course particularly his idea that one can no longer turn to "grand narratives" to understand a postmodern world, is by now such a staple of postmodern thought that it informs many (if not all) of the other perspectives in both the humanities and social sciences. Lyotard is therefore a figure that looms large whenever the postmodern is mentioned. The same is true here; one could say that a Lyotardian stance is inherent in all the arguments made throughout this book. My approach of literature, the city, and representation generally subscribes to his call to "wage a war on totality" (82), in searching for ways of bringing into view the complexity and plurality of the postmodern city. However, Lyotard's concerns are more philosophical than my concerns are here, so his work will not explicitly be addressed. Secondly, the work of Fredric Jameson should be mentioned here briefly, as a matter of course. As with Lyotard, mentioning the postmodern irrevocably calls up Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Indeed, I discuss this work at length in later chapters, for his approach of the postmodern brings together a humanities perspective and broader philosophical considerations that have proven relevant outside the humanities as well.

In the social sciences, the issues at stake in the discussion of the postmodern tend to differ from the humanities. In the fields of literature and architecture, the objects of study are usually clearly defined (texts and buildings) and accordingly the focus is often on postmodernism (as a feature of the objects under investigation) with some approaches

allowing for a connection with a larger concept of postmodernity. When it comes to the city, however, matters are more complex. The city as an object of study does not belong to a single, well-defined discipline; it is discussed in (human) geography, sociology, political science, urban planning, and anthropology, for example. Accordingly, a practical catch-all label “urban studies” encompasses all of these, insofar as they address urban issues. The need for this label already indicates an orientation guided more by the object of study than by disciplinary conventions and academic turf wars. Perhaps this diffuse nature of the social sciences partly explains why the concept of the postmodern, while equally difficult to define as in any debate, is at least less contested in the social sciences than in the humanities.

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For the purposes of this overview, I distinguish between social theory and the field of urban studies. With regard to the former, the work of David Harvey (particularly his book *The Condition of Postmodernity* [1990]) should be mentioned here because he provides broad and thorough theoretical underpinnings for his conception of postmodernity. For the development of his concepts, he is not limited to the usual categories in geography, but draws on art, film, literature, and philosophy as well. His focus is therefore on a broader notion of postmodernity, not just an aesthetic cultural phenomenon. With “time-space compression” as an overarching term for an accelerated experience of space and time – which for Harvey are “basic categories of human existence” (201) – Harvey’s broad theoretical horizon is capable of successfully joining topics as wide-ranging as regimes of economic production, historical developments from the Enlightenment onward, cultural production, and the city – which he deals with even more elaborately in *The Urban Experience* (1989), where postmodernism and the city are discussed directly in terms of political-economic transformations from Fordism in modernity to flexible capital accumulation in postmodernity. Harvey is therefore capable of combining a (Marxist) analysis of capitalism with an analysis of historical and cultural change. However, he is generally critical of the postmodern, and adopts a stance which may acknowledge the complexity of the postmodern, but nevertheless attempts to pin it down – e.g. claiming that “[p]ostmodernism can be regarded, in short, as a historical-geographical condition of a certain sort” (*The Condition of Postmodernity*, 328). One could see Marxist roots in such assertions, trying

to ground a cultural phenomenon in (a materialist conception of) the real world, along the lines of a base-superstructure model. In my view, the scope of Harvey's work is exactly what is required to bring into view the complexity of postmodernity, but his evaluation of the postmodern condition aims to (de)limit the postmodern, in effect putting a stop to precisely the expansive and inclusive perspective that underlies Harvey's work in the first place.

Within urban studies the postmodern is approached in a more practical manner. It is not a theoretical or abstract issue, but one that stems from seeing new urban phenomena – different types of cities, spaces, structures – that require a different framework in order to be understood. The idea of the postmodern in urban studies, therefore, springs from the postmodernity of the cities it investigates. Hence, while the term itself may remain difficult to pin down, the general stance toward the postmodern is a pragmatic one: it is a term used to describe a set of conditions and structures (social, economic, political, etc.) that are specific and historically situated.⁷

