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Reflections of/on the City

Literature, Space, and Postmodernity

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Reflections of/on the City

Literature, Space, and Postmodernity

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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.

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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.”

10 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.

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.

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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-

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.

28

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.

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).

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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.

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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,”¹ 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

¹ 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.² Moreover, in its subsequent usage the term has been employed in a variety of ways and for a wide range of spaces.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.”⁷

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.

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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.⁸ 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.

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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).⁹ 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.

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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

⁹ 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)

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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.¹⁰

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

10 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.¹¹ 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.

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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.¹²

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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

¹² 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).¹³ 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

¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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.

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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

¹⁴ 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).¹⁵ 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.”

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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)

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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.”¹⁶ 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 predetermined, 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).¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰

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

²⁰ 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).²¹ 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.

2 – Beyond the Negative: Non-location and *The Crying of Lot 49*

After a reading of Barthelme’s “The Balloon” and Auster’s *City of Glass* as texts that present different ways to come to terms with urban space in the light of a world characterized by postmodernity, the question remains *what kind of new spaces* belong to such a world. After all, Lefebvre’s lived space is a way of conceiving of spatiality rather than a description of an actual space, and the same goes for Foucault’s heterotopia. Likewise, while the practices and tactics for which de Certeau argues certainly characterize a new usage of space, they do not themselves characterize new types of spaces. Just like Barthelme’s and Auster’s texts show a new approach to spatiality in relation to the (existing) modern urban space of Manhattan, another text – Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) – will allow for more specific elaboration upon the spaces particular to postmodernity.

81

In McHale’s view, *The Crying of Lot 49* is a transitional text, moving from a modernist epistemological dominant to an ontological concern in the form of a glimpse of the possibility of multiple worlds. “Classically modernist in its form,” according to McHale, Pynchon’s novel follows an intricate detective plot – akin to the work of Raymond Chandler, for example – and the novel “represents the mediating consciousness of Oedipa, and through her the happenings in its fictional world” (23). In brief, the novel tells the story of Oedipa Maas, who is charged with executing the will of her former lover, Pierce Inverarity. This task leads her to the fictional city of San Narciso in Southern California, where she stumbles upon a secret and subversive postal network – W.A.S.T.E. – through which isolated and marginalized individuals and groups communicate. As her search expands, she discovers an intricate history behind this network and its almost all-encompassing extent in contemporary America, leading her to perceive all incidents as connected by a massive system that she dubs the “Tristero.”

However, she is unable to definitively prove (to herself, at least) the actual existence of the Tristero, because all people who had led her to the system in the first place either die or become inaccessible in terms of reliable knowledge about the Tristero. At the end of the novel, she

has only one final connection to the system in the form of a mysterious bidder for Inverarity's stamp collection – but the novel ends precisely on that note, at the auction, waiting for the bidder to reveal himself. Hence, a final resolution of Oedipa's quest is denied, leaving only the *possibility* of the existence of the Tristero. The key phrase here is one she adopts from an actor who likens himself to the projector in a planetarium: "Shall I project a world?" For McHale, the fact that this phrase remains a question indicates the novel's liminal character when seen in the light of a distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction: the possibility of a multiplicity of worlds is raised, but does not materialize, leaving the novel just on the modernist side of the threshold.

82 One could also say, of course, that such a liminal position is possible only by recognizing the two sides of the threshold. Although the novel may not tip over into full-blown postmodernism, the transitional character of *Lot 49* does offer both a modernist and a postmodernist perspective. Particularly for the present examination of spatiality, the novel's transitional perspective provides a view of distinctly postmodern urban spaces.

The transition from modern to postmodern urban space is apparent in the way in which the city of San Narciso is introduced in the novel. As Oedipa arrives in her car, the text provides a view of the city from above:

She drove into San Narciso on a Sunday, in a rented Impala. Nothing was happening. She looked down a slope, needing to squint for the sunlight, on to a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the first time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of understanding. Smog hung all round the horizon, the sun on the bright beige

countryside was painful; she and the Chevy seemed parked at the center of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken. (14-5)

The view of the city from above, as Burton Pike notes in his thorough study of the representation of the city in modern literature, is a traditional narrative viewpoint common in nineteenth-century literature. As he remarks, no action takes place in such a panoramic view of the city, so from this vantage point “what is observed must pass through the filter of the narrating consciousness” (34). Within the context of *Lot 49* as a liminal novel between the modern and postmodern, one can see that this perspective on the city reinforces the primacy of issues of seeing and knowing, with the subject as the focal point for these concerns, which is particularly evident in the last two sentences in the passage above. Hence, this view of the city is characteristic of the epistemology of modernity, particularly as developed in the nineteenth century. For example, compare this passage from *Madame Bovary* (which, despite the obviously different historical context, is an illustrative modern correlate to the view presented in *Lot 49* well over a century later) in which Emma views Rouen from a carriage atop a hill:

83

Sloping down like an amphitheater, submerged in the mist, it spread out beyond the bridges, chaotically. And the featureless curve of open country sloped away up until it touched the far pale blur of the skyline. Seen like this from above, the whole landscape had the stillness of a painting; ships at anchor were crowded together in one corner; the river curved smoothly around the foot of the green hills, and the islands, oblong in form, looked just like big black fish, motionless on the water. Factory chimneys were pushing out immense plumes of brown stuff that were swept away on the breeze. You could hear the rumbling of the ironworks and the clear sound of church-bells from spires that rose above the mist. The trees along the boulevards, quite leafless, looked like purple bushes in among the houses, and the roof-tops, all gleaming wet, were a patchwork of mirrors, each piece at a different height. Sometimes

a gust would blow the clouds towards Côte Sainte-Catherine, like sea-waves in the sky crashing silently against a cliff.

From that dense-packed humanity she inhaled something vertiginous, and it gorged her heart, as though the hundred and twenty thousand souls pulsing down there had discharged all together the fumes of the passion she imagined theirs. Her love unfurled across vast space, dilated to a chaos by the vague murmur rising from below. She rained it down again, on the squares, on the parks, on the streets, and the old Norman city seemed to spread before her like some great metropolis, like Babylon unveiled for her. (244-45)

84 As Pike remarks, the first paragraph here “presents the city as an object in the reader’s line of sight” whereas in the second the city “disappears behind a non-specific vocabulary of passionate feeling,” making it “a screen on which this feeling is projected” (49-50). Both views of the city – as visible “object” and as screen for subjective projection – underscore the subject as the center of the viewing experience. For example, the “stillness of a painting” and the “great metropolis, like Babylon” for Emma, and the “well-tended crop” and the “astonishing clarity” of the printed circuit for Oedipa illustrate that the presentation of the city is focalized through the main character – a prototypically modern narrative device. Hence, the city is reduced to an image generated by the viewer, a product of the primacy and centrality of the position of the viewing subject.

Such presentation of the city from above thus foregrounds the characteristically modern emphasis on epistemology. The same is true for the opening of de Certeau’s description of Manhattan from the top of the World Trade Centre, for example, where the city becomes “a text that lies before one’s eyes” (92), leading to a consideration of the city not as material fact but as concept. In *Lot 49* the initial description of the city does not only implicitly foreground epistemological concerns by nature of the conventional top-down perspective, but it also explicitly raises these concerns in taking the city to be a signifying structure (like in de Certeau) with the promise (or hope) of some concealed meaning to be revealed (hinting at a modernist epiphany) once she is the city itself – a promise held at bay for the moment by distance, smog, and glaring sun. Moreover, by taking the urban (signifying) structure to be a pattern, the

presentation of city suggests a coherent totality – paralleling the reductive process of abstraction that is characteristic of epistemologies of modernity. Hence, Oedipa's (modernist) entrance into San Narciso uses urban space to reinforce the epistemological reason for her going there in the first place, to sort out Inverarity's estate, and the ensuing detective plot in which she gets entangled. In other words, the view from above reduces the city to an image, suggesting a coherent totality that foregrounds epistemology and the position of the viewing/knowing subject.

However, this use of urban space in conventional and stable conjunction with a concern with meaning and knowability quickly dissipates as Oedipa descends into the city itself. The unifying and totalizing perspective makes way for a description that is sequential, based on the perspective from a car moving along the freeway.

85

She gave it up presently, as if a cloud had approached the sun or the smog thickened, and so broken the 'religious instant', whatever it might've been; started up and proceeded at maybe 70 mph along the singing blacktop, on to a highway she thought went towards Los Angeles, into a neighborhood that was little more than the road's skinny right-of-way, lined by auto lots, escrow services, drive-ins, small office buildings and factories whose address numbers were in the 70 and 80,000s. She had never known numbers to run so high. It seemed unnatural. To her left appeared a prolonged scatter of wide, pink buildings, surrounded by miles of fence topped with barbed wire and interrupted now and then by guard towers: soon an entrance whizzed by, two-sixty-foot missiles on either side and the name YOYODYNE lettered conservatively on each nose cone. This was San Narcissus's big source of employment, the Galactronics Division of Yoyodyne, Inc, one of the giants of the aerospace industry. Pierce, she happened to know, had owned a large block of shares, had been somehow involved in negotiating an understanding with the county tax assessor to lure Yoyodyne here in the first place. It was part, he explained, of being a founding father.

Barbed wire again gave way to the familiar parade of more beige, prefab, cinderblock office machine distributors, sealant makers, bottled gas works, fastener factories, warehouses, and whatever. Sunday had sent them all into silence and paralysis, all but an oc-

casional real estate office or truck stop. Oedipa resolved to pull in at the next motel she saw, however ugly, stillness and four walls having at some point become preferable to this illusion of speed, freedom, wind in your hair, unreeling landscape – it wasn't. What the road really was, she fancied, was this hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of a freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner LA, keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain, or whatever passes, with a city, for pain. But were Oedipa some single melted crystal of urban horse, LA, really, would be no less turned on for her absence. (15-16)

86 The view of the city from a car moving along the highway markedly differs from the static and totalizing view from above. The promise and expectation of an epiphanic moment are punctured once Oedipa drives into the city (prefiguring the progressive breakdown of Oedipa's epistemological framework throughout the novel). The promise of meaning and the order and clarity of the initial view, which together transform the city into a signifying whole, is replaced by the popping up of different elements one after the other. The centrality of the viewer in the first view – in a hierarchically superior position to the city viewed, in control over what is viewed and how – is displaced as well; it is not the viewer who directs what is seen, but the buildings appear to Oedipa in a parade of elements of the city whizzing by. The city presents itself to the driver, taking over control over the process of viewing.¹ Furthermore, whereas the first scene presents San Narciso as an autonomous whole, the second scene explicitly views the city in its relation to Los Angeles, positioned somewhere in a network of freeways. In addition, the city viewed from the road is “unreal,” presenting only an illusion of freedom and unfolding landscape, contradicting a conventional (and highly romanticized) view of the open road in the US.

Similarly, the metaphors for viewing the city change. Whereas the first description sees San Narciso in terms of man-made elements – a well-tended crop, a printed circuit, and hieroglyphs – the up-close

1 In contrast, compare Emma's approach to the city in *Madame Bovary* as she looks out of the carriage, which completely affirms the primacy of the viewer: “Emma knew it from end to end; she knew that after a meadow there came a sign-post, an elm, a barn, or a road-mender's hut; sometimes, to give herself a surprise, she would close her eyes. But she never lost an exact sense of the distance still to be covered” (244).

presentation of the man-made elements of the city in the second scene draws on different terms. One of the first things Oedipa remarks is the “unnatural” character of address numbers that run into the 80,000s as the buildings whiz by, in apparent contrast to the initial likeness to an electronic circuit. Furthermore, this concern with “naturalness” is extended by viewing the individual parts of the city as bodies in their own right, “paralyzed” on a Sunday. Likewise, the network of freeways as a whole appears in bodily terms, as a network of veins for the purpose of sedation through intravenous drugs.

Overall then, this ground-level view of the city yields an entirely different picture: not the suggestion of an organized and signifying whole (with the promise of a revelation), but the city as an unnatural, paralyzed, and sedated body, no longer viewed as a passive object, but actively presenting itself. The contrast between these two views of the city is thus a spatial expression of the novel’s transitional character, effecting a transition from a modern city to a postmodern city that lacks such unitary definition.

Yet the question of what to make of this difference is not immediately answered using the theoretical discourses on space discussed so far. The contrast between a top-down and ground-level view invites a comparison to de Certeau’s discussion of walking in the city. However, there is a key difference that characterizes the treatment of urban space in *Lot 49*. With regard to the view from above, *Lot 49* seems to be in line with de Certeau’s remarks on the Concept-city. But whereas for de Certeau the descent into the city sparks a discussion about the decay of the Concept-city, with cracks in the system becoming apparent when walking in the city, this process of decay does not seem to occur in San Narciso. At the ground level of the city in *Lot 49* there are no users whose tactics combat oppressive strategies of the Concept-city; the oppositional dynamic between strategies and tactics does not seem to be operative in San Narciso at all. The initial suggestion of an ordered whole carrying hidden meaning – a hieroglyphic “urban text” – is primarily a pre-conceived mode of viewing the city, based on (modernist) convention more than on an actual encounter with urban space. The ground-level view does not correspond to this conceptual totality viewed from above, but it also does not offer the kind of liberation that walking provides for de Certeau. On the contrary, Oedipa sees only an illusion of freedom offered by the road

and consciously rejects it.

88 More specifically, and more importantly, the model that de Certeau describes assumes an urban space in which users interact with the city and each other through the physical activity of walking. This is largely irrelevant in the type of urban space that *Lot 49* deals with, since it was built with drivers in mind, not pedestrians, hence precluding anything but distant viewing and purposive interaction with the streets and buildings of the city, and severely limiting the possibilities for unpremeditated (inter)personal encounters and interaction. As Oedipa's view of the industrial zoning of San Narciso illustrates, her driving is not analogous to walking. For de Certeau, walking in the city empowers the subject, giving it a multiplicity of tactics to materialize and turn the city into a "haunted" space (or "lived" space in Lefebvre's terms). Driving through San Narciso has precisely the opposite effect, turning Oedipa into a passive viewer of a parade of urban elements that present themselves. Therefore, the road in San Narciso is no substitute for the pedestrian use of public space in cities built as modern metropolises such as Manhattan. For movement through public space the user is surrendered to the traffic system.

To also use Lefebvre's terminology here, this means that the public space of San Narciso consists primarily of abstract space, in which the individual is reduced to a generalized subject within the traffic system. This dominance of such space in San Narciso is sustained throughout the novel, depicting urban space only as traversed in private cars (except, tellingly, for an excursion to San Francisco, which will be discussed later). There are no instances of "lived" space, as for example in "The Balloon." Hence, *Lot 49* does not adopt a trajectory like Lefebvre's and Barthelme's when it comes to identifying the key problem of modern urban space and suggesting an alternative.

The two scenes in *Lot 49* that make up Oedipa's arrival in San Narciso indicate a recognizable difference between a modern and postmodern approach of urban space, but only part of this presentation aligns with de Certeau's notion of the Concept-city and Lefebvre's view of the dominance of abstract space. If anything, the modern perspective from above is presented as hopeful – in its reductive overview – whereas the postmodern view at ground level presents an uncomfortable image of the city rather than a positive alternative to the ills of the modern city.

The transition that Oedipa's entrance into San Narciso marks therefore also indicates that what is at stake is not a different usage of an existing modern city – like in Barthelme and Auster – but rather a transition into a *different kind* of space.

In brief, taking *Lot 49* as a transitional novel with respect to modernity and postmodernity requires a different model for making sense of the treatment of spatiality. The novel takes an older mode of spatiality only as its point of departure – literally, in the beginning of the novel, but also conceptually, in that this calling-up of the image of the modern city only serves to indicate how the space of *Lot 49* does *not* operate. Hence, insofar as an analysis in positive (non-oppositional) terms is concerned, the question still remains what the characteristics of the urban space in *Lot 49* specifically are and how they can be understood.

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On the surface, the characteristics of the city are simple to identify: after the hopeful initial view from above, the only feature of San Narciso that bears any particular significance is the network of roads and freeways. There are no scenes in San Narciso in public spaces like streets or squares; all of the locations in which events take place in the city are privately owned spaces – e.g. a bar, a theater, shops, or a private home – and almost all of them are identified in some relationship to the network of freeways or underscore the necessity of cars for accessing space. For example, The Scope – the bar in which Oedipa encounters the renegade postal network and its symbol (the muted post horn) for the first time – is “a bar out on the way to LA, near the Yoyodyne plant.” (31) When she visits a Yoyodyne stockholders' meeting, the first description of the plant itself is rooted again in the perspective from the automobile: “They gave her a round visitor's badge at one of the gates, and she parked in an enormous lot next to a quonset building painted pink and about a hundred yards long.” (56) Perhaps the most succinct example of the prominence and dominance of the network of roads in *Lot 49* is Zapf's Used Books bookstore, which is located “over by the freeway.” (53)

In effect, this last description is emblematic for the urban space of San Narciso: the city seems to be held together by a network of freeways that paradoxically seems to function as both a unifying principle and its opposite. Obviously, in a city designed only for transport by car, the network of roads is key in accessing the (private) spaces that make up the city. Accordingly, this consolidates the dominance of abstract space,

the functional separation it engenders through its reductive logic, and the suppression of social interaction in “lived” space anywhere beyond the private and particular. The relation of a place to this traffic system becomes a constitutive element of its location – hence the identification of the bookstore as being “over by the freeway.” At the same time, however, this dominance of the abstract space of the freeway paradoxically renders the (conventional) notion of location defunct. “Over by the freeway” nominally attributes the bookstore a location, but this is devoid of any particularity or specificity. In that sense, location is not a property of the site at all – it is not proper to the store. What this description allocates is precisely the non-specificity of location, identifying a site while denying it any particularity.

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This last characteristic of “non-location” is highlighted in a key passage at the end of the novel. After Oedipa has lost almost all of her possible connections to the Tristero system and has become desperate in her epistemological insecurity, she drinks bourbon in her motel until after sundown. “Then she went out and drove on the freeway for a while with her lights out, to see what would happen. But angels were watching. Shortly after midnight she found herself in a phone booth, in a desolate, unfamiliar, unlit district of San Narciso” (122). From here, she telephones her last remaining (anonymous) connection to the Tristero, whom she met in San Francisco. After he hangs up on her without having been any help, the “hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning” that she suspected at the start has definitively slipped out of reach. At that point,

She stood between the public booth and the rented car, in the night, her isolation complete, and tried to face towards the sea. But she’d lost her bearings. She turned pivoting on one stacked heel, could find no mountains either. As if there could be no barriers between herself and the rest of the land. San Narciso at that moment lost (the loss pure, instant, spherical, the sound of a stainless orchestral chime held among the stars and struck lightly), gave up its residue of uniqueness for her; became a name again, was assumed back into the American community of crust and mantle. (122-23)

The definitive failure to unearth some concealed meaning underneath

San Narciso and behind the Tristero is prominently spatialized here in a sense of having lost one's bearings and the city being drained of any distinctiveness – and again the site where this takes place is somewhere near the freeway. So after the modernist epistemological detective plot has ground to a permanent halt, non-location in a network of freeways appears to be the main characteristic of the postmodern space of San Narciso.

Jameson's Bonaventure: moving from post-/non-to (post-non)-

When identifying the property of non-location as key feature of space in *Lot 49*, the first thing that becomes apparent is that this is still a negative term. Nevertheless, while this in the first instance still hinges on an opposition to a concept as used in a previous logic, the urban space in *Lot 49* does more than negate or depart from a modern spatiality – but it is *through* a negation of the previous that the novel arrives at a treatment of postmodern urban space in which a key concept like non-location can be understood positively.

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With respect to the non-location of space in *Lot 49*, particularly the last passage cited above recalls Jameson's discussion of postmodern space. As a classic point of reference when postmodernism is concerned, Jameson's essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" has sparked many discussions already, but for the present purposes Jameson's arguments about postmodern space provide a theoretical "trajectory" for moving beyond the negative interpretation of non-location.²

In his essay Jameson's point of departure, as far as architecture and space are concerned, posits (high) modernism as characterized by "prophetic elitism and authoritarianism" and "credited with the destruction of the fabric of the traditional city and its older neighborhood culture" (2) through the uncompromising imposition of a utopian vision on an existing urban structure. This is in effect a familiar point, offering a neg-

² The edition of Jameson's essay used here is the publication in book form (1991). While the original publication in the *New Left Review* in 1984 had the greatest impact, the later version is preferred here because it corrects some mistakes in the original, such as misspelling and mislocating the Bonaventure Hotel, which is so central to his argument.

For discussions of the spatial aspects in Jameson's essay, see for example Philip Cooke's appreciative discussion, Mike Davis' sharp critique of Jameson's neglect of the urban environment, or Sharon Zukin, who, while acknowledging the importance of Jameson's essay for raising important issues, easily dismisses his discussion of the Bonaventure as "impressive though flawed" (432).

ative evaluation of the modern, highlighting the dominance of (abstract) discourses and programmers over the social and lived. Accordingly, Jameson gives architects like Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe as examples, and buildings like the Wells Fargo building in Los Angeles.

