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Reflections of/on the City : literature, space, and postmodernity

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Summary

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Reflection of/on the City: Literature, Space, and Postmodernity is an interdisciplinary study of literary representations of the postmodern city. While the early 20th century was characterized by the metropolis, with a high concentration of people and enterprise, the second half of the 20th century is marked by, on the one hand, a different kind of city – sprawling, flexible, to be understood in different frameworks – and on the other hand a changed usage of existing urban space. This study explores aspects of the postmodern city by looking at American literary works from the 1960s to the end of the century. These aspects are represented in literary works, of course, but my usage of these texts is explicitly geared towards looking beyond literary categories. Literary works do not only offer a reflection of, but importantly also a reflection on the city. My aim is to approach urban issues by using literature as a way of thinking about the city, which can therefore be brought together with theoretical of social scientific ways of thinking.

This study thus revolves around certain aspects of the city – like the position of the individual, characteristic types of space, and the role of the body – but simultaneously also around developing an approach that connects different academic fields. Every chapter is an interdisciplinary investigation of a different urban question – or, put differently, since these questions are interrelated, every chapter looks at the postmodern city from a different angle, by combining concepts and perspectives. Overall, this study is a broad investigation of the postmodern city, in which an interdisciplinary way of thinking is developed throughout the different chapters.

The introduction is an exposition of the concepts central to this study. One of the key points is combining perspectives from the humanities and the social sciences. Fields like geography, sociology, and urban studies have good tools for (empirically) looking at urban questions, but these can be insufficient for questions concerning meaning (often presented as a “symbolic” dimension of the city). The humanities, on the other hand, are well equipped to deal with meaning, but are less capable of grounding questions of representation and meaning in the reality of the city. As the influential work of geographer Edward Soja argues, espe-

cially the postmodern city calls for a new way of thinking in which a literary perspective can be useful: literature is not constrained by measurable categories, but can bring the plurality of the postmodern city into view through means of representation, for example.

Another core concept in this study is “postmodernity.” This complex term requires clear definition up front. Firstly, I distinguish clearly between “postmodernism” and “postmodernity.” The “-ism” is a term to pin down aesthetic/thematic concerns in art, literature, architecture, etc. Postmodernity is a broader socio-cultural phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century that brings together different philosophical or socio-economic issues, for example. To briefly frame my understanding of postmodernity here and indicate its academic ancestry: my focus is on the representation of worlds (so more McHale than Hutcheon in literary studies); on ways in which space is given meaning and is structured by signs (more Venturi than Jencks in architecture); on a multitude of small, rather than grand narratives (Lyotard); on bringing together cultural representation and socio-economic factors (in line with Jameson); and on the flexibility and plurality of the city (in line with the L.A. School in urban studies). Finally, this study may consider works that could fit in a canon of postmodernism, but I am explicitly not concerned with their postmodernism, but with the postmodernity to which they relate – of which, and on which they are a reflection.

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Chapter 1 examines the position of the individual subject in the city, by considering Donald Barthelme’s short story “The Balloon” (1967) and Paul Auster’s short novel *City of Glass* (1985). These texts address the relationship between the postmodern subject and the Manhattan street grid – a space in which discourses inhere that originally belonged to the metropolis and the modern subject.

Barthelme’s story revolves around a colossal balloon that suddenly appears above Manhattan. The balloon does not have a fixed shape and thereby offers an alternative for the street grid on the ground. This grid is the embodiment of efficiency and instrumental rationality – values that are imposed on the inhabitants. However, the balloon resists interpretation and signification – it is not an advertisement or monument, for example. It can only be *used*, for walking, playing, or for meeting one another. The balloon offers the people the possibility for “mislocation of the self” – the possibility for losing oneself. The story thus revolves

around the juxtaposition of a rigid spatiality and concomitant subjectivity on the one hand, and on the other hand an alternative spatiality and liberation-through-losing-oneself for the subject.