In effect, saying "the postmodern city" immediately brings to mind the so-called "L.A. School," which emerged in the late 1980s, with Edward Soja, Mike Davis, and Michael Dear among its major figures. As the name suggests, the primary research interest here was in the city of Los Angeles. One could say that within this current of urban studies, the topic of the postmodern emerged from the analysis of L.A. as a new type of city requiring a new type of thinking, which in turn recasts the terms in which one can view cities generally. In a (very small) nutshell, this is the thrust of the argument of Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) – an attempt to develop a postmodern framework of analysis for a postmodern city. Hence, Los Angeles allowed object and theory to co-develop. Michael Dear's point of departure in his book *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (2000) is illustrative: "Most cities have an instantly-identifiable signature... But Los Angeles appears to be a city without a common narrative" (11). A double gesture is going on here: on the one hand, L.A. is

7 Notable studies of the postmodern city within the social sciences include Mike Davis' *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (1990) and *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998), Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson's *Postmodern Cities and Spaces* (1995), Allen J. Scott and Edward Soja's *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (1996), Nan Ellin's *Postmodern Urbanism* (1999), Michael Dear's *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (2000), and Edward Soja's work, which spans this entire period: *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989), *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996), and *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (2000).

presented as being different as a city (urban sprawl vs. the more familiar dense modern metropolis, for example). On the other hand, Dear's point here shows a methodological shift: from the assumption that cities can be reducible to an identifiable signature to a situation in which one cannot turn to such a simple idea – a methodological shift that occurs throughout Soja's work as well. Of course this resonates completely with the Lyotardian idea that "grand narratives" no longer provide a meaningful framework for understanding the world.

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Taking Los Angeles as the paradigmatic case for the postmodern city often results in a multitude of headings under which aspects of the city can be understood, often with creative neologisms. For example, Soja comes up with "six discourses for the postmetropolis" (in his later work *Postmetropolis* [2000]): postfordism, cosmopolis, exopolis, fractal city, the carceral archipelago, and Simcities. Dear shows even more flair: global latifundia, Holsteinization, praedatorianism, flexism, new world bi-polar disorder, cybergeoisie, protosurps, and memetic contagion (152-53). The creativity in these terms exhibits the postmodern academic stance with which these authors work (departing from the High Seriousness of traditional academia), but more importantly they are symptomatic: the point is not to produce definitive terminology, but to find flexible frameworks of analysis for making sense of a particular kind of city.⁸ The postmodern city cannot be circumscribed, but can only be approximated in urban studies.

One should note, however, that the paradigmatic status of L.A. with respect to "postmodern geography" is not to be conflated with the specificities of Los Angeles as a city. Simply put, the postmodern city is not a synonym for urban sprawl; cities do not have to look like L.A. to be considered postmodern. The famous section of Mike Davis' excellent *City of Quartz* (1990) on "Fortress L.A." – on the destruction of public space through regimes of panoptic surveillance – is a good example: Davis' description is specific to L.A., but also provides a model for understanding phenomena like the increase of gated communities (often new developments on the edges of cities) or increasing camera surveillance paired with privatization of formerly public space (in older cities). In

8 Another noteworthy study with a string of headings is Nan Ellin's *Postmodern Urbanism* (1996), which takes off from the modern adage "Form Follows Function" and identifies as the themes of postmodern urbanism Form Follows Fiction, Fear, Finesse, and Finance.

other words, with L.A. as the paradigmatic case, these approaches can account for phenomena in new cities and for urban change, allowing one to understand cities as postmodern without the necessity for the city to be “new.” This is relevant particularly in the case of New York City: while Manhattan originally developed as a typical modern metropolis, the city has changed into a node in a network of global capitalism, for example – a feature not to be understood within the frameworks for the modern city, but for the postmodern one. More to the point, in the context of the present study, the emphasis on ways of *thinking about* the postmodern city in urban studies allows both Los Angeles and New York to serve as key “loci” of postmodernity. After all, within the domain of literature and the arts, these two cities are completely dominant – both as represented cities and as actual sites of cultural production. However, their postmodernity provides ways of thinking about the postmodern city along more general lines, which apply to other cities, whether in the U.S. or in Europe, for example. The general stance toward the city in urban studies, therefore, where the object of study is not dominated and subjugated by theory, is highly compatible with an interdisciplinary approach – and will be discussed in greater detail below and throughout this book.