Jameson's discussion of postmodern space revolves around John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel on Bunker Hill in Los Angeles, which he presents as a "full-blown postmodern building" that "offers some very striking lessons about the originality of postmodernist space" (38). Jameson describes several aspects of the building. Firstly, he points out that, contrary to modernist utopias, the building is popular, "visited with enthusiasm by locals and tourists alike" (39), which is possible because the building contains shops as well as a hotel, mixing different functions geared towards different types of users. Jameson takes this point a step further, suggesting that the "Bonaventure aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city" (40), which means that the building acts as a substitute for the city in which it is situated. This totality of the building is underscored by the fact that while it has three entrances, none of them is clearly marked (e.g. by a traditional marquee), rejecting the functional identifiability (and hence reduction) as a particular type of building. In addition, the building's exterior "skin" consists of reflective glass, which "repels the city outside" and gives it "power over the Other," similar to the effect of wearing reflective sunglasses (42). At the same time, this reflective skin means that the hotel's exterior does not show the building itself, but rather its surroundings – which, combined with its multiple unmarked entrances, makes the "disjunction" (41) between the hotel and the surrounding city less radical than in the utopian move of modernist architecture in Jameson's view.³

With respect to the building's interior, Jameson stresses particularly the hotel's escalators and elevators, and the lobby. He presents the escalators and elevators as more than functional devices for movement in space; rather, they "replace movement but also, and above all, designate themselves as new reflexive signs and emblems of movement proper," replacing an older mode of movement (walking) by an autoreferential

3 One could, of course, make the reverse case with the same arguments. Particularly the interpretation of the building's reflective exterior is debatable, for such exteriors are by no means characteristic only of postmodern architecture, having featured in the steel-and-glass architecture of modernism as well, for example. However, the opposition between modernist and postmodernist architecture is not what is at stake in the present discussion.

“transportation machine” (42). Again, this is a familiar point when it comes to the postmodern: when the primacy of purposive instrumentality that characterized the modern is undone, there is no reinstatement of the symbolic (for there is nothing to symbolize) but rather a process of signification in which a sign cannot point to anything but itself. In other words, beyond the (de-emphasized) functionality of the escalators and elevators, there is only what Jameson labels autoreferentiality.

In contrast, while this interpretation of the escalators and elevators consists of definite assertions, Jameson is “at a loss” (42) when it comes to finding the terms in which to describe the lobby itself. “Given the absolute symmetry of the four towers, it is quite impossible to get your bearings in this lobby,” according to Jameson, so that “such space makes it impossible for us to use the language of volume or volumes any longer, since these are impossible to seize” (43). The difficulty in experiencing this space, or making sense of it, is complete and all-enveloping, leading to the assertion that “[y]ou are in this hyperspace up to your eyes and your body” (43). Jameson’s repeated use of word “impossible” is telling here. His point about the lobby is basically the familiar approach of the postmodern as the not-or-no-longer-modern. Hence, his self-acknowledged difficulty in finding the terms to discuss the space is perhaps more pertinent than his description of the space itself. The issue is not the possibility of talking about this space (for Jameson discusses the lobby at some length), but the inadequacy of a negative means of expression.

In this context, Jameson’s ultimate point about the Bonaventure is strikingly close to the ultimate experience of space in *Lot 49*. In discussing Portman’s hotel as a new type of space, Jameson’s main point is that “this latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (44). The experience of this “hyperspace” is almost identical to Oedipa’s experience after the phone call to San Francisco: unable to get her bearings and feeling isolated amidst an epistemologically impenetrable space that seems at the same time total (America) and non-distinct. The similarity between the two descriptions is even more pertinent here precisely because they relate to two different kinds of space: the interior of a building for Jameson and a city dissipating into the whole of America

in *Lot 49*. In both cases, the particularity of a specific space is not what characterizes it as postmodern – a programmatic autonomy that is only sustainable under the dominance of modern abstract space – but it is rather the way of coming to terms with space, as it emerges from the experience of space. It is in this light that the interpretation of the Bonaventure as a “total” space aspiring to function as a city must be seen; the hotel is not a substitution at all, but its mode of spatiality stands as a model for how postmodern urban space works. Accordingly, Jameson presents the hotel as a “mutation in space,” an instance of an abstract development, rather than as a particular (single) instance of a “mutated space.” In the end, his discussion of the Bonaventure serves to move beyond the architectural – to the spatial in general, or (more specifically relevant here) the urban. In other words, the similarity between Jameson and *Lot 49* on this point shows how spatiality is more important in the postmodern than the specifics of a particular space per se.

Therefore, Jameson’s point about the Bonaventure underscores the fact that Oedipa’s sensations at the end of the novel are notably characteristic of postmodernity. The sense of loss and isolation at the end of *Lot 49* – when all connections to the Tristero have been played out and Oedipa is left empty-handed – is not just the final stage in a narrative progression of events. The story of the novel portrays a gradual breakdown of an epistemological quest, in which the sense of non-location can be taken as a spatialization of the ultimate confounding of the detective plot. More importantly here, the spatial isolation at the end of the novel also completes the transition that began hopefully with the modernist vision of San Narciso to the experience of postmodern spatiality – a process already started by Oedipa’s actual entrance into the city. Hence, with Jameson’s discussion of the new space of the Bonaventure in mind – the “latest mutation in space” – one can see the “loss” of San Narciso’s uniqueness not as an endpoint (in spite of its position at the end of the novel), but rather as the entrance into postmodernity. While McHale posits *Lot 49* as teetering on the brink of becoming postmodernist – based on the fact that the question “ Shall I project a world?” remains a question and does not actually lead to a multiplicity of worlds – one can say that with respect to (urban) space the novel identifies the transition into a postmodern spatiality.

Yet while Jameson still relies primarily on negative terms to underscore the postmodernity of non-location, a critical reading of his essay points to two key issues through which it becomes possible to move beyond the negative, which also makes the immediate similarity between Jameson and Pynchon all the more pertinent: the focus on signification on the one hand, and the focus on the body (which will be addressed in depth in the following chapter) on the other.

Jameson's concern with signification and the space of the Bonaventure is apparent on several levels. First of all, his discussion in and of itself presents the hotel as a space that signifies, which accounts for his "being at a loss" in describing the lobby in the first place. Jameson does not seek a neutral description of the Bonaventure, but very deliberately (though not outspokenly) seeks meaning in the elements of the space and the space as a whole. This is clear, for example, in statements like "[h]anging streamers indeed suffuse this empty space in such a way as to distract systematically and deliberately from whatever form it might be supposed to have," (43) – where the operative word is "distract," showing that the interpretation hinges entirely on preconceived notions about space. Although he does not greatly elaborate on the conceptual limits of his interpretation, Jameson does (at least nominally) acknowledge that the position from which he speaks is one in which his "perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space [he has] called the space of high modernism" (38-9). In other words, his difficulty with what he labels a "mutation in space" is completely inherent in his approach; if the premise is that he is dealing with a new kind of space, Jameson has already acknowledged that he cannot present it as anything more than being not the same as the old. Hence, his "being at a loss" with respect to the Bonaventure lobby has little to do with the space at all, but it is rather characteristic of an attempt to force the hotel into a previous mode of signification that does not apply.

This leads to statements about the hotel's space that should not be taken at face value, for they are really more signs of the modernist frame of reference than characteristics of the space. The above-mentioned treatment of the elevators as "allegorical autoreferential devices" is such an example, upon which Jameson elaborates in a passage that is noticeably florid:

Yet escalator and elevator are also in this context dialectical opposites; and we may suggest that the glorious movement of the elevator gondola is also a dialectical compensation for this filled space of the atrium – it gives us the chance at a radically different, but complementary, spatial experience: that of rapidly shooting up through the ceiling and outside, along one of the four symmetrical towers, with the referent, Los Angeles itself, spread out breathtakingly and even alarmingly before us. But even this vertical movement is contained: the elevator lifts you to one of those revolving cocktail lounges, in which, seated, you are again passively rotated about and offered a contemplative spectacle of the city itself, now transformed into its own images by the glass windows through which you view it. (43)

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This passage explicitly links the upward movement of the elevators along the towers with the city of Los Angeles, but this is by no means unproblematic in Jameson's analysis. Apart from the fact that the hotel was posited before as a disjunction from the surrounding city, it is not clear what Los Angeles is the referent *of* here, or what the relation of this referent would be to the autoreferential elevators. Moreover, while it is also difficult to see how the city is transformed into an image of itself by viewing it through a window (because that would imply "postmodern windows" that produce self-referential images, or imply that glass windows have been postmodern all along), the last point in this paragraph is the familiar view of the city from above, as seen before in de Certeau or early on in *Lot 49*, which is prototypically a *modern* perspective.

In other words, Jameson's discussion here prominently foregrounds the subject as a knowing and interpreting entity, which is also how he frames his overall point about the "latest mutation" of space:

My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it, in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism. The newer architecture therefore – like many of the other cultural products I

have evoked in the preceding remarks – stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions. (38-9)

Jameson's proposition here is an interestingly problematic one. At the most immediate level, these claims can hardly be taken literally with reference to architectural space, for example. The implication would be that either Portman's design is more "evolved" than the capabilities of the architect himself, or that Jameson's evolution (and that of all other subjects) lags behind Portman's or his design – neither of which leads to any productive standpoint. In this sense, Jameson's argument here is also a reactionary claim, with reverberations of generational differences, speaking as a representative of a previous generation that is out of touch with contemporary reality. The implication would then simply be to wait until the subject (or a new generation) "catches up" with the object, making it a simple matter of time to let any difficulties resolve themselves. Hence, as the call to growing new organs also indicates, one is not to take these propositions literally or at face value.

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Instead, one can take Jameson's viewpoint as an attempt to defend the privileged position of the subject of modernity. Jameson may present "postmodern hyperspace" as further evolved than the subject, but he nevertheless clings to the primacy of the subject, maneuvering the subject into the role of the underdog, yet without relinquishing the position of the subject as the center of experience. In other words, one can take Jameson's proposition here as a reactionary defense of the modern subject in the guise of a critical appraisal of postmodern space.⁴

However, as with all surreptitiously reactionary claims, Jameson here also points to precisely the elements that allow one to transcend the reactionary – in two notable instances. The first lies in the "imperative to grow new organs." While this issue of bodies and space will be dealt with in greater detail later, it needs to be noted here that Jameson's point recalls (almost literally) and recasts Georg Simmel's famous essay

4 Likewise, though in a different context – of religion, the loss of the social bond, and the work of Daniel Bell – John O'Neill criticizes Jameson as "neo-modernist" in this respect (502). Similarly, in a related, more overarching perspective, Douglas Kellner points out that Jameson's view of postmodernism is founded on binary oppositions within a totalizing "Marxian Master Narrative" (262).

on the modern city, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903). In brief, Simmel’s argument is that the modern metropolis (e.g. Berlin or New York) engenders social and emotional distancing between people, and instead favors the intellectual and a blasé attitude; physical proximity in the urban masses goes hand in hand with great intellectual distance. This characteristic stems from the fact that in the metropolis one is continuously bombarded with external stimuli, against which the individual needs to protect itself. One of the terms in which Simmel presents this argument is by saying that one must develop “a protective organ for [oneself] against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it” (326).

98 Thus Jameson’s proposition seems to be an updated version of Simmel’s argument, with the distinction between the modern and the postmodern at stake rather than the distinction between the rural/traditional and the modern. However, there is a key difference in that Simmel’s argument, while speaking of defense mechanisms, is ultimately in favor of the modern. He acknowledges the loss of close interpersonal ties that were possible before, but also finds great freedom in the favoring of the intellectual in the metropolis. Hence, his point is explicitly a positive one, not mourning a loss but praising a new-found freedom. Jameson’s reference to “new organs,” therefore, reverberates with associations of benefits gained rather than possibilities lost.

Recalling this aspect of Simmel’s classic argument opens up Jameson’s discussion further and makes it possible to take his point further than he does himself. After all, in contrast to Simmel, Jameson halts at the negative opposition to the old, pointing to limitations and impossibilities. Hence, he constructs his discussion of the Bonaventure to affirm these limits. One can see this in a revealing instance that, tellingly, revolves around signification. While Jameson’s discussion is predicated upon the idea that space and spatial features act as signs, he objects to signage when that counteracts the sense of non-location:

Given the absolute symmetry of the four towers, it is quite impossible to get your bearings in this lobby; recently, color coding and directional signals have been added in a pitiful and revealing, rather desperate attempt to restore the coordinates of an older space. I will take as the most dramatic practical result of this spatial

mutation the notorious dilemma of the shopkeepers on the various balconies: it has been obvious, since the very opening of the hotel in 1977, that nobody could ever find any of these stores, and even if you located the appropriate boutique, you would be most unlikely to be as fortunate a second time; as a consequence, the commercial tenants are in despair and all the merchandise is marked down to bargain prices. (43-4)

Jameson's discussion is at its most value-laden precisely on a point that concerns signs, and this passage is problematic with respect to several key issues in his overall argument. Firstly, the description is not in line with the earlier claim about the hotel's popularity ("visited with enthusiasm by locals and tourists alike"), for if the shops were unfindable even, if not especially, in a second instance, the "enthusiasm" with which the hotel is visited would rely only on the novelty of a first experience – making the building a model for a theme park, not a substitute of a "total" space. On a practical level, Jameson's hyperbole here also either implies that the shopkeepers themselves would also have difficulty locating their own businesses, or that customers are somehow less skilled in locating shops than the poor shopkeepers. The qualification of the shopkeepers' difficulties as "obvious" is also puzzling here. It seems to acknowledge the reality of the problem, yet Jameson seems unwilling to take this problem seriously, by not identifying the problem as a flaw or shortcoming (despite its obviousness). But more importantly, the curious double move here acknowledges a problem inherent in the space of the hotel in the first place, while rejecting the solution to that problem on the grounds that the added signage undermines the important characteristics of the space. In other words, the "impossibilities" with which the subject is confronted in this space are taken to be constituent elements – any attempt to resolve them is a "revealing," "pitiful," and "desperate" return to modern spatiality. Hence, the interpretation of the hotel is geared entirely towards maintaining the subject in the position of confusion, faced with all sorts of impossibilities. Since this was already a construal in the first place, one could say that this position is here defended solely for the sake of presenting postmodern space as problematic.

If one veers away from the negative valuation here, one can see that Jameson identifies another key characteristic of postmodern space,

namely the prominence and importance of signage. In fact, this is a familiar feature of postmodern space that is foregrounded in *Learning from Las Vegas* by Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour – a work to which Jameson refers several times.⁵ To recall my brief discussion of this classic book in the introduction of the present study: the point of *Learning from Las Vegas* is to take the “vernacular” architecture epitomized in Las Vegas seriously, rather than dismiss it as too far removed from what could be called “high architecture.” Hence, *Learning from Las Vegas* fits in with a general effort to depart from the elitism of modernist architecture and the International Style, for example. One of the main points in which Las Vegas architecture notably differs is in the prominence and primacy of signage. To develop this issue, Venturi et al. distinguish between the model of “the duck” and the “decorated shed.” “The duck” is taken from an old hamburger drive-in called “The Duck” that was located in a building actually shaped like a duck. This architectural form embodies and exhibits the “meaning” or function of the building; in this sense, “the duck” is the vernacular equivalent of cathedrals and palaces, for example, whose forms themselves are integral to all other aspects of the building. In Las Vegas this older model is superseded by that of the “decorated shed,” basically a featureless box with a façade at the front. The shape of the building carries no meaning and performs no function in and of itself, but instead it is the façade that signifies the building’s function and identity. Hence, the determining character is not architectural form, but *signage* in the shape of a façade. In an urban structure designed for the automobile, the façade is also a sign visible from the road, which lines up with the signs of the traffic system. The model of the “decorated shed” represents a spatial system in which one is guided, in a private automobile, by traffic signs, billboards, and other (neon) signs to the desired destination, marked by a (neon) façade, which itself also functions as a homing beacon once the individual steps out of the private car onto a desolate parking lot. In other words, signage is the key and dominant feature of this type of space.

While this is a familiar type of space, and a notably different type of

⁵ Jameson refers to *Learning from Las Vegas* several times as a key text on postmodern architecture (e.g. in his discussion of Frank Gehry’s house in a later chapter), but he introduces the Bonaventure as “in many ways uncharacteristic of that postmodern architecture whose principal proponents are Robert Venturi, Charles Moore, Michael Graves, and ... Frank Gehry” (38). Framing Portman’s building in this way indeed downplays the importance of signage.

space compared to the models and practices of modernist architecture and urban planning, this is clearly not the kind of space Jameson takes into account in his discussion of Portman's hotel as a model of postmodern space. In fact, Jameson does not take the automobile or urban infrastructure into account at all.⁶ Although the decorated shed of Las Vegas and the Bonaventure of course do not vie for a position as sole or primary model for postmodern space, in rejecting the prominent role of signage in his discussion of the hotel, Jameson also disregards the complementarity of these two models.

For apart from resolving a problematic limitation in the discussion of the Bonaventure, highlighting the prominence of signage, as "learned from Las Vegas," also lends further aptitude of Jameson's point about postmodern space (i.e. as a distinct mode of spatiality) for understanding space in *Lot 49*. After all, the experience of spatiality is very similar, but the automobile-oriented urban space of San Narciso resembles the "vernacular" of Las Vegas far more than it does the Bonaventure hotel – as can be seen in the ground-level view of San Narciso upon Oedipa's arrival already cited above, after which she arrives at the motel where she will be staying throughout the novel, marked by a "representation in painted sheet metal of a nymph holding a white blossom towered thirty feet into the air; the sign, lit up despite the sun, said 'Echo Courts'" (16). The city of San Narciso, where things can be located simply "over by the freeway," is therefore spatially very much akin to Las Vegas.

In fact, signage is a key aspect of space in *Lot 49*. Apart from the obvious framing of San Narciso in terms of signification in Oedipa's arrival, this is most apparent in the ubiquity of the symbol of the Tristero, the muted post horn. Oedipa's encounters with this symbol range from stamps to bathroom walls to a reference in a seventeenth century play, for example. More importantly, though, this symbol is also a particularly *spatialized* sign, as becomes very clear in the excursion to the Bay Area.

6 In this respect Jameson's discussion of postmodern space is highly traditional, focusing on a single building, disregarding spatial usage by actual people, and also viewing it in an atemporal framework – in short, putting primacy on the design of the space alone (Lefebvre's dominance of abstract space), in effect an essentialist move focusing on the moment right before the first opening (without yet being "contaminated" by actual usage). Jameson's perspective thus seems grounded in the logic of "the duck," which fits in well with his modern(ist) framework (not that signage per se is exclusive to postmodern space, but the disregarding of the vernacular of Las Vegas architecture, especially as model for a shift in logic and "dominant" – to recall McHale's term – is one aspect of the reductionism that is part of a modern perspective). This conventional mode of understanding buildings is also the background for Jameson's rejection of added signage in the Bonaventure.

Again, on this point also see Davis' critique of Jameson's neglect of the larger urban setting in which the Bonaventure is situated.

As soon as Oedipa's initial errands in Berkeley turn up little more than dead ends, she decides to drift through San Francisco at night. She seeks to use this shift to a more "conventional," more modern urban environment precisely for the purpose of getting away from the Tristero, which dominated the Southern Californian setting of San Narciso. However, it becomes clear already at the start of this *Walpurgisnacht* section of the novel that the Tristero also saturates this different urban environment:

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She had only to drift tonight, at random, and watch nothing happen, to be convinced it was purely nervous, a little something for her shrink to fix. She got off the freeway at North Beach, drove around, parked finally in a steep side-street among warehouses. Then walked along Broadway, into the first crowds of evening.

But it took her no more than an hour to catch sight of a muted post horn. She was moseying along a street full of ageing boys in Roos Atkins suits when she collided with a gang of guided tourists come rowdy-dowing out of a Volkswagen bus, on route to take in a few San Francisco night spots. "Let me lay this on you," a voice spoke into her ear, "because I just left," and she found being deftly pinned outboard of one breast this big cerise ID badge, reading HI! MY NAME IS Arnold Snarb! AND I'M LOOKIN' FOR A GOOD TIME! Oedipa glanced around and saw a cherubic face vanishing with a wink in among natural shoulders and striped shirts, and away went Arnold Snarb, looking for a better time. (75-6)

Along with the tourists, Oedipa is swept into a gay bar where she sees the post horn as pin worn by the Anonymous Inamorato, whom she telephones at the end of the novel in the episode already mentioned above. After this first encounter, she ventures into "the infected city" (80) and there runs into the symbol of the muted post horn at every turn. She encounters the sign as used by children for a game like hopscotch, as a tattoo, or among Chinese characters in a herbalist's shop window in Chinatown, for example. On her nightly tour Oedipa runs into all manner of people outside of mainstream society, either rejected or alienated, and finds the post horn to absolutely saturate the city: "Decorating each alienation, each species of withdrawal, as cufflink, decal, aimless doodling, there was somehow always the post horn" (85).