This configuration can be understood by means of Foucault's concept of heterotopia. In brief, in Foucault's work heterotopia is a concept for investigating the relationship between spatial and discursive orders. The point is not one type of "other" space – all kinds of spaces can be "heterotopian" – but the way in which spatiality and discursivity are intertwined in heterotopia. This is a key point in Barthelme's story. The crux is not the balloon itself, but the fact that the balloon shows how much the urban space of Manhattan shapes people's lives; it shows that the discursive "charge" of space has extensive consequences for the individual in the city.

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The story stresses the need for a spatiality in which other factors are foregrounded. The influential work for Henri Lefebvre is relevant here. His main point stems from a critique of the restrictions of what he calls "abstract space." Abstract space hinges on a reduction – think of a functional separation between "traffic," "shopping," and "residential" spaces, for instance. This never does justice to reality and it subordinates the social. Lefebvre therefore argues for a re-balancing in thinking about space, with room for the usage of space and above all for what he terms "lived" space, which foregrounds the social. Barthelme's story revolves around the same re-balancing. The Manhattan grid is an embodiment of abstract space: a rational, purposive, and efficient spatial formation. The people of the city feel reduced and oppressed by this. The balloon offers a rough draft of a new postmodern spatiality: without a fixed form, emphasizing instead everyday usage and the social – and thereby also offering the subject more freedom.

Auster's novel *City of Glass* revolves precisely around the usage of urban space, and specifically around walking. The protagonist, writer/detective Daniel Quinn, enjoys losing himself on his long walks through the city. He gets a tail job where he needs to follow someone who spends days walking the streets of Manhattan, "writing" the letters of a message (seen from above) with his routes. This can be viewed using Michel de Certeau's famous piece on walking. Like Lefebvre, de Certeau rejects the idea of abstraction as primary or privileged – for both the city and the subject. Instead, de Certeau puts forward a subject that exists in and

through everyday practices. The individual and urban space should be considered together, in their interactions – of which walking is a paradigmatic example: subject and space are defined by both being elements in the physical act of walking in the city. Auster's novel supports this perspective, for the subject in the novel has both feet firmly on the ground, both literally and figuratively. The novel departs from the classic figure of the *flâneur* – icon of urban modernity, as in Baudelaire – who assigns meaning to the city, from which he is detached as a privileged and centered subject. The novel and de Certeau thus both argue for a perspective on the city that is not determined by preconceived abstract ideas, but that foregrounds subjectivity and spatiality as they emerge from everyday practices, from concrete interactions between people and the city.

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Chapter 2 addresses the question what kinds of space characterize the postmodern city, by reading Thomas Pynchon's short novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965). The "mislocation of the self," which was central to Barthelme's story, is the crux of the cityscape of Southern California in *Lot 49*: a vast urban sprawl, held together by a network of freeways, in which clear structures are difficult to discern. As her epistemological quest of sorting everything out grinds to a halt, protagonist Oedipa Maas finds herself in a world in which she cannot get her bearings.

This is also a key point in Jameson's well-known piece on the Bonaventure hotel in Los Angeles. He describes postmodern space mainly in negative terms of shortcomings – as if the subject is incapable of coming to terms with such space. However, Jameson is mainly rhetorical in this, in order to maintain a modern idea of subjectivity – emphasizing the knowing subject as the center of experience. Yet his analysis also presents a positive view of subjectivity in such spaces. The main points are then space as shaped by changeable meanings, by way of signs, symbols, and text (cf. Venturi et al.). *Lot 49* presents a similar view: the signs and appearances of the subversive W.A.S.T.E. postal network shape urban space. It is not a predetermined or underlying structure, but a flexible regime of signs and signifiers that gives meaning to the city.