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In the context of cities and urban studies, the distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity should therefore again be stressed. Even though the use of these terms is less diffuse than in the humanities, a clear demarcation between the levels to which they pertain is needed just as much. As discussed above, “postmodernism” has a strong association with a particular type of architecture. Major postmodernist buildings are commonly encountered in discussions of the postmodern and the city (e.g. the Piazza d’Italia by Charles Moore, as discussed by Harvey, or buildings by Portman and Gehry, as discussed by Jameson). However, as with literary texts, it is important to clearly distinguish between the postmodernism of certain buildings and the postmodernity of the city. Even when the architectural style that is postmodernist is considered, it is often in light of larger and more complex social, cultural, economic, and political elements that make up the city (i.e. its postmodernity). This is true for urban studies, but largely also in the field of urban planning or urbanism, which has close ties with both architecture and the social sciences (cf. Nan Ellin’s *Postmodern Urbanism* [1999]). In a way, the distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity is easier to make than in the humani-

ties: a postmodernist piece of architecture is less easily isolated than a literary work or put into a circumscribed canon, for there is always the surrounding city to be taken into consideration (even though some architects might prefer not to, occasionally). Postmodern ideas might feed into urban planning, but postmodernism (as a realm of aesthetic, stylistic, or thematic concerns) is more easily identifiable as only one aspect (mainly architectural) of the postmodern city.

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To conclude this overview, there is a brief and general comparison to be made between “the postmodern” and “the city” as concepts. They share a definitional difficulty that steers one into a theoretical direction which is, in my view, particularly productive. For all the debates about the postmodern, the term is generally actually fairly specific already: it refers to matters in the realm of the social and cultural in the late twentieth century. It is only when one tries to definitively pin down the term (e.g. attempting a taxonomy of features, or establishing a definite canon) that one discovers that this is futile. Something similar is true for “the city”: the concept is old and generally works just fine, since we have little or no difficulty in determining whether Los Angeles and New York are cities – or Hong Kong, New Delhi, or Cleveland, for that matter. Yet when trying to narrow down types of cities, definitions tend to sprawl as much as the postmodern city can do. The prevailing models are the Greek-based “prefix-opolis” (as in metropolis, but also postmetropolis, exopolis, and megalopolis), Latin-based “prefix-urbia” (e.g. suburbia and exurbia, or conurbation), or plain English “X city” (e.g. “[post]modern” and of course “global,” but also “edge,” “network,” etc.). “The city” becomes problematic only once one attempts to isolate a meaning or referent. Yet in the explosion of terms for the city, one can see a solution for both: the point is not to understand both concepts as useful for the purpose of delimiting, but as inclusive and expansive. They provide frameworks for bringing together phenomena, more than for pinning them down. Especially when considering the postmodern city, these definitional difficulties should not be compounded, but it should become clear that they need to be treated as concepts that open up (rather than delimit) questions. What this calls for theoretically, then, is a framework that can accommodate different perspectives and issues – making a combination of the humanities and the social sciences all the more (theoretically and methodologically) necessary.

Postmodern city and interdisciplinarity

So far I have argued that different disciplines have their limitations when it comes to the city (and the postmodern), but this only partly underpins the need for a new, interdisciplinary approach to the postmodern city and its representations. A closer look at an example from the work of Edward Soja, as major figure of the L.A. School and urban studies generally, can serve to point in the direction that an interdisciplinary approach can or should take. The example I draw on is a recurring point in Soja's work on Los Angeles. He takes on the common problem of the difficulty of bringing Los Angeles into view – succinctly exemplified in the Michael Dear quote mentioned above: its lack of a recognizable signature and a common narrative. The problem when it comes to understanding Los Angeles is not that we have difficulty in identifying Los Angeles as a city in reality (we know perfectly well where to find it, without any doubt that it is a city, or that the city as a concept has become defunct), and in practice it is easy enough to agree that it is indeed the paradigmatic postmodern city as well. The problem, then, is not so much one of definition, but of representation. To put it very simply, L.A. cannot be reduced to a symbol like the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, or the Empire State Building, nor can it be satisfactorily captured in familiar narratives (e.g. of industrial development, cultural heritage, or metropolitan progress). This is true both for the popular imagination and in the academic field of geography. There is a gap between an urban reality and (geographical) concepts for the postmodern city, a gap that readily available conceptual apparatuses for understanding the city (largely developed for the modern metropolis) cannot bridge. This requires a new framework to understand the city, which amounts to finding new ways of representing the city in thought and in the imagination.