The impact of the abundance of post horns, however, lies not just in the mere presence of the sign. The episode is unsettling not because of the unusual encounters with unusual people, but more because of the capacity of the symbol to (re)signify the urban spaces as belonging to the system Oedipa dubbed the Tristero. As before, the modernist foundations of Oedipa's detective quest, which before were attached to her initial view of San Narciso, also form the (conceptual) point of departure for the episode in San Francisco:

The city was hers, as, made up and sleeked so with the customary words and images (cosmopolitan, culture, cable cars) it had not been before: she had safe-passage tonight to its far blood's branchings, be they capillaries too small for more than peering into, or vessels mashed together in shameless municipal hickeys, out on the skin for all but tourists to see. Nothing of the night's could touch her; nothing did. The repetition of symbols was to be enough, without trauma as well perhaps to attenuate it or even jar it altogether loose from her memory. *She was meant to remember.* ... She tested it, shivering: I am meant to remember. Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike 'clues' were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night. (81, emphasis in the original)

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Oedipa here identifies San Francisco as a modern metropolis, a cosmopolitan seat of culture, this one particularly marked by the symbol of the cable car (which might as well be substituted for the Statue of Liberty or the Eiffel Tower to designate another metropolis). She also acknowledges the "direct, epileptic Word" (or logos, one might say) as her epistemological anchor point. Hence, the frame of reference here – although she identifies it as lost – is built on knowable and legible "master signifiers." By extension, Oedipa takes the multitude of post horns in the city as "clues" in her detective quest and she hopes they will act as a substitute for her lost epistemological framework. Unsurprisingly, since this would constitute a replacement of one modernist framework for another based on the same model, the plethora of post horns does

not form a set of clues at all, but presents an overload of signification. At the end of the nightly tour of the city, exhausted, Oedipa still places her experience within the framework of the detective story: “But the private eye sooner or later has to get beat up on. This night’s profusion of post horns, this malignant, deliberate replication, was their way of beating up” (85). Within the novel as a whole, however, one can see that Oedipa here clings to the detective idiom in vain (for the detective will not solve the case after being beat up on), reinforced by the uncertain “their” in this passage, which has no direct antecedent but refers to the presupposed “they” behind the Tristero.

104 The effect of the incessant recurrence of the post horn amounts to an overdose of signs, which recalls the Simmelian stimulus overload, though there is a marked difference. Simmel discusses a bombardment of different stimuli in the modern city, whereas Oedipa is bombarded with the same sign all over San Francisco. For Oedipa the overload consists not of a multitude of different impulses, but of a persistent and significant difference between the model of signage in space that she encounters and the (modernist) framework for space and signification with which she entered the city, with the (reductionist) promise of patterns and legible structures. In other words, it is not the sign itself, but rather the model for signage in space – the potential of a sign to determine the meaning or usage of a space, rather than the strictly spatial/material aspects of urban space. The primacy of signage, the model of the “decorated shed” associated at first only with the landscape of Southern California, undoes the perception of and presumptions about the more familiar urban space of San Francisco. Hence, it is not so much the sign, but the model of signage that has “infected” the city and that makes the episode so unsettling for her.

This repetition, against the background of the “they” behind the Tristero, also allows one to see the recurring sign of the post horn in this episode as a spatialized instance of the novel’s concern with paranoia. While *Lot 49* deals with paranoia in a number of a guises – from Miles’ band the Paranoids to Dr. Hilarius’ choice for “relative paranoia, where at least I know who I am and who the others are” (94) – for the present concerns the most important point is the way in which the novel treats paranoia not so much as a psychological pathology, but as a (semiotic)

regime or paradigm.⁷ As Leo Bersani argues (about Pynchon in light of *Gravity's Rainbow*, but many of his points apply equally to *Lot 49*), paranoia is based on a (preconceived) idea of a “truth” or “real” of which the world, as encountered by the paranoid, is a deceitful repetition; “[t]he paranoid sees the visible as a simulated double of the real; it deceptively repeats the real” (108), because the world displays but never matches the preconceived idea of “truth” or the “real.” Therefore, as a system for engaging the world, “[p]aranoia repeats phenomena as design” (102). The repetition of the post horn in San Francisco can thus also be seen as not so much a property of the urban space that could be “objectively” established, but rather as characteristic of an experience of urban space that is marked by a paranoid world view.⁸

The problem for Oedipa, evident in her feeling of being beat up on, is that the notion of “truth” underlying this paranoid view is aligned with the modern epistemological framework that underlies her entire detective quest. Rather than being fully autonomous and finding its genesis solely in the paranoid subject – a perspective on paranoia beyond that of a problematic disorder, as Bersani’s with respect to *Gravity's Rainbow* – Oedipa’s paranoia is tied to a modernist epistemology that already links the position of the subject to “true” knowledge of the world. The repetition of the post horn thus confronts Oedipa with her desire (as a detective) to see clues and hidden meaning behind the visible, yet her frustration also indicates precisely that she is *not* in the “orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia” (126); the inaccessibility of that hidden meaning only *suggests* the world as repetition of a paranoid truth, but her modern epistemological anchoring renders this world view inadequate for her. Paranoia is a temptation, a paradoxical possibility to salvage some of

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7 For a thorough inventory of the many ways in which *Lot 49* deals with the theme of paranoia, see John Johnston’s article “Towards the Schizo-Text: Paranoia as Semiotic Regime in *The Crying of Lot 49*.” For a discussion of paranoia in *Lot 49* in a more conventional sense, in relation to Orwell’s Big Brother, see Aaron S. Rosefeld’s “The ‘Scanty’ Plot: Orwell, Pynchon, and the Poetics of Paranoia.” For an insightful critique of Jameson’s approach of postmodernism and cognitive mapping (and his totalizing theory and reliance on “Marxist science”) through a reading of Pynchon, by drawing on the ideas of paranoia and the postmodern sublime, see Jon Simons’ “Postmodern Paranoia? Pynchon and Jameson.”

8 Building on *Lot 49* and the work of Don DeLillo, as well as Immanuel Wallerstein’s world systems theory, Emily Apter develops an idea of paranoia as paradigm for the “oneworldedness” of the contemporary world. This oneworldedness “imagines the planet as subject to ‘the system’” and “fails the optimists (left or right) by endorsing the idea that there are legitimate reasons to be paranoid in a world bent on civilizational self-destruction” (370). Hence, this oneworldedness counters positive utopian visions (e.g. Jameson’s ultimately Marxist utopian view), as well as pluralist conceptions. On this last note, Apter’s view would contradict McHale’s view of the postmodern as characterized by a plurality of worlds. One could say that Apter’s oneworldedness, “allowing the unimpeded flows of capital, information, and language” (370), subsumes plurality (as in McHale’s approach) in a single world. However, full resolution of the question of plurality or oneworldedness is beyond the scope of the present study.

her defunct modern epistemology (evident in the binary oppositions in which she tends to frame paranoia), but hence never a realistic option for her. One could therefore see the repetition of the sign of the Tristero in San Francisco as battleground for the “hieroglyphic” meaning behind the city streets, as identified upon first viewing San Narciso and again at the end – “Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth” (125). Moreover, the paranoid aspect of this episode highlights the involvement of the subject in the process of signification; hence this paranoia underscores not only the importance of signage in postmodern spatiality, but also the implication (if not necessity) of the subject in space too. Therefore urban space and signage are the primary domains where the novel’s transition from modernity to postmodernity takes place here.

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Therefore, the effect of signage in this episode adds further complexity to postmodern space and non-location in *Lot 49*. Oedipa’s feeling of being “beaten up” at the end of this episode prefigures her sense of non-location at the end of the novel. The connection between the two experiences of urban space underscores that (a different model for) signage is lacking as a key factor in Jameson’s account of postmodern space. In effect, his “perceptual habits” formed in modernism correspond to Oedipa’s view of San Francisco – a modern metropolis typified by cable cars. Yet while Jameson vaguely refers to a need to grow a new organ to come to terms with postmodern space, *Lot 49* is more specific in pointing out a key area of difference, namely the different role of signage in urban space.

Non-location, Augé’s non-places, and the prominence of the sign

The role of signage in postmodern space and the way signage figures in the experience of non-location can be further specified by drawing on Marc Augé’s concept of non-places (“non-lieux” in the original French), developed in his *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995). Although this is yet again a term formulated negatively (at first sight), the way in which Augé constructs the concept of non-places further opens up the issue of non-location in *Lot 49*.

The context within which Augé develops this idea is the anthropological study of contemporary France, as a change from anthropological

studies of non-Western cultures (West-African in Augé's case). He presents contemporary France as being in a situation of "supermodernity," which is typified by excess of time and of space, made possible through technological developments (29-31) and amounting to a description familiar in different contexts as time-space compression (e.g. Harvey). Augé adds an important nuance to this familiar account in his positioning of supermodernity, which also illustrates his approach of positive and negative definition: "We could say of supermodernity that it is the face of a coin whose obverse represents postmodernity: the positive of a negative. From the viewpoint of supermodernity, the difficulty of thinking about time stems from the overabundance of events in the contemporary world, not from the collapse of an idea of progress which – at least in the caricatured forms that make its dismissal so very easy – has been in a bad way for a long time" (30). While Augé's move here might seem only a matter of semantics, it does set the stage for the rest of his ideas. He acknowledges the "bad reputation" of the postmodern here – as being little more than a facile set of ideas that mark "the end of..." – and rather than dismissing this view, he focuses on a positive approach of the same situation. The semantic shift from "post" to "super" here indicates an approach that does not dismiss, but takes on board the difficulties he seeks to explore – and is in that sense akin to Barthelme's approach in "Not-Knowing," for example. While the present study disregards the semantics of this shift to "super-" (foregrounding the positive view of postmodernity already), the attitude it expresses with respect to postmodernity is key in making sense of postmodern space.

With this view of the contemporary situation of supermodernity, Augé explores the "hypothesis ... that supermodernity produces non-places" (78). He defines non-place in opposition to what he terms "anthropological place," which is a "concrete and symbolic construction of space" (51) of "identity, of relations and of history" (52). In this type of space, cultural identities, interpersonal and socio-economic/political relationships, and histories (whether local, regional, of national) are inscribed in material forms that guide practical usage, which in turn reinforces these social formations and their inscription. One could think of a traditional marketplace, a town square with a town hall, monuments, or religious structures like churches or temples, all with accompanying symbols and signs that indicate the ties between different people and of

people to this type of place. Augé readily acknowledges the limitations of this idea of place: “Of course, the intellectual status of anthropological place is ambiguous. It is only the idea, partially materialized, that the inhabitants have of their relations with the territory, with their families and with others. This idea may be partial or mythologized. It varies with the individual’s point of view and position in society” (56). Nevertheless, while this notion of anthropological place may only be an ideal-type, Augé’s point is to indicate a type of space which is primarily *relational*, embodying and engendering (traditional) cultural formations and (interpersonal) ties.

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This view of anthropological place is what Augé defines his idea of non-places against: “If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (77-8). However, this negative opposition only accounts for the term “non-place” itself. In non-places the relationship to anthropological place is not negated or denied, nor should one be “tempted to contrast the symbolized space of place with the non-symbolized space of non-place” (82). Augé stresses that neither (anthropological) place nor non-place exist in “pure form,” but that they should be seen as “opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten” (79). Hence, one must not see this distinction between place and non-place in the one-dimensional terms which the labels themselves suggest (consisting either of something or its absence); instead, one must see the distinction as consisting of two “dimensions” between which there is some fluidity and overlap. The continuity is illustrated, for example, in the relationship between already existing (historical and anthropological) places and non-place, in which non-places “do not integrate the earlier place: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of ‘places of memory’, and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position” (78). Rather than annul or negate, non-place acknowledges and reassigns anthropological place. Hence, Augé’s aim is not to construct an absolutely waterproof system of definitions in a descriptive or prescriptive sense; his terms are concep-

tual tools to make sense of contemporary spaces.⁹

By discussing several types of actual space that he considers exemplary of non-place, Augé makes his idea of non-place more concrete and develops it further. The types of spaces he has in mind are airport lounges, freeways (specifically the French *autoroutes*), and supermarkets, for example. Portman's Bonaventure would also qualify as a non-place, but Augé is much more specific in discussing this new type of space, stressing two aspects for considering non-place:

the word 'non-place' designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces. Although the two sets of relations overlap to a large extent, and in any case officially (individuals travel, make purchases, relax), they are still not confused with one another; for non-places mediate a whole mass of relations, with the self and with others, which are only indirectly connected with their purposes. As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality. (94)

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Non-places are characterized by a purposive program in which individuals engage with that program on a solitary basis, leaving interpersonal and social ties largely irrelevant. Hence, in Lefebvre's terminology the non-places of supermodernity are clearly conceived and abstract spaces, spatial materializations of a discursive program geared towards instrumentality and a concomitant generic individual subject.

Augé's valuation of these non-places, however, is not at all damning like Lefebvre's, and he also offers a much more detailed framework for understanding them. Augé points particularly to the discursive nature of their purposive/programmatic dimension, which is apparent both in "the words and notions that enable us to describe them" (107) as well as in those spaces themselves. With respect to the former, one can see how understanding non-places in terms of "transit" and "interchange" differs from seeing places in terms of "dwelling" and "crossroads," for example.

⁹ Peter Merriman makes a similar point in his study of the British M1 motorway, where he points out that the clarity with which Augé presents the non-place (particularly in opposition to anthropological place) disregards some nuances and complications that arise when using the concept to discuss an actual non-place like the M1.

110 Non-places have their own vocabulary for being discussed, which – one could say – is tied in with the discourses of and in those spaces themselves. After all, signage is key in conveying the ends of these purposive spaces, especially since the goals are not achieved or indicated by any shared or social knowledge (or *savoir-faire*) but need to be communicated to each individual in isolation. As Augé underscores, “[t]he link between individuals and their surroundings in the space of non-place is established through the mediation of words, or even texts” (94). While the idea of a word conjuring up an image of a place – like “Tahiti” for people who have never been to Tahiti, for example – is already familiar, “the real non-places of supermodernity ... have the peculiarity that they are defined partly by the words and texts they offer us: their ‘instructions for use’, which may be prescriptive (‘Take the right-hand lane’), prohibitive (‘No smoking’) or informative (‘You are now entering the Beaujolais region’)” (96). In other words, Augé accords a very prominent role to signage in the space of non-places (for while he speaks of “words” here, he also includes other types of signs, like ideograms and traffic symbols).

As with the necessary supplication of Jameson’s view of postmodern hyperspace with Venturi’s lessons from Las Vegas, Augé’s account underscores the importance of signage in postmodern spaces and also supports the reading of the San Francisco episode in *Lot 49* above. The symbol of the post horn itself signifies the Tristero system – which is already unsettling enough for Oedipa – but what makes the symbol so vexing in this episode is that it is the marker of the model of signage that belongs to non-place, a purposive system in which signs work to convey goals to a solitary individual, rather than aggregate to a larger understandable “narrative” guided by a “master signifier” – something that is not commensurable with the (modern) epistemological framework with which Oedipa set out in the beginning. The problem that this poses is reinforced by an additional property of non-place, which Augé illustrates with the example of the motorway. Large signs are placed alongside the motorway, as it cuts through the landscape, to indicate details in that very landscape (e.g. a famous hill) or a picturesque village, for example, both of which are nominally nearby yet completely removed from the road itself. Hence, as Augé notes, “[m]otorway travel is thus doubly remarkable: it avoids, for functional reasons, all the principal places to which it takes us; and it makes comments on them” (97). The sign in

non-place thus has the function of representing something which it purposefully keeps at a distance. This function of the sign also runs counter to the (modern) purpose of Oedipa's detective quest.

In addition to the signs which indicate the purpose or details of a particular non-place (such as "Frozen Foods" in the aisle of a supermarket, or the example of "You are now entering the Beaujolais region"), there are also signs which more immediately direct the interaction between an individual and the space. These are what Augé labeled the "instructions for use" (which also eliminate and pre-empt socially constructed and transmitted knowledge, or *savoir-faire*). One of Augé's examples here is the ATM machine, which directs usage through messages like "Please withdraw your card" and "Thank you for your custom" (100). Such messages "are addressed simultaneously and indiscriminately to each and any of us: they fabricate the 'average man', defined as the user of the road, retail or banking system" (100). On top of generalizing, such signs may also individualize this 'average man', for example in the case of a flashing sign to indicate an individual driver is speeding. These signs are in effect the material implements of Lefebvre's abstract space that generate a generalized subject. Hence, they do not only structure spatial usage (in the form of queuing and keeping distance in the case of the ATM, for example), but they also form spatial "interfaces" between the individual and larger (abstract) systems (e.g. the money economy, or the traffic system) that mediate the interaction between individuals within that non-place.

This function of signage in non-place is of particular relevance to space in *Lot 49*. Each of the signs referring to the Tristero – the post horn, or the letters W.A.S.T.E. – is not just a sign pointing to some renegade postal system, but each also carries an instruction for using the system. This begins already with the introduction to the system in the deliberately misspelled message on the envelope of Mucho's first letter to Oedipa, "report all obscene mail to your postmaster," and also applies to the message D.E.A.T.H. (Don't Ever Antagonize The Horn), for example. In this light the most illustrative message, and one of the most frustrating for Oedipa, is the one accompanying the post horn in a laundromat, "if you know what this means... you know where to find out more" (84), which is simultaneously an imperative for use of the system and a perfect exclusionary statement. In addition, and perhaps most

importantly, the Tristero is a particularly spatial system – of mailboxes, postal carriers, and their routes – that consists of non-places. Oedipa’s tail job of a W.A.S.T.E. carrier underscores the spatiality of the system, and also the non-places that this system is made up of: desolate places with trash can mailboxes and anonymous bus rides. What she sees in action is a spatial system with a purpose, without any social dimension to it, and also a system whose purposive use makes the urban space lose its distinctiveness:

112 They rode over the bridge and into the great empty glare of the Oakland afternoon. The landscape lost all variety. The carrier got off in a neighborhood Oedipa couldn’t identify. She followed him for hours along streets whose names she never knew, across arterials that even with the afternoon’s lull nearly murdered her, into slums and out, up long hillsides jammed solid with two- or three-bedroom houses, all their windows giving blankly back only the sun. (90)

In effect, Oedipa’s experience here is one of non-place: her tour is guided by a functional purpose, the urban space is devoid of any sociality, and thereby the city also loses any distinctiveness beyond this purposive use of space. One could even say that the W.A.S.T.E./Tristero system, as a system like the banking or traffic system, is predicated upon non-place in the same way as the “mainstream” systems for which it acts as an alternative. The irony is then that this system with the purpose of connecting individuals isolated from mainstream society functions as a “system of non-place,” which inherently counteracts the social, and generalizes the individual. Hence, in a larger perspective one could also say that the Tristero and its signs are representations of the idea of non-place, as a key characteristic of postmodern urban space. In this light, Oedipa’s ultimate experience of non-location – exemplary of the experience of postmodern space – occurs when she is forced to accept that the Tristero system is assumed in the larger system(s) of post/supermodern non-place that make up America.

In addition to signage, Augé also highlights mechanisms of individuation as characteristic of non-place. As mentioned above, the relationship of an individual to non-place is both purposive and contractual. In other words, engaging the (discursive) program that underlies the purpose of

a non-place requires some sort of sign and guarantee that warrants the individual's position in non-place. As Augé puts it, “[a]lone, but one of many, the user of a non-place is in contractual relations with it (or with the powers that govern it). He is reminded when necessary, that the contract exists” (101). In the example of the ATM, which individualizes its users through the signs it displays, the “contract” that mediates the individual and the use of non-place is the bank account, with the bank card as the material signifier of that contract. In transit, the same applies to having a ticket or passport as a sign that one is allowed to be in a particular space, sometimes reinforced by signs saying “one must be in possession of a valid ticket to...”. Augé points out that while a ticket or passport holds the individual's name, “[t]he contract always relates to the individual identity of the contracting party” (101). The ticket will always bear the identity of the non-place to which it allows access, reducing the individual to the “average man” in non-place with the “shared identity of passengers, customers or Sunday drivers” (101). Furthermore, identity checks and confirmations of the “contract” are a precondition for engaging non-place; one may not enter without showing a passport, ticket, or bank card. Hence, “the passenger accedes to his anonymity only when he has given proof of his identity; when he has countersigned (so to speak) the contract... There will be no individualization (no right to anonymity) without identity checks” (102). Although some enjoyment is to be drawn from this paradoxical property of non-place – “the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing” (103) – Augé's main point here is that “[t]he space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude” (103).

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The same principle – of the precondition of identification for identity-less individualization in non-place – is also at work in *Lot 49*. As mentioned above, on Oedipa's visit to the Yoyodyne plant, for example, she is given a visitor's badge upon entering and after attending a meeting, she ventures into the plant:

Somehow Oedipa got lost. One minute she was gazing at a mockup of a space capsule, safely surrounded by old, somnolent men; the next, alone in a great, fluorescent murmur of office activity. As far as she could see in any direction it was white or pastel: men's shirts, papers, drawing boards. All she could think of was to put on her

shades for all this light, and wait for somebody to rescue her. But nobody noticed. She began to wander aisles among light blue desks, turning a corner now and then. Heads came up at the sound of her heels, engineers stared until she'd passed, but nobody spoke to her. (58)

114 The procedure here is that of non-place: an identity-check at the entrance gives access to an impersonal space, in which a functionally anonymous individual's relations are geared towards the purpose of that space. However, since this passage concerns a factory, this is not an unfamiliar spatial organization. More importantly, though, the same aspect of non-place can also be seen in the San Francisco episode, where its workings are foregrounded and also more pertinent. Identification is also the precondition for Oedipa's episode in San Francisco; while it is not her own identity, her episode begins with her receiving a name tag designating her as Arnold Snarb. She is then herded into a gay bar "along with other badged citizens" (76) where she encounters the member of the Inamorati Anonymous, after which she ventures into the city and realizes that she has "safe-passage to its far blood's branchings" (81). The start of the whole episode follows the procedure of the identity-check for access to non-place. It is not the misidentification as Arnold Snarb that provides Oedipa with the anonymity needed for her tour of the non-place of the city, but rather the fact that she is identified itself – if not simply the *act* of being identified. Hence, the point of her exploration of the modern metropolis of the cable car is thus already undercut from the beginning: by adopting the generic "identity" of the subject in non-place, what she finds in the city is the solitude and similitude that are the hallmarks of non-place. Instead of a detective gathering clues, she is simply one isolated individual unable to connect with others in the same space. What little connection she can establish is mediated by the post horn, the sign that marks the space as non-place.