A better concept for understanding such space is Marc Augé's non-place. In contrast to spaces where people already have old ties (think of traditional villages), non-places are characterized by new and temporary ties. Signifying structures, such as signs and instructions, determine

the possibilities for the individual. The standard example is the airport, where an individual temporarily becomes a generic subject through spatial configurations (corridors, barriers, queues) and signs (passports, tickets, instructions). This model of spatiality is much better suited for the plurality and changeability of the postmodern city. It is precisely in non-places that the subject can find freedom in temporary anonymity, for example – a mechanism that is repeatedly at work in *Lot 49*. Yet non-places are by no means neutral in a political sense. In another text by Pynchon, an essay on Watts in L.A. (1966), he describes demarcations that are operative in Los Angeles that give some people access and exclude others from the system of the city, in a spatial and socio-economic sense. In the non-place of Los Angeles as the postmodern city of the entertainment industry, for example, the generic subject is white and middle-class.

Chapter 3 explores the relationship between the postmodern city and the body. The point of departure is a recurring call for modification of the body when faced with new types of urban space, for example in the need for new organs in Simmel and Jameson. This call fits in with a long tradition of thinking about the body in terms of shortcomings that can be remedied by technological means such as prosthetics. In this modern way of thinking, the urban environment encroaches upon the individual, requiring the individual to fix or overcome the physical. The postmodern city, however, requires a different framework for thinking about the body.

Don DeLillo's novel *Cosmopolis* (2003) explores precisely these issues. Main character Eric Packer is a billionaire who made his fortune by exploiting the system of financial markets. To him, his body is an old-fashioned limitation; he would rather make money off of the fluctuations on the currency markets in nano-seconds – completely in the realm of cyber-capital, unencumbered by bodiliness. This is then the modern framework for the physical, focused on shortcomings and technological extensions, which also belongs to the modern metropolis and its privileging of the mental (Simmel). The novel explores how the position of the body in the postmodern city is different, through questions of boundaries and organs – Packer is continuously worried about his asymmetrical prostate, for instance. The work of N. Katherine Hayles is useful here, particularly in two of her key concepts: firstly, her understanding

of “virtuality” as the interwovenness of the “material” (bodies, but also machines and space) and the “informational” (knowledge, discourses, information systems); and secondly her concept of “embodiment” as performative and specific (as opposed to “the body” as an abstract idea). Hayles offers a broader set of coordinates for understanding subjectivity and the body than a Cartesian model that privileges the abstract.

Particularly the ride across Manhattan in Packer’s white limousine explores the coordinates for understanding the body. The car is a technological extension for Packer: completely fitted with computers for instant information about the financial markets and access to his systems. The limousine is a “skin,” a prosthesis for moving through the city and for keeping it at a distance, with screens rather than windows for looking outside, for example. Yet the novel also underscores that the body plays an irreducible role in the postmodern city; not only technology and abstractions matter, but also material interaction and the physical. The same image emerges from studies of automobility: the driving subject replaces the walking subject – like the *flâneur*, or as in de Certeau – so that mobility in urban space merges the technological and the physical. The point is therefore not a radically different role for the body in the postmodern city, but a different framework for understanding it: not one-sided (body as obstacle, with a preference for abstraction and knowledge), but with room for the interplay between body and information, space and technology.

Finally, the “coda” to this study examines narrativity and the city, by considering an essay by DeLillo that responds to the 9/11 attacks. DeLillo’s essay explores how to respond to the catastrophe. A “meaning” of the events cannot be caught in “the” story of 9/11, for the idea of both a single meaning and of a single narrative reduces reality and cannot do it justice. For DeLillo the answer lies in an explosion of stories – where every element of the city, the street, and the ruins of the buildings produces a small narrative of its own. This plurality of narratives is the only adequate way to reflect and reflect upon the events – and that plurality is embodied by the city, for DeLillo. The idea of the city as consisting of a multitude of narratives is a perspective on the city, on post-modernity, and on narrativity that seamlessly fits in with the approaches taken in the other chapters.