Throughout Soja's work, the issue of representing the postmodern city also plays an important role.⁹ Recognizing that conventional disci-

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⁹ Soja's work throughout the late 1980s and 90s is very consistent in its search for ways of adequately understanding Los Angeles. Accordingly, one can see an ongoing development in his main writings of the period. In *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989) Soja lays the foundations for new ways of thinking about the city, building particularly on the work of Lefebvre (whose magnum opus on space, *The Production of Space*, had not been translated into English yet) and Foucault. In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places* (1996), Soja expands his Lefebvrian approach, and incorporates elements that he did not address in his previous book (notably feminist and postcolonial perspectives), for which he had been criticized. A volume edited with Allen Scott (*The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* [1996]) convincingly displayed the multitude of approaches in the "L.A. School" (and incorporated articles by many of its representatives). Soja's *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (2000) can be seen as a final cementing of his approach (rooted in Lefebvre, acknowledging and incorporating the diversity of the city and its history, etc.) in this period.

plinary analyses are insufficient when it comes to cities like Los Angeles, Soja explicitly formulates his goal as “opening up and expanding the scope and critical ability of ... already established spatial or geographical imaginations” (*Thirdspace* 1). Already in *Postmodern Geographies*, Soja discusses a myriad of aspects of the spatiality of L.A., but at the same time notes that none of them can either be used for a totalizing view of the city, or can be approached using conventional geographical categories. For example, L.A. did not develop around a core, its current downtown only functions as financial and governmental hub or (metaphorical) panopticon, its industrial development differs from that of other cities, population density varies from common patterns, etc. Soja sums up his discussion of L.A. by saying that there “remains an economic order, an instrumental nodal structure, an essentially exploitative spatial division of labor” that has been very productive but that also “has been increasingly obscured from view, imaginatively mystified in an environment more specialized in the production of encompassing mystifications than practically any other you can name” (*Postmodern Geographies* 246). Yet the point is not to attempt to demystify, as if some essence or original were retrievable, but to find ways of critical analysis that allow for plurality, incompleteness, and contradiction in the city. As Soja puts it, “[t]otalizing visions, attractive though they may be, can never capture all the meanings and significations of the urban when the landscape is critically read and envisioned as a fulsome geographical text” (*Postmodern Geographies* 247). Hence, after discussing a brief and (theoretically necessarily) incomplete history of the city, he acknowledges that Los Angeles

is difficult to grasp persuasively in a temporal narrative for it generates too many conflicting images, confounding historicization, always seeming to stretch laterally instead of unfolding sequentially. At the same time, its spatiality challenges orthodox analysis and interpretation, for it too seems limitless and constantly in motion, never still enough to encompass, too filled with ‘other spaces’ to be informatively described. (*Postmodern Geographies* 222)

Soja thus identifies a difficulty in his own discipline. The existing frames of analysis prefer a temporal and totalizing organization, which is no longer productive when examining a postmodern city like Los Angeles.

Soja's strategy for finding new terms in which to think about the city crucially involves stepping outside the social sciences, into the realm of literature. Repeatedly, in his books *Postmodern Geographies* and *Thirdspace*, as well as in his own article in his volume with Allen Scott, Soja turns to the story "The Aleph" by Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges. A *literary* representation of space is thus central to his new conceptual perspective on L.A. In Soja's first discussion, in *Postmodern Geographies*, of Borges' story (which presents the Aleph as a fantastic object in someone's basement, basically infinity bundled into a tiny ball), he cites several passages as crucial to his own argument (222-23). Firstly, there is the description of the Aleph as "the only place on earth where all places are – seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending." Secondly, there is the difficulty of coming to descriptive terms with the Aleph and the despair of the writer: "here begins my despair as a writer. All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass?" The task of the writer – and the geographer, for Soja – becomes almost insurmountable:

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Really, what I want to do is impossible, for any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal. In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed me more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive. Nonetheless, I will try to recollect what I can.

What Soja draws from Borges' story is the problem of the incommensurability of a reality that is plural and simultaneous – taken to the extreme of an impossible, irreducible plurality, of infinity bundled into a tiny ball – and the representation of that reality in a language that is necessarily sequential.