This issue of identification as precondition for anonymity is immediately driven home in the convolutions of Oedipa's first encounter. Once anonymous, the first person she meets is the member of the Inamorati Anonymous, whose identity is marked by the post horn as a pin in his lapel, paralleling Oedipa's badge. His namelessness, backed up by the rules of the IA, also affirms the anonymity of the non-place that Oedipa

has entered. Apart from taking the IA's name literally, this programmatic anonymity also skews the principles of the organization upon which the IA is modeled – the AA, where speaking at meetings is often started by stating one's name – by acknowledging the status of outcast or reject from mainstream society, but by precluding meetings and the formation of a community, which in turn aligns the IA with the logic of non-place as well.

It also needs to be pointed out that the setting for this encounter is a gay bar, a space for the first marginalized group of the evening and a space for cruising – based on anonymity yet geared towards (sexual) contact with others. As a space that fosters anonymity, the bar is itself already a non-place, for the functional purpose of facilitating sexual intercourse. Yet while the sexual nature of the space is fully acknowledged, it is at the same time counteracted by the encounter with a man who has forsworn all forms of love (though that does leave the unanswerable question of why he is there in the first place) and by a group of tourists being herded into the bar. As Mark Hawthorne remarks, “[t]he movement of tourists into the bar defines heterosexual curiosity about those whom sexual polarity has marginalized and, by treating this curiosity as ‘normal,’ blurs the distinctions that position straight sexuality over and ‘deviance’ from it” (66). The presence of tourists simultaneously affirms and counters the gay bar as space of outsiders based on sexual marginalization. However, these very counteractions mark the bar as a non-place, the first of a night of non-places marked by the sign of the post horn.

Lastly, in addition to signage and individualization, Augé highlights a third characteristic of non-place that is relevant for postmodern space and the space in *Lot 49* – namely the importance of travel. While anthropological place is characterized by relations of the people to the space itself and to each other, the traveler by definition notably lacks relations to the place he is in; hence, a traveler is always in a place *as traveler*. Conversely, the place that a traveler inhabits is a traveler's place, which is not characterized by (social) relations to the space, or in other words a non-place. Hence, Augé argues that “[t]he traveler's space may thus be the archetype of *non-place*” (86, emphasis in the original). Nevertheless, the traveler (especially in the guise of the tourist) does engage with space by *visiting* it and looking at the space with a traveler's gaze. In Augé's view, therefore, travel “constructs a fictional relationship between

gaze and landscape” (86). The relationship between the traveler and space is not inherent in the space itself, but is generated through the act of travel, and is therefore primarily dependent upon the traveler.¹⁰ Accordingly, Augé suggests that it is as if “the position of the spectator were the essence of the spectacle, as if basically the spectator in the position of a spectator were his own spectacle” (86). One can see that in contemporary images of tourism (e.g. in leaflets), but also in holiday snapshots, the tourist himself often takes center stage, for example. Hence, it is not only the spatial characteristics space (signage, construction, etc.) that constitute a non-place, but also the usage of a space. Simply put, it is not only the tourist trap that is a non-place of tourism, but any space visited by a tourist is a non-place (at least for the tourist) simply by his or her very being there.

116

This aspect of Augé’s idea of non-place places Oedipa’s nightly tour of San Francisco in a slightly different light. It is obvious that the episode starts by Oedipa adopting the position of the tourist Arnold Snarb, joining a group of fellow travelers on a guided visit of a gay bar (adding yet another “layer” of non-place to that bar). However, after she leaves and moves deeper into the city, the terms in which her tour is framed are worth repeating here:

The city was hers, as, made up and sleeked so with the customary words and images (cosmopolitan, culture, cable cars) it had not been before: she had safe-passage tonight to its far blood’s branchings, be they capillaries too small for more than peering into, or vessels mashed together in shameless municipal hickeys, out on the skin *for all but tourists to see*. (81, emphasis added)

Oedipa purportedly has greater access to the city, being able to see things on the surface of urban space that tourists cannot – presumably because of their predetermined mode of looking (the tourist’s gaze), which is represented in the herd of tourists in the gay bar. However, as argued above, Oedipa’s experience of the city at night is not at all that

¹⁰ Augé discusses this prominence of the travel in the context of Chateaubriand’s 19th-century travel writing, and hence against a background that does not (yet) feature spaces designed particularly for tourists. While this places the discussion in an “ideal” and “lost” context, the prominence of travel in non-place is increased even more when taking contemporary tourism into account.

of a detective uncovering an increasing amount of information, but that of non-place – specifically the tourist’s non-place, as marked by Oedipa’s adoption of the non-place non-identity as the tourist Arnold Snarb. As a result, while she imagines herself a detached observer that night, she is less far “removed” from the scenes she witnesses than she thinks; as a tourist she is a determining factor in what she sees, as opposed to the (modern) detective who stumbles upon bits of information.

All in all, on her nightly tour of San Francisco Oedipa engages the Tristero as a particularly spatialized system of non-place, and concomitantly her experience is that of the user of non-place as well. Even though Oedipa engages the city in the hope of “returning” to a more familiar mode of spatiality, her experience there does not offer relief but instead underscores that recourse to modern spatiality is not a viable option (in that respect already contradicting Jameson’s “neo-modernism”). The episode affirms that postmodernity and non-place are properties of the contemporary city. Moreover, the San Francisco episode shows how her (desired) position of the detective, of the observing subject, is not possible anymore; instead Oedipa is an onlooker, a tourist, occupying a position implicit in the contemporary city and thus fully complicit with the non-place of postmodernity. Hence, this part of *Lot 49* illustrates that postmodern space is not so much characterized by what Jameson describes as “a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject.” Instead, especially when taking into account the importance of signage and its mediating function between non-place and its users, *Lot 49* in that respect shows that the “mutation” into postmodern space goes hand in hand with a distinct difference for the individual in urban space.¹¹

117

11 Although not immediately pertinent to the further understanding of postmodern urban space as in *Lot 49*, it is worth noting that a view of space that in a way combines the approaches of Jameson and Augé can be found in Siegfried Kracauer’s essay “The Hotel Lobby” (originally written in 1922-25 as part of his study of the detective novel). Contrasting it to the congregation in a church, Kracauer (who had been a student of Simmel’s) views the hotel lobby as “the space of unrelatedness” where “the change of environment does not leave purposive activity behind, but brackets it for the sake of a freedom that can only refer to itself and therefore sinks into relaxation and indifference” (179). In addition, individuals in this space “can vanish into an undetermined void, helplessly reduced to a ‘member of society as such’ who stands superfluously off to the side” (179), leaving them “deprived of individuality, since their anonymity no longer serves any purpose other than meaningless movement along the paths of convention” (182-3). In taking the hotel lobby as paradigmatic and in presenting it as a space of unrelatedness that strips away individuality, there are obvious parallels to Jameson and Augé. However, Kracauer’s critical perspective on the lobby focuses on the negative, and the comparison to the church bears more than a trace of nostalgia, which for the purposes of the present study limits the usefulness of Kracauer’s analysis. For further discussion of Kracauer’s work in relation to space and particularly architecture, see Anthony Vidler’s *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (2000).

Watts, L.A., and the generic subject of non-place

Augé's analysis does not only break away from a negative approach (of "post- = no longer") so that non-place can be defined on its own terms as a characteristic of postmodern space, but his approach also highlights the interplay between space (whether anthropological place or non-place) and the subject in space. With the figure of the traveler/tourist as illustrative model of a subject without any specificity in relation to the surrounding space, non-place is oriented towards a generic subject, or produces the "average man" in Augé's words.

118 In *Lot 49* Oedipa is confronted, almost at every turn, with the necessity of discarding the specifics of her identity and of adopting the position of the generic subject. For example, her first encounter in San Narciso already highlights the need to shed the specifics of her own identity. For the game of "Strip Botticelli" she puts on all her clothes at once, which one could take as a maximization of identity in order to be stripped away entirely, and she experiences "a moment of nearly pure terror" (27) because she cannot find her image in the mirror (because it was shattered by a broken can of hairspray whizzing around like a projectile). Other related instances of identity-loss and the generic range from Dr. Hilarius trying to recruit Oedipa as another subject for his experiment with hallucinogenic drugs on "a large sample of suburban housewives" (10), Oedipa's name being converted to "Edna Mosh" for transmission via radio, after being instructed to "just be yourself" (96), and of course her adoption of the anonymous identity of Arnold Snarb in the episode in San Francisco.

In addition, one can see this necessary interrelationship between spatial system and subjectivity as core element in Oedipa's difficulties with the Tristero as "alternative" system:

if not for another set of possibilities to replace those that had conditioned the land to accept any San Narciso among its most tender flesh without a reflex or a cry, then at least, at the very least, waiting for a symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew. She had heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided; and how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity? (125)

Against the background of taking non-place to be characteristic of postmodernity, the difficulty here lies not so much in choosing between mainstream society and the Tristero, or even in the epistemological problem of determining whether the Tristero exists or not, but the exclusionary nature of the constellation Oedipa constructs here. The intertwining of (spatial) system and subject position entails that one cannot take part in a different system without the concomitant change in subjectivity. What Oedipa seems to wish for, based on her anchoring in a modern epistemological framework, is to engage the alternative (the Tristero) while retaining her position as a (knowing) subject – as if she is free and autonomous in that respect. This framework is also where the phrasing of her problem, as consisting of two mutually exclusive choices, comes from; it hinges entirely on oppositional logic and the knowability of the world. When, as Augé does, letting go of the view of postmodernity as derived, one can see that Oedipa’s difficulty concerns not simply an alternative to mainstream society, but the choice between a fixed singular or a plural conception of the world – not “this world or the other,” but “this world or any other,” or in other words, the acceptance of postmodernity on its own terms. Hence, the novel’s key question, “Shall I project a world?” has consequences not only for the view of possible worlds, but also for the subject positions that these worlds bring along. Once again, while *Lot 49* may not “tip over” into “full-blown” postmodernity and Oedipa clings to her modern (epistemological) framework, the liminal character of the novel does ensure that the postmodern comes into full view.

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Taking postmodernity on its own terms therefore has consequences not only for how specifically postmodern space can be viewed, but also for the subject in postmodern space. One must note here that while postmodern non-place may produce a generic subject, this subject position is far from neutral in a political or ideological sense. Oedipa’s feeling of being beat up on in the San Francisco episode does not only indicate the struggle that is the transition from the modern to the postmodern, but it also shows how postmodern non-place excludes her from taking part in what she sees as a “tourist.” While Augé may point to the “passive joys of identity loss” and the generic subject position may not be particularly problematic in straightforward cases concerning ATM machines or the signs along the motorway, this connectedness of

non-place and generic subject also produces exclusionary strategies that serve to marginalize or even eliminate certain people, identities, and subjectivities.¹²

120 By fully acknowledging the prescribed generic subject position, the concept of non-place thus also gives a broader view of the postmodern space represented in *Lot 49* that takes into account the positions that are under pressure in postmodern space. Non-place has effects not only on the people entering it (like the traveler with his airline ticket and passport), but it also has effects on people who are *denied* access. This exclusion takes place not only on an incidental or individual level, but can be implemented on a systematic scale as well, putting the dynamics of non-place to use in exclusionary strategies (in line with de Certeau's use of the term). In other words, non-place can be utilized for socio-political purposes, for the benefits of some, but also at the expense of others. Non-place can thus have an obverse (and "ugly") side, a political dimension that one cannot overlook.

While the Tristero in *Lot 49* is already entirely oriented towards marginalized groups, Pynchon offers a much more explicit view of the urban landscape of Southern California in an essay published a year after *Lot 49*. In "A Journey into the Mind of Watts" (1966), which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, he discusses the neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles, primarily known at the time for the race riots of August 1965, in which he also expounds a more "immediate," non-fictional vision of urban space in Southern California. What he presents in this essay is precisely how the (postmodern) city privileges the white middle class and excludes the black population of Watts – through the workings of non-place, highlighting the mechanisms through which this group is excluded from the spaces and spatialities of the postmodern city. So while *Lot 49* elaborately explores the workings of non-place in a general framework of a search for gaining access, and ending up in this type of postmodern urban space, Pynchon's essay looks at the same mechanisms from a different angle, showing its political effects and implications. The essay thus shows the obverse, which (in my view) adds perspective that needs to be taken into account when considering the postmodern city.

Pynchon's essay begins with an account, perhaps the immediate

12 See Cathy N. Davidson for a thorough discussion of the masculinity of the subject positions that Oedipa has to occupy – thereby reading *Lot 49* as critique of the "cherished myths of a male-dominated society" (50).

reason for writing the essay, of a case in which a white police officer chased, stopped, shot, and killed a black man, Leonard Deadwyler, who was rushing his pregnant wife to hospital. A token inquiry dismissed the incident as an accident, but as Pynchon points out, “[i]n the back of everybody’s head, of course, is the same question: Will there be a repeat of last August’s riot?” Pynchon takes the case as symptomatic of the persistent racial and socio-economic inequality of the situation of Watts and its residents. At the heart of this inequality, according to Pynchon,

is the coexistence of two very different cultures: one white and one black.

While the white culture is concerned with various forms of systematized folly – the economy of the area in fact depending on it – the black culture is stuck pretty much with basic realities like disease, like failure, violence and death, which the whites have mostly chosen – and can afford – to ignore. The two cultures do not understand each other, though white values are displayed without let-up on black people’s TV screens, and though the panoramic sense of black impoverishment is hard to miss from atop the Harbor Freeway, which so many whites must drive at least twice every working day. Somehow it occurs to very few of them to leave at the Imperial Highway exit for a change, go east instead of west only a few blocks, and take a look at Watts. A quick look. The simplest kind of beginning. But Watts is country which lies, psychologically, uncounted miles further than most whites seem at present willing to travel.

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What Pynchon describes here is basically a view of the postmodern non-place, dominated by signage, that contrasts with the reality of immediate and basic problems in Watts. The different time-space dimensions of non-place entail that Watts, while geographically at the heart of the city, is nevertheless a world away from the postmodernity that surrounds it, which Pynchon describes by contrasting it with Watts, where “all of it is real, no plastic faces, no transistors, no hidden Muzak, or Disneyfied landscaping, or smiling little chicks to show you around.”

Pynchon also explicitly ties in the urban space of L.A. with the media and entertainment industries, which themselves revolve around the

foregrounding of signage (and thereby the production of non-place). However, this intertwining of the city and these industries is not merely economic; Pynchon extends this alliance between the two by viewing L.A. as being

a little unreal, a little less than substantial. For Los Angeles, more than any other city, belongs to the mass media. What is known around the nation as the L.A. Scene exists chiefly as images on a screen or TV tube, as four-color magazine photos, as old radio jokes, as new songs that survive only a matter of weeks. It is basically a white Scene, and illusion is everywhere in it, from the giant aerospace firms that flourish or retrench at the whims of Robert McNamara, to the “action” everybody mills along the Strip on weekends looking for, unaware that they and their search which will end, usually, unfulfilled, are the only action in town.¹³

122

What Pynchon seems to suggest here is a conflation of the city and its (self-produced) image in the media, of actual space and its representation – a view of Los Angeles as autoreferential in Jameson’s terminology (or simulacral in Baudrillard’s familiar terminology, for that matter). The urban space Pynchon describes is the postmodern non-place of solitude and similitude, with the “plastic faces” and “smiling little chicks” as the impersonal, anonymous functionaries of a city designed to be occupied by the generic subject. He is therefore clearly critical of the postmodern city here, with its Disneyfication, Muzak, and media images. In *Lot 49* these foregrounded aspects of media and imitation are presented with irony but also with a certain degree of (comedic) enjoyment – e.g. in Pierce’s impressions of The Shadow, a crime-fighting vigilante from a radio drama, the actor/lawyer convolutions of Metzger and Manny di Presso, or the development of Fangoso Lagoons, with real human bones for recreational divers in Lake Inverarity and an “Art Nouveau reconstruction of some European pleasure-casino” (37). In the Watts essay, on the other hand, Pynchon examines these aspects from the perspective of an excluded racial minority, which highlights the negative and exclusionary dynamics of this landscape.

¹³ Note the parallel here between the “giant aerospace firms” and *Lot 49*’s Yoyodyne Inc.

The relatedness between the non-place of L.A. and the generic subject is also one of the problems for Watts and its residents, one of the characteristics that sustains inequality in postmodernity, because the position of generic subject is not neutral. After all, this position is a product of the purposive program inherent in non-place, dependent upon larger societal systems (e.g. the banking system) and the relations between (generic) individuals which that program accords. The individual in non-place may be reduced to anonymity, but the generic subject there is by no means featureless, having to comply with the program of the space. Hence, non-place does not accommodate outsiders or marginalized groups, and can therefore sustain existing inequalities. In *Lot 49* the W.A.S.T.E. system illustrates that outsiders have no way of relating to each other within mainstream society in the first place, and particularly the episode in the Bay Area shows that, even in the non-place of alienated individuals, these marginalized groups do not relate to each other.

123

In his discussion of Watts, Pynchon shows how the generic subject position is an exclusionary device to sustain the “white culture,” “white Scene,” and “white fantasy” he speaks of, in a description of what a day for an unemployed kid in Watts could look like:

If you do get to where you were going without encountering a cop, you may spend your day looking at the white faces of personnel men, their uniform glance of suspicion, their automatic smiles, and listening to polite put-downs. “I decided once to ask,” a kid says, “one time they told me I didn’t meet their requirements. So I said: ‘Well, what are you looking for? I mean, how can I train, what things do I have to learn so I can meet your requirements?’ Know what he said? ‘We are not obligated to tell you what our requirements are.’”

He isn’t. That right there is the hell and headache: he doesn’t have to do anything he doesn’t want to do because he is The Man. Or he was. A lot of kids these days are more apt to be calling him the little man – meaning not so much any member of the power structure as just your average white L.A. taxpayer, registered voter, property owner, employed, stable, mortgaged and the rest.

The little man bugs these kids more than The Man ever bugged their parents. It is the little man who is standing on their feet and in their way; he’s all over the place, and there is not much they can do

to change him or the way he feels about them. A Watts kid knows more of what goes on inside white heads than possibly whites do themselves. Knows how often the little man has looked at him and thought, “Bad credit risk” – or “Poor learner,” or “Sexual threat,” or “Welfare chisler” without knowing a thing about him personally.

The natural, normal thing to want to do is hit the little man. But what after all, has he done? Mild, respectable, possibly smiling, he has called you no names, shown no weapons. Only told you perhaps that the job was filled, the house rented.

124

The “little man” that Pynchon sketches here is the “average man” in Augé, produced by and fully complicit with the socio-economic structures that maintain the dominance of certain groups and marginalization of others. The Man, the little man’s conceptual predecessor, is the representation of existing power (state, establishment, capital, etc.) and an expression of an oppositional logic – and perhaps therefore a phrase favored in the counter-culture of the 1960s. The situation that Pynchon describes is one in which there is no defined power to oppose (even in abstract terms such as The Man) because the little man is perfectly generic: a legitimate product and agent of a system that allows no access to those who are not already part of it – “if you know what this means, you know where to find out more,” and like the symbol of the post horn, this generic subject saturates the city (as taxpayers, voters, and property owners). The only way into this system, when a job is concerned, is “to look as much as possible like a white applicant,” as the governed-sent youth counselors try (without much success) to convey to the unemployed kids. In other words, the only way to take part in the system is by adopting the position of the generic subject that belongs to that system.

This exclusionary strategy inherent in the generic subject position is not only a socio-economic phenomenon, but it is a spatial phenomenon as well. Not only is the generic little man “all over the place,” but access to the postmodern city, beyond the enclave of Watts, is also largely restricted to the generic subject. The policing of Watts can therefore be seen as the identity checks necessary to enter non-place. For Pynchon, “besides protecting and serving the little man, the cop also functions as his effigy”; the cop functions not so much as a representative of the government or of The Man, but as a sign of the socio-economic power

system of postmodernity, as the signage of non-place with legs, a car, and a gun. The cop, then, performs the same function as the material devices that regulate (the access to) non-place, like turn-stiles and barriers. His job is not only “to protect and serve,” but also to maintain a spatial order; he is a mobile agent of the spatiality of non-place. The Deadwyler incident was a trigger that

reminded everybody of how very often the cop does approach you with his revolver ready, so that nothing he does with it can then really be accidental, of how, especially at night, everything can suddenly reduce to a matter of reflexes: your life trembling in the crook of a cop’s finger because it is dark, and Watts, and the history of this place and these times makes it impossible for the cop to come on any different, or for you to hate him any less. Both of you are caught in something neither of you wants, and yet night after night, with casualties or without, these traditional scenes continue to be played out all over the South central part of this city.

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Such police procedures are scenes, scripted and produced by the dominant discourse that informs the non-place of the postmodern city. Hence, one could see the harassment by the police that the people (particularly young men) need to suffer in Watts as the mechanisms of the regulation of non-place, analogous to signs directing usage of space (“please wait behind the white line”) and the identity checks required for access to non-place (or rather, in these cases, to deny access). In effect, such police actions are not meant to effectively (or silently) enforce power, but are designed to be in full view, at least for those over whom power is exerted – like signage in urban space. In that sense, one could take such policing to be counter-panoptic, not the workings of a machine that keeps the execution of disciplinary power out of the public eye, but instead purposely visible set-pieces aimed at maintaining the discursive borders of postmodern non-place and regulating its points of entry – somewhat like the sign saying “You are now entering the Beaujolais region,” but with a prohibition and threat of violence.

Therefore, Pynchon’s portrayal of Watts complements the representation of the city in *Lot 49*. The novel presents mainstream society’s outcasts, those for whom there is no place in the non-place of the

postmodern city, while their alternative can offer no connections for marginalized groups either, providing only the different non-place of the Tristero. It is the non-choice between these alternatives – the false choice between ones and zeroes, convention or Tristero – that shows the impregnability of these two systems of non-place, at least within the framework of Oedipa’s task of “sorting it all out” (5). Hence, by showing that non-place cannot usefully be reduced to or framed by a modern epistemology, the novel offers a view of the particularity of postmodern space. In his essay on Watts, Pynchon extends this perspective on the postmodern city by looking at it not through the modern-postmodern distinction, but through the distinction between mainstream society and socio-economically excluded minorities. In effect, the essay looks at non-place not only from the “inside,” but particularly from the “outside” – from the position of those who are denied access to the non-place of the postmodern city, as part of their exclusion from part of the postmodern world. This lays bare that non-place is not neutral or innocent (politically or ethically), but requires discursive and sometimes physical force in order to be maintained. One could even say that Pynchon’s “little man,” as a figure that connects the generic subject of non-place to the socio-economic politics of the postmodern city, also affirms the relation between the postmodern in a cultural and in a politico-economic sense – akin, though along different lines, to Jameson’s connection between postmodernism and late capitalism. Therefore, the essay on Watts in effect shows that Oedipa’s experience in San Narciso – of the opacity of the Tristero and the post horn, and of the feeling of non-location at the end – is a representation of the experience of the postmodern city which, particularly in terms of spatiality and subjectivity, has characteristics that are not merely abstract properties, but that have substantial consequences in the real world and particularly the lives of those on the outside, without access.

Thus, *Lot 49* provides an insight into the spaces of postmodernity, especially when supplemented with the perspective from Pynchon’s essay on Watts. At the most visible level, the postmodern city consists of a network of freeways connecting privately owned spaces, in which “over by the freeway” is a meaningful qualification of location. It is an environment in which signage is more prominent than social interaction; where Muzak, neon signs for motels, post horns, and W.A.S.T.E. bins determine

the usage of a space, the roles of individuals, and their (im)possible interactions. Hence, perhaps the most important feature of postmodern space that emerges from *Lot 49* is that the city is a non-place, a regulated and monitored place of “solitude and similitude” for anonymous (yet identified) individuals, for the generic subject produced by the program of the postmodern city.

By way of an afterthought, one can see the postmodern city which foregrounds the generic subject and locations “over by the freeway,” as it emerges from *Lot 49*, as a model for today’s “global” city, or particularly the city as part of a global network of capital flows (e.g. as in the work of Castells). For instance, this global city is discussed by architect Rem Koolhaas in his essay “The Generic City,” which one can take as moving even further away from de Certeau’s decaying Concept City, and also as even more outspoken than Augé’s discussion of non-place in the move beyond negative opposition to the modern. Koolhaas extends the generic subject as produced by non-place in Augé (and Pynchon) to taking the Generic to also be the main feature of urban space itself, describing the Generic City as “the city liberated from the captivity of center, from the straitjacket of identity” (1249-50). He posits the Generic City as a model for cities today that originated in the Western world, but is now “a concept in a state of migration” (1262), on the move towards the equator (cities to think of are Bangkok, Singapore, or Hong Kong). The image he presents is in many respect close to the urban space of *Lot 49*.

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The serenity of the Generic City is achieved by the *evacuation* of the public realm, as in an emergency fire drill. The urban plane now only accommodates necessary movement, fundamentally the car; highways are a superior version of boulevards and plazas, taking more and more space; their design, seemingly aiming for automotive efficiency, is in fact surprisingly sensual, a utilitarian pretense entering the domain of *smooth* space. What is new about this locomotive public realm is that it cannot be measured in dimensions. The same (let’s say ten-mile) stretch yields a vast number of different experiences: it can last five minutes or forty; it can be shared with almost nobody, or with the entire population; it can yield the absolute pleasure of pure, unadulterated speed – at which point the Generic City may even become intense or at least acquire density –

or utterly claustrophobic moments of stoppage – at which point the thinness of the Generic City is at its most noticeable. (1251)

128 Like San Narciso, the Generic City here is a city without any public spaces for interaction, but instead prominently features a system of free-ways for which the idea of position and location, or time for that matter – the “dimensions” for Koolhaas – are entirely flexible. This underscores the time-space compression of non-place, the prominence of the car, the city in which things can be located “over by the freeway.” The Generic City thus emphasizes certain features, at the cost of others, especially those people who are unable to go along with its dynamic, or those who are denied access. Despite the ethnic diversity in the Generic City, there is little room for otherness (“[g]olf courses are all that is left of otherness” [1251]) and mobility and migration are preconditions (“[t]he Generic City is always founded by people on the move, poised to move on” [1252]). What one sees in Koolhaas’ essay, therefore, is that this city depends on exclusionary methods – of the type illustrated in Pynchon’s essay on Watts, as a world away from the rest of Los Angeles – that produce the condition of the generic, both for the city as a whole as for the subjects in the city. With respect to signage, the Generic City is also in line with the treatment of signage in the non-place of *Lot 49*. There is a

redundancy in the iconography that the Generic City adopts. If it is water-facing, then water-based symbols are distributed over its entire territory... If it has a mountain, each brochure, menu, ticket, billboard will insist on the hill, as if nothing less than a seamless tautology will convince. Its identity is like a mantra. (1263)

What little identity the Generic City has is established through persistent repetition of signs – strikingly analogous to the repetition of the post horn in San Francisco – that follows the logic of signage in non-place. In short, many elements of the Generic City can be traced to the kind of space of which *Lot 49* offers a representation. Especially against a background of ideas like Koolhaas’, one could therefore say that the experience of non-location at the end of the novel (where San Narciso “gave up its residue of uniqueness for her; became a name again, was assumed back into the American community of crust and mantle” [122-23])

moves beyond oppositions between the modern and postmodern, and beyond the particularity of the U.S.; the reflection upon urban space in *Lot 49* – in its representation of non-place, signage, and the generic subject – indeed takes the space of a postmodern world on its own terms.

3 – Bodies in Urban Space: *Cosmopolis*

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After a discussion of postmodern urban space in *Lot 49* as non-place that engenders a generic subject, or an “average man” in Augé’s words, one problem immediately presents itself: the generic may be a key quality of postmodern spatiality, but it does not cover everything. On the one hand the workings of non-place, exemplified in the airport lounge that requires identification in order to become an anonymous generic subject, clearly foregrounds the ways in which the subject is subsumed in the discourse of postmodern spatiality. Yet on the other hand, it is also immediately apparent that the generic is not total, if only because each instance requires a (new) individual to subject him- or herself to becoming the generalized subject. A specific *instance* of interaction (with a specific individual) is necessary for the subject to become generic.

Hence, non-place cannot be seen as a given or predetermined (generalized) condition, but a spatiality that one *enters into*, in an instance that produces the condition of the generic for the subject in postmodern urban space. Even if one enters non-place repeatedly (or goes from one non-place to another) and the general principles of the space(s) may be the same, they are predicated upon an event of entering. This event marks the entrance itself as the *limit* of the discourse of the generic non-place. So while a space may be characterized by the generic, the event of entering such a space is itself specific and situated.

In other words, the generic/non-place of postmodernity may not foreground it, but it certainly depends on the specific. Whereas non-place is characterized by discursivity, the event that constitutes its limit (the identity check, for example) is marked by materiality: objects like passports, bank cards, and tickets; physical spatial elements like turnstiles, customs booths, or ATM machines; and bodies, standing in queues, following dictated paths, or pressing buttons as instructed. In short, non-place hinges on materiality and bodiliness. The position of the individual in the city is not just a matter of abstract considerations, but also a matter of a physical individual engaging his or her material surroundings, of individuals in an immediate and physical sense. In the example of the airport lounge, it is easy to identify the material objects

involved – the airline ticket, the passport, the architecture, signage, etc. However, there is a key element in this configuration that still requires exploration: the individual as a physical, material entity – as a body in space. Hence, the question remains: what about the body in postmodern urban space?

The point is to find a conceptual framework with which the body can be considered in its relation to the city. However, in a dominant tradition of thinking about urban space that privileges the mental, the systematic, and the overview from above (rooted in Cartesian conceptions of both space and the subject), the bodily easily slips out of view – a tradition that reinforces the foregrounded discursivity of non-place even further. Yet one need only evoke some stereotypical images of the modern and postmodern cities to illustrate that the body is a factor that ought to be taken into consideration. For example, if one contrasts the individual in the urban masses of the subway in the modern metropolis and the individual behind the steering wheel of a car on a freeway cutting through urban sprawl, one can see not only a difference on the level of spatial formations and practices that one can understand at a systematic level (e.g. by focusing on the different traffic systems). Even though there need not be a difference in the bodies themselves (in their physical constitution, etc.), the position of the body in relation to its urban surroundings, as a material element in very different spatial practices is almost radically different. So regardless of concrete changes in (Western) bodies themselves in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (based on medical advances, dietary practices, changing conceptions and practices of beauty, etc.¹), the question of the body in the city particularly concerns not so much what the body is, but how it relates to the surrounding space.

Two common points in discussions of the body in the city can also provide here the angle of approach for the question of the body in the postmodern city. Firstly, the body in the city is often treated as a problem to be solved or overcome, e.g. in the classic discussions by Simmel and Jameson (which will be the starting point for exploring the question of the body in detail below). This is of course the obverse of conceptions

¹ The development of changing practices and discourses on the modern body is discussed excellently in Tim Armstrong's book *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1998), which is addressed specifically for its analysis of prosthesis below.

that privilege the mental, but this problematization of the body is paired with a noteworthy “medicalization,” for example in the terms used (e.g. speaking of “diagnosing the problem,” and a host of metaphorically used diseases). Secondly, and in line with this medicalization, the problem of the body is often approached with an “interventionist” attitude. The body is often thought of as needing physical alterations, e.g. in the “new organs” that Simmel and Jameson call for, but also in the discourses related to the concept of the cyborg (whether going back to nineteenth-century literature or the influential critical work of Donna Haraway).

132 These two points can open up the issue of the body in urban space, and particularly the differences between modern and postmodern conceptions. I would argue that the desire to intervene in the body should not be taken literally or as a technological ideal/goal, but as a framing of the (modern) attitude taken towards the body. With a conventional idea of subjectivity as being rooted in thought, the body is positioned as a given and as a passive substrate for the subject’s engagement with the world. Accordingly, the city is taken to be an encroachment on the body, against which the body must be armed – especially in the example of the urban masses in the metropolis. Simply put, in this conception the body is faced with a modern city as an imposition coming from outside. However, as urban spatialities change in a postmodern world, the position of the body changes as well. My argument is that this change is not simply a reversal of directions (e.g. the body now extending into the city), but a more complex relationship between the body and the city. The hierarchical distinctions that mark the modern conception become untenable; instead, the relationship between body and city is characterized by virtuality – a term drawn from the work of N. Katherine Hayles, discussed below, which centers on the interpenetration of the material and the informational. In a movement away from a (conceptual) separation between the individual and the world, body and city become systems that extend into each other – which will be discussed in relation to Don DeLillo’s novel *Cosmopolis* below.

New organs?

The framework for the question of the body in urban space – and specifically the body as a problem – can be drawn from a metaphor used in two key texts already briefly touched upon in the previous chapter: the

need for “new organs” for coming to terms with a new spatiality, which occurs in Simmel’s classic essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” and Jameson’s analysis of the Bonaventure hotel. The recurrence of this call for new organs stresses the limitations of the body – and the body as a limit – with respect to the discursive regimes that dominate the spatiality of the (post)modern city. At the surface, the propositions discussed in both texts are, of course, not to be taken literally; neither text aims to put forward a sci-fi-like argument to augment the body. Rather, I would argue that both texts use the metaphor in a strategy of displacing the body – and by doing so, reinforcing a spatiality in which the dominant factors are discursive rather than material (cf. Lefebvre’s objection to abstract space). A closer look at the terms and issues involved in these two texts provides the coordinates for situating the (role of the) body in postmodern urban space.

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Simmel’s argument pits the individual against a modern city that imposes itself from the outside. His focus is on the ways the individual maintains independence in “its adjustment to the forces that lie outside of it.” (325) He argues that, because of a “swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” (325) life in the metropolis privileges the mental, which is contrasted with “the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence.” (325) In order to maintain independence and gain the intellectual freedom that the city accords as well, the individual needs to arm himself against the overload of stimuli: “the metropolitan type – which naturally takes on a thousand individual modifications – creates a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it” (326). Two points should be underlined: the city is explicitly external here, and the solution for the external threat is specifically phrased as a *protective organ*. Although it is to be taken figuratively, one should note that this choice for a physical metaphor (rather than simply abstract terms like “a defense” or “a strategy”) resonates with some of his other bodily terms in addressing the phenomenon of metropolitan life. For instance, Simmel also speaks of the stimulus overload as “atrophy of individual culture through the hypertrophy of objective culture” (338), casting the problem in medical terms.

While these metaphors serve to construct (and privilege) the “mental

life” in the modern metropolis, they equally point to the material and corporeal. One could concentrate Simmel’s point into an “urban scene” of the dense crowd in the subway, where technical development, population density, and societal structures of the metropolis come together. This phenomenon leads, for Simmel, to an intellectual freedom, which stems from the material, technical, and physical dimensions of mass transit. Hence, there is a significant material “ground” for the privileged mental life of the metropolis. Simmel identifies this issue explicitly, in emphasizing the combination of physical proximity (in the urban masses) and intellectual distance between individuals. So while intellectual freedom is the primary focus here, it also underscores the physical conditions and, more importantly, the different role of the body in this modern spatiality. This is how one could (symptomatically) read Simmel’s proposal for a new “protective organ”: as a nominal attempt to get beyond the limited body, but in effect anchoring the subject firmly in the physical, stressing the bodily dimension of the city, so that the subject can come to terms with a new spatiality – in terminology that in fact veers away from the body, towards privileging the disembodied.

Despite the historical differences between Simmel and Jameson (the former speaking of the modern metropolis, the latter of postmodern space – to be addressed briefly below), Jameson’s discussion of the Bonaventure hotel shows significant similarities with Simmel’s argument. Jameson takes the implications of this view of the body in space even further, particularly in the metaphors he uses. He speaks of his analysis of the Bonaventure’s relation to the urban fabric as a “diagnosis” (42) and of its exterior as a “glass skin,” likening it to the wearing of reflective sunglasses (with the implication that the interior of the building parallels a head). More importantly, he emphasizes that “[y]ou are in this hyperspace up to your eyes and your body (43) – apparently separating the eyes from the rest of the body, in a quiet affirmation of the traditional conception that privileges the disembodied eye as the means through which the knowing subject engages the world. In this light, it is even more poignant that Jameson claims that “this latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the *individual human body* to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (44, emphasis added) – again

implying that the “individual human body” depends upon perception and cognition (or even looking-as-knowing). Such an idea of the subject here acknowledges bodiliness yet accords it only a passive role as “material ground.” Hence, his overall point on postmodern hyperspace is cast in similar terms:

My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it, in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism. The newer architecture therefore—like many of the other cultural products I have evoked in the preceding remarks—stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions (38-9).

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The (new) mode of spatiality of the Bonaventure poses a problem for the subject in space, but in this formulation Jameson can be seen to try to salvage his conventional notion of the subject. As can be surmised from his focus on *perceptual* equipment and habits, he does not seek to change his conception of a looking/knowing subject (a disembodied knowing eye, metaphorically), but rather seeks a modification of the body as material ground for the subject, in calling for “new organs” for even better ways meet the challenges of postmodernity. In addition, the use of “mutation” can be taken to have biological/genetic overtones here too.

Yet in both Simmel’s and Jameson’s descriptions, the call for new organs is not simply the symptom of an attempt to save a conception of the subject that centers on perception and knowing, relegating the body to a passive role, and locating any challenge for that subject in the (external) realm of the bodily. However much one might see both diagnoses as primarily affirming a particular (modern/Enlightenment) conception of the relation between subjectivity and the body, they still address a real problem in the relationship between the body and the city.

How to read these two problematizations of the body in urban space, then? Firstly, these calls should be taken as rhetorical strategies for positing a body that is unequipped for a new urban space. One can take this argument as reinforcement of the foregrounding of abstract space, as a correlate of privileging the mental/intellectual. If one downplays the role of the body, the material, and the specific, it might seem as if the relationship between the subject and urban space is stable, unproblematic, and to be sought primarily at the level of the discursive. The relegation of the body is reinforced in both texts by building on a discourse of technological progress (which also aligns well with the medicalization of terms in both texts). Jameson, for example, focuses more on escalators, elevators, and revolving cocktail lounges, as technological elements that determine the properties of the hotel, than on their usage by actual people. Simmel, likewise, suggests that if all the pocket watches in Berlin were not synchronized, “its entire economic and commercial life would be derailed for some time,” because “the technique of metropolitan life in general is not conceivable without all of its activities and reciprocal relationships being organized and coordinated in the most punctual way into a firmly fixed framework of time which transcends all subjective elements” (328). The position of the subject, therefore, is presented as tied more to the technological than to the embodied – let alone the social. Phrased differently, one could say that the interface between the individual person and the city (as a discursive entity that provides a subject position) is presented in technological terms. The call for new organs is in effect not a call for change, but a call for extension of a body that is positioned as being limited. The call would thus steer one *away* from questions of the body in the direction of technological progress.

However, while both Simmel’s and Jameson’s arguments may not focus on the body, and downplay it to some extent, embodiedness remains a (problematic) presence that looms large in both texts. The fact that the same problem has apparently persisted throughout the twentieth century from Simmel to Jameson also indicates that the issue is, at any rate, a genuine one. For that reason, I would suggest that one should take the call for new organs literally as well, in the sense that it addresses the physical and material interaction between body and urban space. Even the terms of specific organs are relevant literally, to the extent that they evoke a discourse that speaks of the body along those lines

– analytically, split up into different parts with different functions. Hence, I take both Simmel’s and Jameson’s call to actually signal the need to take into consideration the materiality and physicality of the individual in the city, and in a way they set out the coordinates within which this should be done. Taking off from these texts, then, I aim to argue that especially when it comes to the individual in the postmodern city, one should foreground the urban subject as being notably *embodied*.

Lastly, for more direction for exploring the question of the body, Simmel and Jameson need to be situated historically as well. After all, what is at stake for Simmel is the independence of the individual in the modern metropolis circa 1900, whereas Jameson’s argument springs from Los Angeles in the 1980s. I would argue that Simmel’s argument attempts to equip the individual to meet a new urban modernity, making it a positive argument to “enable” the subject (or “metropolitan type” in his words). As Simmel’s argument moves from “small-town and rural existence” to the metropolis, he brings into view the elements that make up urban modernity, as well as the way in which the individual can cope with the city as an imposition from the outside. Jameson’s point, on the other hand, can be taken, in my view, largely as a defensive argument to keep the individual from leaving behind urban modernity, from drowning in what he calls “hyperspace.” Yet while Jameson reaffirms the modernity signaled by Simmel, he also offers a general direction for exploring the position of the body in postmodern space. Apart from the signaling what a postmodern subject would move away from (e.g. the emphasis on the perception and knowledge etc.), Jameson suggests that we are “to expand our sensorium and our body to some new ... dimensions.” (39) Though the difference with Simmel is subtle, it can be read to indicate a different “direction”: rather than barricading the individual against a bombardment of external stimuli, the subject needs to find ways to *extend* into or towards the world around it. While I would argue that the position of the body in postmodern urban space is more complex than a simple reversal of directions could account for, Jameson’s point here is at least an invitation to explore how the individual can “expand into” the city. Therefore, the recurring call for new organs in Simmel and Jameson, placed in their respective historical contexts, provides a framework in which to understand the body in the postmodern city.

Taking off from this call for “new organs,” this chapter will continue to explore the question of the body further by close-reading Don DeLillo’s novel *Cosmopolis* (2003). Concerns of the body and the city are prominent in the work of DeLillo, and *Cosmopolis* addresses these in depth. Hence, for the purposes of this study, this novel is treated not just as a representation of the role of the individual and the body, but also as a theoretical reflection in the form of literary fiction. Moreover, *Cosmopolis* is particularly apt as final major literary work to be examined here: it is set explicitly in the year 2000, a suitable endpoint of the period I consider in this study. Especially since the novel is set in New York, the setting in the year 2000 is even more marked since *Cosmopolis* is a post-9/11 novel, set in pre-9/11 New York. While I see little point in engaging the question whether 9/11 was a major turning point or not (also see the coda after this chapter, on DeLillo’s essay “In the Ruins of the Future” for further discussion), it is nevertheless a marked point in the history of New York – making the setting of the novel all the more suitable here to serve as final literary work under consideration. Moreover, in considering *Cosmopolis*, all facets of the postmodern city discussed in the previous chapters can be brought back to Manhattan as a marked postmodern urban space.

***Cosmopolis:* The body, technology, and capitalism**

In a nutshell, DeLillo’s novel tells the story of 28-year-old billionaire Eric Packer on a day in April in the year 2000, who has made his fortune as a brilliant trader on the stock and currency markets, building his business empire from scratch. Hence, he is the embodiment of the self-made man, of new money, and of ruthless capitalism. He exercises, meditates, reads poetry, collects art, and lives atop a skyscraper in an apartment with 49 rooms. All of this also makes him the embodiment of the Western, white, male heterosexual who seeks profit in every facet of life.