Taking the story as a representation of the predicament of the geographer, Soja addresses the question of how to represent the plurality of the city. Yet precisely in this turn to an impossible and literary construct like the Aleph as a basis for understanding Los Angeles, Soja highlights a key

feature in the analysis of the postmodern city: it cannot do without taking on board issues of language and representation. In other words, one needs to bring together the social sciences and the humanities. "The Aleph" thus becomes not only a representation of the geographer's predicament, but the Aleph becomes a model for representing Los Angeles, with Soja referring to the city as "LA-leph" (*Postmodern Geographies* 223). Through Borges' story, Soja has found a framework with which to think about the plurality of the city:

What is this place? ... more than any other place, Los Angeles is everywhere. It is global in the fullest sense of the word. Nowhere is this more evident than in its cultural projection and ideological reach... Everywhere seems also to be in Los Angeles. To it flows the bulk of the transpacific trade of the United States... Global currents of people, information and ideas accompany the trade... (*Postmodern Geographies* 222-223)

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Soja uses the fictional impossible construct of the Aleph precisely for the leverage he needs to avoid models that depend on either a totalizing view or a fragmentary inventory of elements of the city. The crux is not to think in terms of the "whole" of L.A. or of identifying its parts, but find a way to represent the city as a complex plurality.

Tracing this element of Soja's work indicates the importance of representation, and it points to ways in which a literary text can provide not just an illustration of urban issues (a reflection of, in my terminology), but can also provide the terms in which one can understand the city. Accordingly, I take Soja's use of Borges as an invitation to expand on this interdisciplinary train of thought, and in my view one can go a great deal further than Soja does. After all, his turn to "The Aleph" takes place entirely on a metaphorical level. The story provides a way to think about space, but this space itself is purely conceptual, exploiting the cracks in the stability of the (im)possible that can appear once one delves into the domain of fiction. The space of "The Aleph," therefore, is (typical for Borges) one that belongs to the imagination. Yet Soja's purpose (and mine) is to talk about the very real phenomenon of the city. Consequently, I maintain that one can find solutions for Soja's problem (how to *think about* the postmodern city) in representations

that are more specific to urban space than the purely imaginary space of the Aleph. What I will attempt to develop in the remainder of this book is an approach that calls upon literary texts to open up and think about questions of urban space. In sum, then, I take Soja's turn to the Aleph to signal the need to take into account the cultural, not just as reflection of the city, but as integral part of understanding the postmodern city. One might even draw from this a tentative call for a field of "urban cultural studies" – which does not (yet) exist, in fact, but if it did, it might actually be the most appropriate field for the present study.

Thinking about the postmodern city

This study thus takes literary works as reflections of and reflections on the postmodern city, and brings together theoretical notions and perspectives from the social sciences. Hence, just as Soja's use of Borges' story, my readings of literary texts will not primarily be geared towards their literary qualities. To be sure, literary texts form the foundation for this study, but my concerns are not limited to or contained by them. The texts I discuss present versions of the postmodern city and thereby raise questions that are relevant for the (broader) postmodernity of which they are part. A work is thus not to be conceived of as a "result" or passive "expression" of the (postmodern) world it relates to, as if it were an epiphenomenon, at a remove from reality. Instead, in representing reality, a literary work is also a way of thinking about reality, and in fact of thinking reality. My implication is of course not to naively pretend that literature provides a "better" perspective on the postmodern city than urban studies, for example, or that being aware of the limitations of academic disciplines could imply that literature is interchangeable with representations of the city found in the social sciences. Yet my argument is explicitly that literary representation is a valuable way of thinking about the postmodern city, and that combining ideas and questions from literary representations with insights from theory and urban studies leads to productive new frameworks for the postmodern city.

With respect to the specific literary texts I discuss, my orientation is a double one. On the one hand, while anchored by the specificity of the works in question, I hope to let the different ways of thinking about the postmodern city (in literature, theory, and urban studies etc.) play off each other, "co-producing" an interdisciplinary approach. On the other

hand, with literature at the core, I hope my analyses provide insights into those specific works as well. On this note, however, I should underline that I read these works for their representations of the postmodern city, and that my aim is explicitly not to provide exhaustive interpretations or engage the niches within literary studies devoted to these works or their authors. Nevertheless, I hope that my readings of them do provide insights into these works as well, just as much as I hope they provide examples of how one can read works of literature as ways of thinking in general.