The novel is based on an episodic journey across Manhattan, which starts with Packer deciding to have a haircut at his and his father’s old barber’s on the other side of town in Hell’s Kitchen. He is driven there in his anonymous white limousine, but the journey across town is slowed down by a range of interruptions – including a funeral procession, a presidential motorcade, and an anarchist demonstration – which frame

the story's different episodes. Packer is accompanied by his chief of security and several bodyguards, and the different stages of the journey are marked by his encounters with different people, such as employees meeting him in the limo, or a number of encounters with his wife.

Simultaneously, Packer is involved in a risky investment strategy in which he borrows immense sums of money to invest in the yen, based on the expectation that the yen will drop – which it does not. Throughout the day, this strategy appears to become ever more dangerous and self-destructive, but rather than cut his losses, Packer continues to borrow yen and work toward financial suicide. The story progresses to see Packer actively destroy his fortune, as well as the people around him, and in the end he lets himself be murdered by a disgruntled former employee, whose threats to Packer's life also mark the day leading up to their (chance) encounter. In short, the novel is a journey that spirals towards the collapse and destruction of Eric Packer, in all possible senses.

The point of *Cosmopolis*, then, is not so much to portray the city (or the main character) realistically, which in part accounts for the many negative or apprehensive reviews when the novel came out. Walter Kirn in the *New York Times*, for example, warned “[b]eware the novel of ideas, particularly when the ideas come first and all the novel stuff (like the story) comes second.” Likewise, earlier in the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani had labeled the novel “a major dud,” “lugubrious and heavy-handed,” for the fact that “most of the descriptions of New York City are oddly generic” and that its “central theme, that chaos and asymmetry will trump the search for order and patterns, is a familiar one,” for example. In the *New Yorker*, John Updike commented that in *Cosmopolis* “implausibility reigns unchecked” and that “the trouble with a tale where anything can happen is that somehow nothing happens. How much should we care about the threatened assassination of a hero as unsympathetic and bizarre as Eric Packer?” The point of the present argument is not to prove these reviewers wrong (because even though the novel has been reevaluated to an extent in the years since its publication, it would be hard to argue it is one of DeLillo's best works), but the criticisms of the book can serve as a compass for what it can be read for instead of “novel stuff” such as plot, character, plausibility, and central themes that could be rendered in a single sentence.

In fact, *Cosmopolis* is better read as a meditation in fiction on issues

that are prominent in DeLillo's work in general and in a postmodern world. The novel is full of explicit discussions of the large themes around which it revolves: capitalism, technology, and time. In line with what the initial reviewers seemed to object to, it seems to matter little which character utters what; especially Packer and his associates seem to align with each other, as well as with the structure of the narrative (the notable and obvious exceptions being Packer's killer Benno Levin, Packer's wife, and his nostalgic barber). The novel's dialogue, Packer's reflections in free indirect discourse, and the settings of the different scenes all work together to present the main themes and, in a way, take them to their extremes. However, these themes are not just discussed, but are also mobilized to let them play themselves out in the context of one specific man and the events of a day in April in the year 2000, set in Manhattan. In other words, the novel explicitly addresses large, abstract socio-cultural themes, but at the same time these are brought into play in a specific and situated context – which turns these large themes into questions of limits, bodies, and the city (which is the reason for reading this novel here – and which might in fact veer away from reading for “novel stuff” like plot indeed).

Of all the large socio-cultural issues that DeLillo takes on in the novel, capitalism is the most foregrounded. In this light, Packer's wealth is perhaps his most immediately noticeable feature, not so much because of the extent of his fortune (and the concomitant position of power), but the way and the arena in which it was garnered. Packer is not simply the embodiment of capitalist enterprise, but of two very particular aspects that are especially important in the later twentieth century – even more so specifically in the novel's historical moment (the year 2000) – which can easily be connected to a more general framework of postmodernity via Jameson's term “late capitalism.” Firstly, Packer is the epitome of what Jerry Varsava discusses thoroughly as “rogue capitalism,” which is “that subspecies of capitalism that seeks special advantage and unfair profit” by way of “a double assault, one on the immediate agreement at hand, the other on the very system of guarantees and expectations that makes all contracts possible and indeed appealing.” (79) Packer's fortune rests on actively exploiting and abusing the capitalist system – a strategy that undermines and counteracts the very basis of the system, yet yields the greatest returns when measured against the terms of the

system, i.e. profit.

While this in itself is not limited to postmodernity/late capitalism (Varsava discusses a number of interesting examples from other historical periods), the problem is exacerbated because it is connected to the second feature of Packer's wealth: he generates money based on the capitalist system itself, exploiting the changes, patterns, and risks inherent in the stock and currency markets. The scale at which this happens is at the same time huge in terms of trade volumes and money, as well as infinitesimal with respect to time – operating not simply within a continuous and permanent flow of information (with the capitalist system reduced to a constant stream of numbers), but having to make decisions based on fluctuations in the markets in time frames that approach the instantaneous. The point of Packer's wealth is thus not a matter of extent or simple numbers; it is a (moral/ethical) transgression of the socio-political and economic system of capitalism, exploiting the machinations of the system itself at a level of abstraction and scale only possible in "late capitalism." In this respect, Packer's wealth embodies postmodernity, and one can say that Packer is the embodiment of his wealth.

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A second major issue throughout the novel, closely connected to capitalism, is technology. As Packer says to Michael Chin, his young currency analyst, "there's only one thing in the world worth pursuing professionally and intellectually... The interaction between technology and capital. The inseparability." (23) The close connection between the two goes beyond the mechanics of the way in which Packer makes his money; the connection has repercussions for the ways in which we interact and come to terms with the world, relegating the physical aspect of engaging the world to the background. Technology and information thereby become categories that are implied in each other. For Packer this goes so far as to say that

It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets. In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the

planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole. (24)

142 Information is presented here as inseparable from the tools to convey it, such as writing generally, but more specifically the electronic and digital technologies that form the backbone for Packer's world. Moreover, information/technology is imbued with life here. Vija Kinski, Packer's chief of theory, even proposes a continuity between life and information: "People will not die. Isn't this the creed of the new culture? People will be absorbed in streams of information. I know nothing about this. Computers will die. They're dying in their present form. They're just about dead as distinct units. A box, a screen, a keyboard. They're melting into the texture of everyday life... Microchips so small and powerful. Humans and computers merge... And never-ending life begins." (104-5) In this passage, devices such as computers serve to give primacy to a flow of information that fuses with life. Technology therefore bridges two domains, and in the process renders its own materiality of boxes and screens and (by implication here) the materiality of people obsolete. The novel thus puts forward a view that technological development serves to transcend the limits of existence, by way of rendering obsolete and leaving behind.

This leads to the third major theme: time. Time is not presented as some neutral continuum, but the text expresses a view that privileges a drive toward the future. The novel explicitly dismisses the past and favors the future, which is apparent throughout the text but most explicitly addressed by Vija Kinski. For example, when Packer uses the word "doubt," Kinski picks up on this with an argument that is a clear departure from a Cartesian position: "Doubt. What is doubt? You don't believe in doubt. All doubt rises from past experience. But the past is disappearing. We used to know the past but not the future. This is changing... We need a new theory of time." (86) The departure from a Cartesian doubting subject is explicitly framed here through time. Kinski's rejection of knowledge rooted in past experience here adds considerable weight to the dimension of time; instead the drive to futurity or speculation about the future (the source of Packer's fortune) becomes the ground for subjectivity. Again, time is closely tied to the other major themes; for example, in a reflection that takes Simmel's point about

clocks even further, Kinski claims that it is “cyber-capital that creates the future... Because time is a corporate asset now. It belongs to the free market system. The present is harder to find. It is being sucked out of the world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets and huge investment potential. The future becomes insistent.” (79) When Kinski asks Packer how small a nanosecond is exactly, he immediately takes the “technologizing” of time even further by identifying the smallest units of time – zepto- and yoctoseconds. Likewise, the anti-capitalist demonstrators they encounter are dismissed by Kinski as holding a “protest against the future. They want to hold off the future. They want to normalize it, keep it from overwhelming the present.” (91) Therefore, time is subsumed in a constellation with capital and technology, with an aversion of the past, the future as focal point, and a present that vanishes as it extends into yoctoseconds.

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So far, then, the major themes addressed in *Cosmopolis* are familiar themes of postmodernity and globalization. In its joining of technology, time, and capitalism, the views presented in the novel are fully compatible with, for example, Harvey’s focus on time-space compression, or in fact Jameson’s approach as well. The presentation of Packer as a ruthless capitalist is – in line with the critical reviewers’ objections – the stereotypical one as well (in this respect one might see Packer as akin to Gordon Gekko in Oliver Stone’s film *Wall Street* [1987] or perhaps Patrick Bateman of Brett Easton Ellis’ novel *American Psycho* [1991]). However, while “[t]he temptation to read DeLillo’s novel primarily as a critique of the oligarchs of global capitalism is strong,” as Aaron Chandler rightly notes (241-2), *Cosmopolis* revolves less around straightforward critique of Packer or capitalism than around other tensions. In fact, the major themes discussed above only provide the coordinates within which the novel explores less clear-cut issues of boundaries and bodies.

Furthermore, it is important to situate the novel in its proper historical moment: published in 2003, and set in April of the year 2000, literally the endpoint (if not the highpoint) of many twentieth-century developments in capitalism and globalization. About a decade after the end of the Cold War and fall of communism, the end of the twentieth century offered unbridled wealth, within the parameters that Packer has pushed

to their extreme and beyond.² However, the point of *Cosmopolis* (unlike that of DeLillo's magnum opus *Underworld* [1997], which provides a social history of America in the second half of the twentieth century, for example), is not to look back historically, but to look ahead. When compared to a text like *The Crying of Lot 49*, a work of the 1960s, one can see how postmodernity and the postmodern city are approached there by way of a transition into them, coming from a modern perspective – asking more or less “where are we now, in relation to where we were?” For *Cosmopolis*, on the other hand, postmodernity is a given, a point of departure, and no longer necessarily defined in terms of historical contrast – and the question for *Cosmopolis* is “where to now?”

144 This orientation is clear from the start of the novel, where, like so many novels of the city, *Cosmopolis* presents a view from above. However, instead of some form of insight or meaning abstracted from the city below, for Packer this view leads to thoughts of the materiality of the city, rather than an abstract reflection on the city:

He stood at the window and watched the great day dawn. The view was across bridges, narrows and sounds and out past the boroughs and toothpaste suburbs into measures of landmass and sky that could only be called the deep distance. He didn't know what he wanted. It was still nighttime down on the river, half night, and ashy vapors wavered above the smokestacks on the far bank. He imagined the whores were all fled from the lamplit corners by now, duck butts shaking, other kinds of archaic business just beginning to stir, produce trucks rolling out of the markets, news trucks out of the loading docks. The bread vans would be crossing the city and a few stray cars out of bedlam weaving down the avenues, speakers pumping heavy sound. (6-7)

There is nothing here of the transformative or interpretive look that belongs to the knowing subject of modernity, whether it is de Certeau's “text before one's eyes” or a *flâneur* like in Baudelaire (or Benjamin). A

² Alison Shonkwiler even discusses *Cosmopolis* under the heading of a “financial sublime,” with wealth and capitalist enterprise pushed beyond what regular frames of reference can cope with – “[t]he farther capital's ‘flight’ into increasingly spectral realms, the more the numbers and charts symbolize its denarrativization, its striving toward the altogether nonrepresentational.” (252)

long view from above, over the city and into the distance, only gives rise to thoughts of prostitutes and commerce, particularly concerning food, picturing the city streets as places of almost ancient business concerns (food and sex). This view does not abstract meaning from the street, but instead moves “into” the street – thereby zeroing in on its materiality. The starting point nods to the conventional modern entry into the city, but the description follows a different trajectory.

This move away from the modern perspective is continued in a passage that sets up questions of the body, space, and technology. As Packer leaves his building, it becomes clear that the terms in which these issues are framed throughout the novel are related to those in Simmel and Jameson, focusing on tensions and questions of limits and boundaries:

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He rode to the marble lobby in the elevator that played Satie. His prostate was asymmetrical. He went outside and crossed the avenue, then turned and faced the building where he lived. He felt contiguous with it. It was eighty-nine stories, a prime number, in an undistinguished sheath of hazy bronze glass. They shared an edge or boundary, skyscraper and man. It was nine hundred feet high, the tallest residential tower in the world, a commonplace oblong whose only statement was its size. It had the kind of banality that reveals itself over time as being truly brutal. He liked it for this reason. He liked to stand and look at it when he felt this way. He felt wary, drowsy and insubstantial.

The wind came cutting off the river. He took out his hand organizer and poked a note to himself about the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper. No recent structure ought to bear this word. It belonged to the olden soul of awe, to the arrowed towers that were a narrative long before he was born.

The hand device itself was an object whose original culture had just about disappeared. He knew he'd have to junk it.

The tower gave him strength and depth. He knew what he wanted, a haircut, but stood a while longer in the soaring noise of the street and studied the mass and scale of the tower. The one virtue of its surface was to skim and bend the river light and mime the tides of open sky. There was an aura of texture and reflection. He scanned its length and felt connected to it, sharing the surface

and the environment that came into contact with the surface, from both sides. A surface separates inside from out and belongs no less to one than the other. He'd thought about surfaces in the shower once. (8-9)

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Several concerns emerge from this passage. Firstly, the major themes of technology and time are brought together in the reflection on the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper, which extends into the inevitable obsolescence of Packer's hand organizer. More importantly and less clear-cut, though, this passage also addresses the issue of the relation of Packer (or, by extension, the individual generally) to the urban world in which he finds himself. By highlighting the shared boundary between man and skyscraper, Packer positions himself in the city differently compared to a conception of an urban subject who is not part of what he observes/knows, with the traditional *flâneur* or detective as icons, for example. Packer's feeling of contiguity, in contrast, assumes not a separation but a comparability between man and built environment. The implication is that the building's sheath of glass parallels the human skin (which is indeed the conventional metaphor in architecture). The question is how the nature of the comparability should be read. On the one hand, it could be taken discursively, pertaining to the constructedness of both the individual urban subject and the city itself. On the other hand, one could see the parallel between skins of humans and buildings as moving away from the conventional categorical distinction between subject and object, foregrounding the material rather than the essential. Both readings, though, move away from Cartesian notions of a subject set apart from its urban world; instead, the relationship between subject and city is rebalanced to make them contiguous, comparable, and compatible with each other.

Lastly, the passage above adds a further element of bodiliness – the remark about his prostate, a first mention of a key concern throughout the novel – into the reflection on the building. This sentence is out of context, and only later when Packer has his daily medical exam does the full impact of his thoughts about his prostate become clear. This remark displays a stylistic aspect of the novel; the text interweaves several layers, such as Packer's thoughts, focalized description, dialogue, and narratorial description. The effect is a density of the discourse, which can be

read as a strategy for representing the fullness and plurality of the world constructed in the novel. While the remark is discontinuous with the rest of the description of the scene, it enforces a simultaneity of Packer's surroundings and his more persistent concerns. The disjunctive remark thus grafts the issue of bodiliness onto the scene being described, adding another layer to the reflection on the relation between skyscraper and man.

More importantly, the remark about the prostate here raises the question of how the building, surface (and skin) and the body and its organs relate to each other.³ The focus on the sharedness of surfaces – the glass skin for the building, physical skin for the man – here also establishes some relationship between the insides of buildings and bodies. Yet the implication is not that the two interiorities are straightforwardly comparable; there is no point in comparing internal organs (like the prostate) to interior spaces like kitchens or hallways, for example. The prostate remark, then, presents the space of the body as different from the space of a building. Furthermore, the remark also establishes a difference between the surface/skin and the prostate. The prostate belongs to a different order: that of the body, internally, which does not come into contact with the outside world, both literally and in the sense that the body is conceived as its own enclosed space. The contiguity between man and skyscraper, then, points to a tension: surfaces are shared by the building and the individual, but the body remains distinct from the city too. Both stand in close contact (to the point of ambiguous boundaries even), but they do not dissolve into each other.

This passage serves as an opening for the way the novel addresses the relationship between subject, body, and space, which cannot be taken for granted, or as unproblematic. In line with the novel's general rejection of a Cartesian centered subject, it seems to call for a new take on the role of the body – and thereby in effect explores issues that the call for new organs in Simmel and Jameson points toward as well. The question is, however, what kind of framework can enable such a new relationship between subject, body, and space.

³ While it is not the aim to take the present argument into a more philosophical direction, one could mobilize Deleuze's (and Guattari's) notion of the Body without Organs here, particularly as dealt with in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988).

Prosthesis and the posthuman

Isolating a single organ like the prostate reverberates with a strain of thinking about the body in modernity, of which Simmel and Jameson are expressions too, which centers on thinking in terms of extension and technology. In his book *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* (1998), Tim Armstrong gives an excellent overview of this tradition. Even though his focus is on the role of the body and technology in modernist texts, his study explores discourses on the body not just based on literary works, but on a range of scientific and medical discourses as well. This enables him to investigate technologies of the body in a cultural context, as well as the relationship between bodiliness and the constructions of subjectivity.

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Armstrong's point of departure is the development throughout the nineteenth century of technology and thought pertaining to the body, ranging from evolutionary thinking to the applications of electricity, that have all affected the role of the body in modernity. He broadly identifies two currents within this development: "Modernity... brings both a fragmentation and augmentation of the body in relation to technology; it offers the body as lack, at the same time as it offers technological compensation." (3) These two directions coexist without necessarily contradicting each other. Armstrong frames modernism (in art, literature, etc.) as concerned with these general tendencies in modernity – in line with the common view of modernism as reaction to modernity – claiming that modernism is "characterized by the desire to *intervene* in the body; to render it part of modernity by techniques which may be biological, mechanical, or behavioral." (6) This conceptualization of the body as lack to be compensated and extended situates the techniques of intervention in the realm of the material – both in terms of mechanical/physical devices as well as practices such as dietary regimes. Both technology and the body should primarily be thought of on the plane of the material keeping intact the conventional separation between mind and body.

Within this general context, Armstrong identifies prosthesis as one of the key technologies to reshape the body. Prosthesis underscores the (notional) fragmentation of the body, as a collection of parts (or organs) that can be replaced or added to, shifting any notion of the body as a whole to the realm of the immaterial. He distinguishes between

two forms, which relate to the two currents identified above: negative prosthesis, which “involves the replacing of a bodily part, covering a lack”; and positive prosthesis, which involves “a more utopian version of technology, in which human capacities are extrapolated.” (78) Positive prosthesis fits in with a discourse of (techno-historical) progress and the extension of human faculties.

The impact of the dynamic between fragmentation of the body, compensation for lack, and expansion through technology, Armstrong argues, feeds into a larger discourse of consumption of the body. One evident example is the use of bodies in war, which sees the maimed being “repaired” with artificial limbs, etc. (with advances in prosthesis being made particularly in the American Civil War and World War I), as well as extension of the body through drugs and military technology, for example. Another area Armstrong convincingly identifies is advertising, where the body is separated into parts (hands, legs, etc.) in advertising for cosmetics and clothing, for example. This industry exploits the dynamic between fragmentation, lack, and extension to the fullest: “the bodily part is knitted into a system of virtual prosthetics: a system which both exposes and remedies defects, implying a ‘whole’ body which can only be achieved by technology; a whole which is constantly being deferred.” (100) With war and advertising as major arenas for the consumption of the fragmented body, the modern discourse on the body aligns itself with the logic of capitalism, making it possible to treat the body as a commodity. Technological development – in line with a discourse of progress – offers, “in the modern era, both utopian possibilities and a wounding and fragmentation of the self which is an incorporation of those possibilities in the form of the commodity; both mechanical extension and systemic subordination.” (101) In other words, the discourse on the body in modernity (within Armstrong’s framework, firmly anchored in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) goes hand in hand with the developments of capitalism in the nineteenth century. By the late twentieth century and the stage of “late capitalism,” this treatment of the body as commodity (usable, tradable, fixable, expandable) has become a conventional norm.

The fragmented body-as-commodity of modernity is part of the construction of the Enlightenment and modern subject as well. Armstrong discusses, for example, Descartes’ view that the possibility of phantom

pain after amputations entails that the limb is “disposable, a tool used by the soul.” (78) The subject is rooted, then, in the “soul” or self, rather than in bodiliness – in fact making matters of the corporeal a secondary concern at best. This pervasive view of the body in modernity is the context for the call for new organs in Simmel and Jameson. The confrontation with the stimulus-overload in the modern metropolis, in Simmel, can be taken as the external/material world encroaching on an urban subject that is conceived in non-corporeal terms. The suggestion to grow a protective organ, then, should be seen on the same plane: not calling for a modification of the subject position, but of the fragmented repairable/expandable body. The same is true for Jameson, and this is why his suggestion that postmodern hyperspace “has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself” is misleading, for the body of modernity (which he tacitly assumes), as a fragmented body/commodity within (late) capitalism, has always consisted of shortcomings and never had a “self” to locate.

This discourse on the body in modernity and prosthesis as a key technology, as Armstrong discusses it, can be recognized in the position from which *Cosmopolis* takes off. The relationship between the body and technology – rooted in the logic of fragmentation, compensation and extension – underpins the strategies by which Packer has exploited the capitalist system to make his fortune. The flow of data and information, as discussed by Kinski and Packer, is used to extend the human capabilities for interacting with the market system. In fact, the technological/informational systems are exploited in such a way that they push the possibilities of extension to their extreme, a point on which Packer explicitly reflects in the moment of his death:

O shit I’m dead.

He’d always wanted to become quantum dust transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat. The idea was to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in a whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from the void.
(206)

In accordance with the modern logic of extending a deficient body, Packer has always taken the position that the bodily needs to be extend-

ed into the realm of the technological to such an extent that it relegates the body to the role of an obstacle to be overcome.

This perspective is sustained by the actual devices used in Packer's world, whose aim is to create as few barriers between the subject and the market/information systems as possible. His wristwatch, for example, offers direct network access with which he hacks into his wife's back accounts to steal and throw away her inherited fortune. The dismissal of the body – as lack on the one hand, and to be extended on the other – is taken to the point where physical interaction with technology is perceived as obsolete too. Packer's limo, as supreme example, is fitted with a range of devices to push the physical body into the background as possible:

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There were medleys of data on every screen, all the flowing symbols and alpine charts, the polychrome numbers pulsing.... There was a microwave and a heart monitor. He looked at the spycam on a swivel and it looked back at him. He used to sit there in hand-held space but that was finished now. The context was nearly touchless. He could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank. (13)

Touching buttons is just as archaic here as the word skyscraper. Packer's chief of security, for example, even has a voice-activated handgun. The technologies with which Packer has saturated his world all serve to create a regime of instant and persistent surveillance and access, so that Packer – as the subject of modernity and capital – can maintain absolute control, without any form of resistance.

Yet the modern logic of the body is not only pushed to its extreme by Packer; the novel also shows that the recession of bodiliness is ingrained in the city. When his limo is in the diamond district, Packer watches the Hasidim walking in the street, interprets this as a scene from either the 1920s or Old Europe, and reflects on the movements of people in the street:

He felt the street around him, unremitting, people moving past each other in coded moments of gesture and dance. They tried to walk without breaking stride because breaking stride is well-mean-

ing and weak but they were forced sometimes to sidestep and even pause and they almost always averted their eyes. Eye contact was a delicate matter. A quarter second of a shared glance was a violation of agreements that made the city operational. Who steps aside for whom, who looks or does not look at whom, what level of umbrage does a brush or touch constitute? No one wanted to be touched. There was a pact of untouchability. Even here, in the huddle of old cultures, tactile and close-woven, with passersby mixed in, and security guards, and shoppers pressed to windows, and wandering fools, people did not watch each other. (66)

152 This passage recalls de Certeau's comments on the "forest of gestures" (102) that (physical/material) everyday practices in the city constitute. However, the scene in *Cosmopolis* emphasizes that in these practices people are solitary or isolated in the crowd. Physical contact is out of the question, rendering the body nothing but a means of transportation for the subject. Furthermore, even the eye, the privileged organ for the modern/Enlightenment subject, is presented as a unidirectional tool for relating to the world: it is a tool for perceiving, but not for intersubjective contact. In other words, the idea of the body as lack to be overcome, or as cumbersome obstacle to the individual's unmitigated access to the world, is not just particular to Packer, but is an inherent part of the city – here associated particularly with the modern metropolis of the 1920s and with Old Europe, the seat of modernity. In short, the novel here affirms Simmel's analysis of the metropolitan street scene as one of physical proximity, but of distance between individual subjects.

However, while modern conceptions of the body as fragmentary are prominent in Packer's idea about himself and about the city, *Cosmopolis* takes these conceptions as a basis (with inherent shortcomings and problems) for exploring where to go from there. Packer's reflections on his hypermodern/hypercapitalist world and his gradual self-destruction, in my view, argue for a postmodernity in which the body is not positioned as fragmentary or a lack to be compensated, as a deficient body that needs to cope with an external world. Instead, as prefigured early on in the novel, *Cosmopolis* argues for a notably embodied subject for whom the body and the city share their surfaces – physically as well as conceptually.

Here the notion of the posthuman, and in particular the work of N. Katherine Hayles is relevant. While the idea of the posthuman is still being debated and the term has no solidified meaning yet, Hayles' major work *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) builds an open and workable notion, within a framework that is capable of bringing together different disciplines (from cybernetics to literature). She basically presents the posthuman as a perspective that "privileges informational pattern over material instantiation" and undoes the central importance given to consciousness "as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition." (2-3) Furthermore, the posthuman posits "the body as the original prosthesis, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born." (3) Lastly, the "posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines." (3). The posthuman, therefore, can include and expand upon the (modern) logic of prosthesis as identified by Armstrong.

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These key features of the posthuman perspective clearly show its roots in the work of Donna Haraway as well as in cybernetics, and a focus on subjectivity. However, as in Haraway, the terms in which these conceptions are cast (such as "intelligent machines") should not mislead one into taking the metaphors, such as that of the cyborg, too literally. With respect to Haraway's work, Hayles argues that the "conjunction of technology and discourse is crucial" (114), because the cyborg is "both technological object and discursive formation" that "partakes of the power of the imagination as well as of the actuality of technology." (115) The point is not to privilege technological development or to let whatever technology happens to be at the cutting edge at the moment (be it digital, networked, nano-scale, etc.) determine how to conceive of the world. Instead, drawing on the history of cybernetic theory, such as the work of Norbert Wiener, Hayles argues that the analysis of information technologies opens up a (cybernetic) paradigm that "can potentially annihilate the liberal humanist subject as the locus of control." (110) The stakes, then, concern not so much the role of the machine, but the (non-central) position of the (human) subject in the world. The posthuman, therefore, is not "post-" in the sense that we are no longer human beings, but that the definition of "we" is no longer built on a presumed centrality and predetermined nature of the human.

In this sense, the posthuman is akin to the postmodern. While Hayles' aim is not to partake in debates of the postmodern, I would align her work with postmodernity (in my usage of the term). In line with the idea that postmodernity is a historically specific term, anchored to the late twentieth century, Hayles is also very explicit about her understanding of the posthuman as "historically specific and contingent term rather than a stable ontology." ("Unfinished Work: From Cyborg to Cognisphere," 160) In *How We Became Posthuman*, she aligns her approach to the posthuman with that of (Lyotardian) approaches of the postmodern as an incredulity towards metanarratives. She seeks to "replace a teleology of disembodiment" that emerges from (technology-oriented) discourses that focus on "the transformation of the human into a disembodied posthuman" (22); she wants to stay away from a techno-fetishistic view that would privilege computers and digital networks, as superseding the human (or one could say privileging a literal cyborg). In the context of Armstrong's work discussed above, one could see this teleology as coming out of the dominant tradition of modernity. In other words, this long-standing discourse that moves towards disembodiment is precisely a metanarrative that Lyotardian approaches would be apprehensive about – as is Hayles (so in this sense, the posthuman is fully compatible with the postmodern). What she aims for, instead, is to explore the many narratives in and through which stakes and claims regarding the (post) human are contested and fleshed out.

More specifically, key in Hayles' argument (and mine) is her understanding of virtuality. She defines virtuality as "the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by informational patterns." (13-14) The crux here is that this positions the virtual not as opposed to the material (as in the commonsensical understanding of the word, with connotations of cyberspace, etc.), but as a recasting of the relationship between materiality and information – or, to use a different term more in line with the previous chapters here, discursive orders. Furthermore, she anchors this understanding of virtuality as the interpenetration of the material and the informational by making a case for a new metaphysical framework. She argues that, especially in an age of electronic media, the (philosophically conventional) primacy of questions of presence/absence should shift to questions of pattern/randomness. A simple example, which she builds on the work of Friedrich Kittler, is the

word processor, which differs from the typewriter or typeset text in that little is gained by conceiving of the flickering light of a computer monitor in terms of presence or absence – instead, the relevant questions concern pattern and randomness. Hayles claims that today pattern and randomness are now “dominant over presence and absence” but that the “pattern/randomness dialectic does not erase the material world; information in fact derives its efficacy from the material infrastructures it appears to obscure.” (28) Hayles redefines the virtual, therefore, as a concept that brings into view both the material world and the informational (or discursive) – moving away from understanding signification as hinging on absence; indeed, Hayles substitutes the idea of the floating with the “flickering signifier” that affects “the *codes* as well as the subjects of representation.” (30, emphasis in original)

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Next to virtuality, Hayles’ other major concept, in my view, is her understanding of embodiment. She quotes Elizabeth Grosz in saying that “there is no body as such; there are only *bodies*.” (196, emphasis in the original) The idea is that speaking about the body as a general category or concept subsumes embodiment into discourse, with a loss of specificity and thereby containing the drawbacks of a universalist perspective. However, “[f]issuring along lines of class, gender, race, and privilege,” according to Hayles, “embodied practices create heterogeneous spaces even when the discursive formations describing those practices seem uniformly dispersed throughout society.” (195) Questions of embodiment can therefore slip out of view if one does not (conceptually) allow for specificities and contingencies. Accordingly, Hayles explicitly distinguishes between “the body” and “embodiment”: the body “is always normative relative to some set of criteria” that are historically and culturally determined (she gives the example of Renaissance medical discourse), whereas embodiment is “the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference... other and elsewhere, at once excessive and deficient in its infinite variations, particularities, and abnormalities.” (196-7) The point is not to privilege embodiment over the body – which would simply be a reversal of the previous structure – but to make sure both concepts, as well as the interplay between them, come into view. The two are different aspects that form what Hayles calls a “polarity” of the new type of subjectivity that emerges in the posthuman. While the body is a useful concept at the level of discourse (and therefore abstracted from

immediate material practices), embodiment is “inherently performative, subject to individual enactments, and therefore always to some extent improvisational,” and is always “tied to the circumstances of the occasion and the person. (197-8) Embodiment, then, is a concept to be used when considering practices and matters that cannot be abstracted from their specific situations.

156 Lastly, Hayles makes a distinction between what she calls inscribing and incorporating practices, which together with the body-embodiment distinction forms her framework for “embodied knowledge,” belonging to the new type of subjectivity of the posthuman. Inscription is akin to the body, “normalized and abstract, in the sense that it is usually considered as a system of signs operating independently of any particular manifestation.” (198) One might conceive of Hayles’ usage of “inscription” as analogous to a (poststructuralist) notion of “text.” Incorporation, on the other hand, is inextricably linked to its material embodiment. As an example, Hayles discusses the gesture of waving goodbye, which cannot be seen separately from the hand doing the waving, unless it is represented in a different medium – like a drawing or words, i.e. an inscribing practice, which is communicable. Even though the two axes of body/embodiment and inscribing/incorporating together form the framework for posthuman subjectivity, Hayles does attach greater importance to embodiment and incorporation when it comes to the present posthuman condition. In her argument, the (technological) developments in the late twentieth century require a focus on embodied knowledge (for which she also turns to the work of Bourdieu) and a departure from Enlightenment assumptions – “to turn Descartes upside down.” (203) Embodied knowledge, gained through incorporating practices, is contingent (because of the improvisational elements in embodiment), “deeply sedimented in the body,” and “partly screened from conscious view because it is habitual,” and can define “the boundaries within which conscious thought takes place,” (205) with the possibilities for changes and developments in this type of knowledge being intricately tied to new technologies. In other words, Hayles’ emphasis on embodied knowledge is a strategy to gain access to the material reality and practices that define (the conditions for) the modes of knowledge and thought that have heretofore always been privileged. Her framework, therefore, aims not to displace one perspective with another, but produces a perspective

in which the physical and informational extend into each other. The result, I would say, is a subjectivity that is not abstracted from the material world (like the Cartesian subject of liberal humanism), but prominently embodied.

The treatment of the body in *Cosmopolis* can be seen along the lines of the posthuman perspective. In effect, the posthuman is the concept that can bring into view not only the way in which the novel pushes to the extreme the different techniques for extending the body (along the lines of thinking of the body-as-lack as expandable through prosthesis), but also the novel's argument *beyond* those extremes. The type of virtuality that underlies the posthuman for Hayles, centering on the interpenetration of the material and the informational, also underlies Packer's approach and financial empire. In the novel, this attitude towards the material and informational is expressed, for example, in Packer's view of data as "soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process" (23), and the balance between the two is tipped to one end in Vija Kinski's proposition that "[p]eople will be absorbed in streams of information." (104)

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The posthuman perspective is particularly apt for a key scene in the novel where issues of the body and technology are played out on a conceptual as well as a very material level. In a nutshell, the scene is a bringing together of two components of Packer's daily routine. Firstly, Jane Melman, chief of finance, hops into the limo, having been forced to interrupt her jog on her day off because of the situation with the yen. Secondly, Dr. Ingram, a replacement for Packer's usual doctor, hops into the limo for Packer's daily full medical examination, which includes an ECG and a prostate exam. The scene thus joins a discussion of finance capital with very literal physicality. As the conversation between Melman and Packer progresses, along with the medical exam, their talk becomes charged with physicality and eventually sexuality. At the highpoint of the scene, Packer and Melman openly express their sexual desires for each other, culminating in mutual masturbation (without touching one another, though) – at the moment the doctor is palpating Packer's prostate. The scene therefore plays out concerns of the body, technology and finance in a very literal sense – and is pivotal in the way in which it anchors the prostate as emblem of concerns of the body throughout the novel. Subsequently, the way in which key elements of the posthuman

are brought into play in this scene can be taken as “blueprint” for a posthuman perspective on the body in urban space throughout the rest of the novel.

158 The medical exam itself contains many elements that fit in with the posthuman perspective. For Packer, this daily routine – not prompted by any indication of illness – aims to push back physicality as far as possible, privileging the informational over the material: “He was here in his body, the structure he wanted to dismiss in theory even when he was shaping it under the measured effect of barbells and weights. He wanted to judge it redundant and transferable. It was convertible to wave arrays of information.” (48) The point of the routine is to convert the state of Packer’s own body into information, into *knowing about* his physical condition rather than feeling it. The doctor uses a number of tools to achieve this conversion. First of all, he uses a stethoscope to listen to Packer’s heart – a device that Packer sees as antiquated, like the word skyscraper: “He looked past Ingram while the doctor listened to his heart valves open and close. The car moved incrementally westward. He didn’t know why stethoscopes were still in use. They were lost tools of antiquity, quaint as blood-sucking worms.” (43) More strongly than with the word skyscraper before, though, the actual use of the stethoscope here disproves Packer’s judgment of it being antiquated. Regardless, the tool is used to isolate specific organs here – the heart valves – thereby reinforcing a notion of a fragmented and knowable body.

Next, the doctor does an ECG, a more technologically advanced tool, where the effect of conversion of a bodily organ to information is even more pronounced: “Ingram did an echocardiogram. Eric was on his back, with a skewed view of the monitor, and wasn’t sure whether he was watching a computerized mapping of his heart or a picture of the thing itself.” (44) What appears on the monitor is a pattern of lines, yet for Packer this blurs the distinction between information and the body itself even further. The explicit process of conversion of the body into the realm of the informational facilitates the process of extension of the body, in line with Packer’s aim to overcome the body through technology. Yet this conversion – unlike (strict or literal) prosthesis – also establishes a contiguity between body and information systems (along the lines set out in Packer’s reflection on the skyscraper), allowing the body to be extended but also to be affected by the informational. In

other words, the exam establishes *virtuality* as in Hayles' usage: the interpenetration of information systems and the material body (with a clear preference for one end of the spectrum for Packer).

The culmination of the medical routine is the prostate exam. Whereas the stethoscope and ECG reinforce the move away from bodiliness, the examination of the prostate underscores the physical and its irreducible presence. Unlike the two other techniques that perceive the body from without, the prostate is examined manually: "He heard a slight rustle of latex. Then the Ingram finger entered." (46) The exam itself underscores the immediacy of physical sensation: "Ingram examined the prostate for signs. He palpated, the finger slyly prodding the surface of the gland through the rectal wall. There was pain, probably just muscles tensing in the anal canal. But it hurt. It was pain. It traveled the circuitry of nerve cells." (47) In affirming the immediacy of the physical, the pain counteracts the logic of the medical exam⁴; rather than aid in the dismissal of the physical, it even displaces the seat of consciousness to the material body:

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The pain was local but seemed to absorb everything around it, organs, objects, street sounds, words. It was a point of hellish perception that was steady-state, unchanging in degree, and not a point at all but some bundled other brain, a counter-consciousness, but not that either, located at the base of his bladder. He operated from within. He could think and speak of other things but only within the pain. He was living in the gland, in the scalding fact of his biology. (50)

The prostate exam, in effect, explores the axes that Hayles sets out for subjectivity in the posthuman. In one regard, the exam firmly belongs in the "conventional" area of Hayles' framework: the point of the exam is to produce "the body" as culturally encoded, which is to say fragmented and dismissible. The techniques involved in the exam are inscribing practices, aimed at converting the body into coded signs that are communicable, archivable in medical records, etc. This is very clear with the ECG, a technique that requires (standardized) operation of

⁴ Russell Scott Valentino also points out that pain here is "a clear bodily counterweight to thought," (147) particularly in the second half of the novel, as Packer seeks the sensation of pain, to the point of his self-destruction.

equipment, which converts the heart inside Packer’s chest to lines on a monitor, producing a coded “body.” However, the other techniques necessary – stethoscope and manual palpation – also rely on incorporating practices. The stethoscope is used to listen to and judge the sounds in Packer’s blood flow, relying on the doctor’s training and experience. Packer’s objections to the tool as antiquated, therefore, can be taken not so much in the light of a discourse of technological progress, but as a resistance to techniques that rely on the specificities of a particular person (with certain manual skills, training, and experience), rather than some mechanically reproducible technique. What Packer objects to is in fact the incorporating practice of the medical exam, of which the prostate exam is the prime example: without using any tools, it is simply one body penetrating and investigating another. The doctor’s position, then, involves a mixture of the elements of Hayles’ framework: the exam requires both inscribing and incorporating techniques; and the doctor is hired as a “faceless” and barely communicative professional (a body coded and reduced to its profession, making him a tool, effectively), but executing his duties involves the specificities and contingencies of the particular instance.

For Packer himself, the setting of the medical exam establishes a framework – essentially Hayles’ – that presents him with elements that are at odds with his aims and assumptions. The purpose of the medical exam, for Packer, is to arrive at *disembodied* knowledge of his body; in terms of Hayles’ framework consisting of the axes of “body”/embodiment and of inscribing/incorporating practices, Packer focuses entirely on two extremes: the coded “body” and inscribing practices. However, the procedure of the prostate exam underscores a degree of physicality that veers away from Packer’s view of his body, even in the setup in the limousine where all elements are geared towards overcoming the physical.

Many of the tensions that arise from this scene are brought together in the culmination of the episode, which is the sexual encounter between Packer and his chief of finance during the prostate exam. Packer enjoys the physicality as underscored by the prostate exam and cultivates this bodily immediacy into the domain of the sexual, in his connection with his chief of finance: “Something passed between them, deeply, a sympathy beyond the standard meaning that also encompassed these

meanings, pity, affinity, tenderness, the whole physiology of neural maneuver, of heartbeat and secretion, some vast sexus of arousal drawing him toward her, complicatedly, with Ingram’s finger up his ass.” (48) Their sexual connection springs entirely from their conversation, without any physical contact: “man and woman reached completion more or less together, touching neither each other nor themselves,” (52) with Packer wearing his sunglasses throughout. This non-physical nature of the sexual connection here resonates with the movement away from the physical that inheres in the medical exam (in Packer’s aim to overcome the body by converting it to knowledge about the body). Yet at the same time, like the prostate exam, sexuality affirms the physical and an immediacy of sensation – but then again the sexual connection here is immaterial; insofar as there is an exchange between Packer and his chief of finance, it is entirely verbal. The sexual tension is thus relieved not so much a-physically, but *informationally*. Therefore, this sexual encounter too exemplifies *virtuality*, the interpenetration of the physical and the informational. In that sense, the sexual connection capitalizes on the issues of the (posthuman) body brought into play by the whole procedure of the medical exam.

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Yet this sexuality is not the only facet of physicality that the scene foregrounds; the prostate is also charged with significance that keeps recurring throughout the novel (as already prefigured in the early reflection on the skyscraper). Specifically, the *asymmetry* of Packer’s prostate escapes his drive to subsume the (coded) body into information. The reason why the knowledge of his asymmetrical prostate haunts Packer so much lies not in the realm of the possible medical consequences: there are none, as his assassin Bruno Levin also tells him (“It’s harmless. A harmless variation. Nothing to worry about. Your age, why worry?” [199]). Packer’s preoccupation with his prostate, as already evinced in the early scene with the skyscraper, arises because the asymmetry cannot be accounted for in his own perspective on his body. In its asymmetry, the prostate does not behave as an “organ” in the sense that the fragmented body of modernity would see the body split into identifiable, manageable, and preferably replaceable organs that are subservient to the (discursive) construction of the body. In other words, the asymmetry confronts Packer with the limits of his take on the body; in isolating the organ, it becomes apparent that the logic of isolating

organs (as part of converting the body into information) has boundaries, precisely in the specificity of those organs, in the fact that Packer's prostate deviates from a "norm." In Hayles' terms, Packer only pursues "the body," whereas his prostate forcefully brings "embodiment" into the picture. The asymmetrical prostate, therefore, becomes an emblem for the limits of "the body," and for the fact that virtuality cannot be total or all-encompassing. Of course, the fact that the prostate is a male organ only adds to the impact of its asymmetry – limiting embodiment to the specifically male here (reinforcing the contrast with a body to be overcome, which basically lacked specification along gender lines), and also undermining Packer's foregrounded masculinity. For alongside his pursuit of profit throughout the novel, Packer actively and aggressively pursues sexual conquest (and particularly his wife – a point that will be addressed below) – and the concern about his prostate adds a degree of (male) anxiety, associating the word prostate with "pissed pants, one, and limp-dick desolation, two" (53). Overall, then, the exam does not produce Packer's body as coded "body," but establishes Packer as markedly embodied, and contrary to the nominal purpose of the exam, the crux of the knowledge about the asymmetry of his prostate is precisely that it is embodied knowledge.