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Taken together, my selections form a solid corpus of representations of the postmodern city, spanning the period marked by postmodernity. My choice for restricting my selection to American examples is not only a practical one for the sake of coherence in my chosen corpus. The works primarily concern New York and Los Angeles, which are key loci of the postmodern, not just in American culture, but globally. They feature prominently as represented cities (in literature, film, art) and in other (academic) discourses of and on the postmodern. In addition, my corpus consists of works by major American authors (with the possible exception of Barthelme, who might be considered a canonical but minor postmodernist writer). They raise issues that I pick up on, and which open up, in my view, productive new takes on the postmodern city. This should not suggest that these works are in any way essential as representations of the postmodern city; in principle, I could have chosen other works for the sake of the same (or rather, similar or analogous) discussions. Yet my focus is not on some “canon of postmodernism” to motivate my choices (let alone chronology as a guiding principle for reading them), but on urban questions. My selection of texts is thus neither arbitrary (in fact, Auster and DeLillo are highly likely choices, for example) nor complete: my argument is that when considering the postmodern one should abandon the totalizing categorizations inherent in notions of arbitrariness and completeness. In this respect, the postmodern thoroughly informs the methodology behind this study.

The following chapters explore three major areas of inquiry for the postmodern city. Chapter 1 looks at the position of the individual subject in the city, based on Donald Barthelme’s short story “The Balloon” (1967) and Paul Auster’s novel *City of Glass* (1985). These works focus on how the subject can relate to the Manhattan grid – a space in which

inhere discourses (of rigidity and rationality, for example) that produce a subject position that originally belonged to the modern metropolis. Postmodernity, however, calls for new ways of using and relating to this existing space – a call addressed by Barthelme and Auster, which I further examine by drawing on Lefebvre’s work on space (and particularly his search for an alternative to the dominance of what he dubs “abstract space”), Foucault’s notion of heterotopia, and de Certeau’s work on walking. This chapter, therefore, looks at how new uses of existing urban space go hand in hand with new concepts for spatiality and subjectivity in the postmodern city.

Chapter 2 asks a simple question: what kind of spaces make up the postmodern city? The literary work under consideration here is Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), which transposes the “mislocation of the self” that is the crux in Barthelme’s “The Balloon” to the landscape of Southern California. To explore what kind of space this is, I consider Jameson’s famous discussion of the Bonaventure hotel (and its limitations), and Marc Augé’s notion of non-place as characteristic of postmodern urban space, which is relevant not only for the fictional cityscape of *Lot 49* but also for Los Angeles as discussed in an essay by Pynchon on Watts.

Chapter 3, then, looks at the body in the postmodern city. Just as the subjectivities and spaces of postmodernity are different, the role of the bodily and the material is as well. I depart from the recurring call for “new organs” when it comes to new types of urban space, as encountered in Simmel and Jameson – a call that expresses a line of thought about the body conceived as deficient or in need of technological improvement. Don DeLillo’s novel *Cosmopolis* (2003) presents the body moving through the city in a white stretch limo, exploring questions of space, technology, and capitalism. With notions of prosthesis, the posthuman (by discussing in depth the work of N. Katherine Hayles), and automobility, *Cosmopolis* can be seen as presenting a relationship between body and city that is virtual, with each extending into the other.

By way of a coda, the final part of this study picks up on an issue running through all the preceding chapters: that of narrativity. A consideration of an essay by Don DeLillo on New York and 9/11 illustrates how representations of the postmodern city cannot rely on simple, temporally organized narratives to produce meaning. Instead, the plurality

of postmodern urban space can only be rendered in narratives that themselves are partial, simultaneous, and multiple. The postmodern city and its narratives, therefore, are marked by plurality.

In conclusion, this overview also shows that, as with my literary corpus, my choices of theoretical perspectives and urban studies approaches are geared towards interdisciplinary insights. In fact, just as with the literary works, my selection tends to include the likely ones too: Lefebvre on social space, Foucault on heterotopia, de Certeau on walking, Augé on non-place, and Jameson on the Bonaventure hotel, for example. All in all, the point of this study is not to find the new in the ingredients it uses, but in the way of combining them: in finding new, interdisciplinary ways of thinking about the postmodern city.