The point to be stressed here is that the novel does not argue for a return to some primacy of embodiment. The complete destruction of Packer and everything he stands for as a cyber-capitalist does not mean that the logic he follows is entirely wrong. The novel shows the exclusively modern/capitalist perspective to be limited, only a part rather than a totality, and that bodiliness and specificity – embodied by the asymmetrical prostate – have a necessary place in thinking about a (post-modern) world. This point is perhaps best captured in the episode with the anarchist anti-capitalist demonstration, simultaneous with Packer's meeting with Vija Kinski, his chief of theory. After Kinski has argued the demonstration to be a fantasy of the very market system against which the protest is directed, one of the protesters sets himself on fire. This extreme form of protest has an impact on Packer: "A man in flames... What did this change? Everything, he thought. Kinski had been wrong. The market was not total. It could not claim this man or assimilate his act. Not such starkness and horror. This was a thing outside its reach." (99-100) Kinski continues to label the act unoriginal, an appropriation

and imitation of the acts of Buddhist monks, whereas Packer focuses on the more immediate (physical) aspects of this (non-verbal) act of protest: “He poured the gasoline and lit the match... Imagine the pain. Sit there and feel it... To say something. To make people think... Does he have to be a Buddhist to be taken seriously? He did a serious thing. He took his life. Isn’t this what you have to do to show them that you’re serious?” (100) For Packer this act is also communicative (as protest) and meaningful, precisely because of its extreme nature. Therefore, despite his own efforts to escape the bodily, Packer here acknowledges the legitimacy of the physical – not as being superior or primary, but as being relevant and meaningful as a specific (embodied) act.

The novel thus argues for a role for the body that is significant rather than subservient. This is also exemplified by a phrase the doctor uses during the medical exam. Packer points out “a plug of sebum and cell debris on his lower abdomen, a blackhead, slightly sinister,” (45) which is entirely banal and medically irrelevant. His exchange between Packer and the doctor is poignant here:

[Packer:] “What do we do about this?”

[doctor:] “Let it express itself.”

“What. Do nothing.”

“Let it express itself,” Ingram said.

Eric liked the sound of that. It was not unevocative. (45)

Initially Packer’s attitude towards his body here is that it is something to be controlled, or against which action can be taken (in line with the logic of prosthesis) to solve the problem. This is reinforced by his first response to the doctor’s suggestion to let the thing express itself: rather than acknowledge any possible agency on the part of his body, Packer focuses entirely on a subject-centered agency and translates the doctor’s suggestion into “doing nothing” – as if Packer himself (as a subject) is the only entity capable of action (against his body). As the doctor insists, the possibility of the body being capable of expression, of communicating itself, becomes clear as an attractive idea (though the double negative in “not unevocative” retains some of Packer’s resistance to the suggestion). Therefore, Packer’s initial view of the body – as passive, something against which action should be taken, with deficiencies to be

overcome – gives way to a view of the body as capable of expressing itself, as a communicative agent in itself.

Again, the prostate is the emblem for this shift with respect to the physical. Packer's killer, Benno Levin, aligns Packer's failure to understand the movements of the yen with the failure to accept the asymmetry of his prostate: "The importance of the lopsided, the thing that's skewed a little. You were looking for balance, beautiful balance, equal parts, equal sides. I know this. I know you. But you should have been tracking the yen in its tics and quirks. The little quirk. The misshape... That's where your answer was, in your body, in your prostate." (200)

The implied shift here is towards a view of the body that has something to say, that is worth listening to, that can speak back. The argument, therefore, is for including the specificity of the physical in a framework of understanding the world, for according the body a place that cannot be displaced by modern/Enlightenment perspectives on the physical/material.

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Body and urban space

So far I have read *Cosmopolis* in order to situate its treatment of the body, technology, and capital, but this still leaves the question how the body can be seen in light of (postmodern) urban space. Backed up by the posthuman perspective and the logic of prosthesis, the novel can be taken to provide an answer to the question why Simmel and Jameson both relate a new spatiality to the need for a new conceptualization of the body. However, the novel can also be taken to be even more specific about the relationship between the body, the subject, and urban space.

The descriptions of the city in *Cosmopolis* show how to situate the individual in the postmodern city. As much as it may be a novel of ideas filled with theoretical reflections, the entire text is also strewn with observations and descriptions of street scenes, such as the description of the diamond district discussed above. In that respect, Packer would seem to belong to a long line of urban observers that could be traced back to the figure of the *flâneur*. There is a similarity, for example, in that both Packer in his limo and the *flâneur* are separated from the scenes they observe. The *flâneur* engages the crowds and public spaces of the city with a certain detachment, foregrounding visual perception rather than bodily experience, for example. However, the isolation inside the car is

different; the driver or passenger is not detached-yet-in-the-midst (cf. Simmel's intellectual freedom), but located in a small world of its own where other worlds come together. From the limousine, Packer can look at the world either in his screens or out the window, which results in descriptions such as this one in the episode with Jane Melman and the medical exam:

Buses rumbled up the avenue in pairs, hacking and panting, buses abreast or single file, sending people to the sidewalk in sprints, live prey, nothing new, and that's where the construction workers were eating lunch, seated against bank walls, legs stretched, rusty boots, appraising eyes, all trained on the streaming people, the march-past, checking looks and pace and style, women in brisk skirts, half-running, sandaled women wearing headsets, women in floppy shorts, tourists, others high and slick with fingernails from vampire movies, long, fanged and frescoed, and the workers were alert for freakishness of any kind, people whose hair or clothing or manner of stride mock what the workers do, forty stories up, or schmucks with cell phones, who rankled them in general.

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These were scenes that normally roused him, the great rapacious flow, where the physical will of the city, the ego fevers, the assertions of industry, commerce and crowds shape every anecdotal moment. (41)

Unlike the *flâneur*, this scene does not result in a creative gaze or provide a ground for the viewing/thinking subject. Within the context of the whole novel, the street scene can better be read as the *data* of the city, akin in its "rapacious flow" to the flow of data on the screens inside the limo. The windows are more complex than the screens here, though. In effect, the screens, with their "medleys of data" (13), are not just a technological extension for Packer, but they also provide an interface through which he can access the system of cyber-capital; hence, they make Packer's relationship to the world a virtual one (in Hayles' sense). The windows, in comparison, perform a double function. As with all windows, they give (visual/informational) access to the world, while at the same time separating the viewer from the world – especially in the case of the windows in the limo, through which one can look out, but not

inside the car. In this respect the window fits in with the conventions of urban observers like the *flâneur*. Yet one could also say that the windows, as part of the moving limousine, here also take on the dynamic of the screen: they give access to the “data” of the city and thereby make up the interface that allows Packer to interact with the (informational) city. So while the windows are emblematic for Packer’s separation from the city in the limo, they also give access – like the screens – to the flows of data that make up a (virtual) world.

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Packer situates himself between these different kinds of data, changing the centered position of the observer to one in which the individual is the relay point between different kinds of data flows. It is not even so much the limo, with its screens and windows, where these systems come together, but specifically in the individual accessing, using, and interfacing with these flows – and in doing so becoming part of those systems. *Cosmopolis* shows that the interpenetration of the material and informational (in Hayles’ definition of virtuality) is not an abstraction; one can precisely locate a site for this interpenetration: the body, and particularly the body driving through the city in a car.⁵

Hence, especially within the context of prosthesis and the posthuman, the element *par excellence* that connects Packer to the city is his limousine. Just as the screens tie into the (information) systems of cyber-capitalism, the limo itself connects Packer to the “systems” of the city. In effect, the car is a prosthetic extension into urban space, and a key tool in rebalancing the relationship between subject and city. The limo is not just a rich man’s mode of transport, it mediates his experience of the city space and events, as is exemplified in the anarchist demonstration. The entire episode is filled with detailed description of the events outside in Times Square – a significant location because it is a node in the city where a lot comes together (commerce, crowds, entertainment, news in the form of the famous ticker, etc.). Furthermore, demonstrations in general are events that are both markedly public and specific for cities. In short, the

5 In a framework akin to the one used here, Rob Shields also seeks to update the figure of the *flâneur*, by drawing on the figure of the cyborg, specifically expanding on the work of Donna Haraway. Shields presents the cyborg as “granddaughter” of the *flâneur* (210), with a focus on the spaces of the cyborg (which he updates from Haraway’s 1980s text) as “milieux interlaced with political and biotechnical processes happening at nano-scale,” (217) for example. While the thrust of his argument (basically moving away from the 19th century *flâneur*, into the 21st century) is similar to mine here, the sense in which he uses the cyborg remains close to the framework of its technological/science-fiction origins (especially in his focus on nano-technologies). So while I use similar conceptual “ingredients,” Shields’ approach is less suited for my analysis here than Hayles’, for example.

scene is characteristic for the urban. While the limo is in the middle of this situation, Packer himself is removed from the goings-on of the demonstration outside, basically safe in the cocoon of his private car. Nevertheless, the whole exchange with Vija Kinski inside the limo is completely geared towards what is happening outside. Packer is thus not entirely isolated inside his limo, but stands in mediated contact with the scene outside. This becomes clear when they get stuck in the riot, when Packer sticks his head out of the sunroof to see what is going on. As his bodyguards beat protesters off the car, Packer “lowered himself into the body of the car and eased the sunroof shut” (88) – where the phrasing in terms of the “body” of the car is significant here of course. This is immediately followed by the view that “It made more sense on TV,” (89) as Packer and Kinski watch the news coverage on the screens inside the limo. Therefore, the formation here simultaneously places Packer into contact with the events unfolding outside and separates him from them. The limousine has become a *prosthetic skin*: it protects Packer from the outside world (the bodyguards violently make sure of that, though the car does get damaged) and it allows him to perceive the outside world, though not through a sense of touch but by creating an envelope with information systems and media coverage of the world. If one conceives of the relationship between individual and city along the Simmelian lines – i.e. an overload of stimuli coming from an external world – the limo can be interpreted precisely as the “protective organ” Simmel called for, just as the screen-mediated contact with the outside world could be seen in line with Jameson’s call for extending our “sensorium.”

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However, making the shift from a unidirectional conception of the relationship between subject and city to one better equipped for a post-modern city, in which the two extend into each other, the limo takes on another function as well. Like real skin, the limo is also the organ with which the individual engages the world; the limo is fully fitted to allow Packer to view and, most importantly, interact with the flows of data in the world, both in the realm of cyber-capital and in the material urban setting. The point of the limo, therefore, is a double one: it protects Packer from the city outside, but simultaneously it enables him to engage the city and the world.

This double function of the limousine as prosthetic skin drives home the implications of Packer’s early reflection on the nature of surfaces,

prompted by the skyscraper he lives in. As discussed above, he anchors his sensation of contiguity between himself and the skyscraper in the view that “a surface separates inside from out and belongs no less to one than the other.” (9) This sharedness of surfaces is especially poignant with regard to the limo. As much as the limo separates inside from out, the whole point of the car is that it is a way of engaging space, of traversing the city, and like a skin, it delimits the individual and serves as an “organ” for contact with the outside world. Yet more specifically in the urban context of Manhattan, the limousine should be taken as a surface/skin that belongs simultaneously to Packer and to the city. The white stretch limo, after all, is not a neutral car, but is rather a mode of transport that is very particular for urban spaces like Manhattan, as nodes in the network of global capitalism. It is anonymity and capitalism materialized in the vehicular, a point brought up repeatedly in the novel and precisely the reason why Packer travels in one: “He liked the fact that the cars were indistinguishable from each other... He wanted the car because it was not only oversized but aggressively and contemptuously so, metastatizingly so, a tremendous mutant thing that stood astride every argument against it... Long white limousines had become the most unnoticed vehicles in the city.” (10-11) The limo, therefore, is not so much an object that expresses the wealth of the individual in it, but it is a fixture of the Manhattan as a center of global capital. It is mobile, but nonetheless an integral part of the city in the same way that skyscrapers and streets are. Accordingly, it belongs indeed as much to the city as it does to Packer. As a skin/surface, therefore, it is the precisely in the limo that man and city come together – as a material instance of global capital in the city streets on the one hand, and as a prosthetic skin for Packer.

Even more specifically, the limousine can be taken as a tool or interface for engaging urban space that is dominated by automobility – a feature especially prominent in the postmodern city. Such space already came into view in *Lot 49* in the previous chapter, just as the French *autoroute* is among Augé’s examples of non-place, but is explored and implemented to the fullest extent in *Cosmopolis*. The term automobility has been used recently as a heading under which to explore the social,

cultural, economic, and political impact of the automobile⁶ – an impact so pervasive and everyday that it is easily taken for granted. Obviously, in the course of the twentieth century the rise of the private car has led to tremendous social and spatial changes. To some extent the development of mass transit and public transport has remained from the modern metropolis, but postmodern urban space also has different facets that follow a different logic. Mass suburbanization after WWII, for example, went hand in hand with a privileged role for the automobile (and an increase in car ownership), as the density of the metropolis (along with public transport) was traded in for the urban sprawl and the private car. Especially in the U.S., this prominence of the automobile has provided a model for moving through (urban) space that is not necessarily dependent on the density of mass transit.⁷ These developments are characteristic for the second half of the twentieth century, for a postmodern world with new configurations of mobility, compared to the spatiality of the modern metropolis for example. While this automobility may be more visible in the type of landscape of which Southern California is exemplary, its properties are no less relevant for Manhattan, as a modern metropolis that has carried over into a locus of postmodernity (especially in light of the city as a node in a network of global finance capital as foregrounded in *Cosmopolis*).

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Two features of what John Urry discusses in a short inventory of a “system of automobility” are particularly relevant for the role of the limousine in *Cosmopolis*: a changed role of the body in a culture and practice of automobility, and a heightened flexibility with respect to socio-spatial structures. Firstly, the body is positioned and used differently when it comes to moving through space. Urry points out that “although automobility is a system of mobility, it necessitates minimal movement once one is strapped into the driver’s seat.” (31) The driver’s body is locked in place – an immobile torso, limbs extended to the parts

6 Cf. a special edition of *Theory, Culture and Society* (2004: 21.4-5) dedicated to automobilities, for example.

7 This development is notably discussed in Reyner Banham’s classic book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971), where he identifies “Autopia” as one of the ecologies that typify L.A. For Banham, the historical development of the city before the dominance of automobility made it particularly compatible with the car: “the less densely built-up urban structure of the Los Angeles basin has permitted more conspicuous adaptations to be made for motor transport than would be possible elsewhere without wrecking the city.” (75) L.A. Was not built for the car, therefore, but the city was able to adopt and adapt to automobility particularly well. Accordingly, one can take Banham’s analysis of “autopia” as an ecology for L.A. as a relevant description for other cities in late-twentieth-century America generally, for example in the city spaces formed and affected by the mass suburbanization of the 1950s.

of the car that require minimal movement for the sake of driving the machine, and the eyes fixed on traffic and the gauges and lights inside the car. The result is, in Urry's words, a "disciplined 'driving body'" (31). Effectively, this configuration displaces the capacity for movement from the body to the machine, in line with the logic of prosthetic compensation/extension. In *Cosmopolis* this immobile body is taken even one step further, since Packer does not even drive his car himself, of course. Another effect of the encapsulation of the body inside the cocoon of the car is the (further) depersonalization of public space. As the city streets change from bodies walking past one another to metal cars driving past, the already delicate matter of eye contact in the street (as perceived by Packer in the diamond district) becomes an even more remote possibility. "Communities of people," according to Urry, "become anonymized flows of faceless ghostly machines." (30) This change in the nature of public space is another facet of Packer's choice for an anonymous white limousine.

A second feature of Urry's system of automobility stresses an increased and necessary flexibility on a number of fronts. While the car accords the driver a certain degree of flexibility and (notably "unbodily") freedom of movement, automobility also "divides workplaces from homes, producing lengthy commutes into and across the city," and it "splits homes and business districts, undermining local retail outlets to which one might have walked or cycled, eroding town-centers, non-car pathways and public spaces." (28) In other words, the possibilities offered by the car as a machine for transport at the same time require systemic changes in spatial arrangements, as well as in residential patterns, commercial spaces, etc. The car, therefore, is not simply a prosthetic technology of mobility; for Urry automobility "coerces people into an intense flexibility ... extending the individual into realms of freedom and flexibility ... but also constraining car 'users' to live their lives in spatially stretched and time-compressed ways." (28) The systemic impact thus goes far beyond the realm of transport; it has changed cities and the way urban space is used. In *Cosmopolis*, the limo underscores this aspect of automobility too. For example, the limo itself is an example of a radical change in the spatial organization of work: it is a fully equipped movable office. Rather than use cars to get to work, Packer's employees need to get to the limo (on foot) as a mobile place of work. The limo envelops

all that automobility has achieved to separate spatially (work, home, and even doctor's offices), while remaining automobile to the fullest – it is an automobile emblem of automobility. In this sense, all of the postmodern city comes together inside Packer's limo; it embodies all the flexibility of automobility, concentrated into a mobile node in the network of global capital.

The configuration of the individual in his car (be it as driver generally or as passenger specifically in Packer's case) also has consequences for how one sees the individual moving through the city. Basically, the car requires a shift in the "model" or paradigm for viewing movement in the city street – from movement on foot to movement by car. A consequence of this shift is that familiar ways of interpreting the individual moving through the city – such as the act of walking and the figure of the *flâneur* – lose considerable force, or at least need to be adapted. Departing from a convincing argument that de Certeau's exclusive focus on the pedestrian needs to be updated, Nigel Thrift zeroes in on driving, rather than walking, as a way to understand the city.⁸ In an approach that resonates with the posthuman perspective, Thrift argues for departing from an understanding modeled on language (as in de Certeau) when it comes to driving; instead, he argues for "driving (and passengering) as both profoundly embodied and sensuous experiences." (46) By focusing on the increasing implementation of software and ergonomics in cars (e.g. GPS systems, ABS braking, etc.), "intelligence and intentionality are distributed between human and non-human in ways that are increasingly inseparable." (49) The car, therefore, is one of the most prominent arenas for the further development of virtuality (in Hayles' terms) as the interpenetration of the physical and informational. The effect of the car and automobility is so pervasive for Thrift that the result is "a world in which knowledge about embodied knowledge is being used to produce new forms of embodiment-cum-spatial practice which are sufficiently subtle and extensive to have every chance of becoming a new

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⁸ In his move from walking to driving, Thrift offers convincing criticism of de Certeau on three main points. Firstly, he signals in de Certeau a persistence of a model based on reading and speech and doubts whether "these operations can be extended to other practices" (43) without problems. Secondly, Thrift objects to a notion of everyday life as "in some sense 'hidden' away, obscured, silenced, and able to be recovered only by tapping into the narrative harmonics of particular sites." (43) Lastly, Thrift questions de Certeau's "implicit romanticism, which comes... from a residual humanism." (44) While these three (in my view legitimate) points of criticism would not invalidate de Certeau's perspective – it remains a fertile basis for thinking about spatial practices (as I have attempted in a previous chapter) – they provide a convincing basis for Thrift to indeed move on from de Certeau.

background to everyday life.” (52) In the course of the twentieth century, therefore, the development of the car has gone beyond the purely technological and functional – it has altered the framework within which to think of the individual in (or moving through) space. The car has been at the forefront of recalibrating the role of the body in relation to the world, part of a shift from a primarily knowing/disembodied subject of Enlightened humanism to an embodied subject that needs to be seen as interwoven with the world, both materially and informationally – a development exemplified in Packer’s limousine. Automobility, then, might be seen as an essential yet often under-examined feature of postmodernity, especially in the way that it reconfigures the body in urban space.

172 In sum, then, one should see Packer in his limousine as representative of not just the excesses of ruthless capitalism but also of the general automobility of a postmodern world. The limo is not a device for moving through the city anymore; it is a moving part *of* the city. At the same time, it is a prosthetic skin for Packer, and therein exhibits the complex “directionality” in the relationship between body and city. It offers protection against an encroaching world and it allows the subject to extend into and interface with both the informational world of cyber-capitalism and the material world of the postmodern city. As a body inside his limo, Packer exemplifies the posthuman subject that belongs to postmodern urban space; it is precisely the configuration where the material and the informational interpenetrate. The city in *Cosmopolis* thus departs from the convention of a mobile individual in a spatially static and socially dynamic city, but rather features a mobile subject in a mobile part of the city – and in this mobility the notably and irreducibly embodied subject shows how the relationship between the body and the postmodern city is marked by virtuality.

Overall then, the question of the body in the city, as addressed in *Cosmopolis*, is a matter of reframing – not of radically changing positions, but of acknowledging and incorporating the body and embodiment in a conception of the subject, and thereby of the city. It bears repeating that one should not read the novel as arguing for a (reactionary) tipping of the scales back toward the body, presence, or history. It is in this light that one should read some of the other elements of the novel that I have not addressed in detail – specifically the haircut (the reason for going across town in the limo in the first place), Packer’s sexual pursuit of his

wife, and his death. All of these are elements present throughout the novel and are wrapped up in the last chapter. They all underscore, by way of conclusion in the novel (I would suggest), that a return to the (pre-)modern is not a viable option for Packer, driving home the fact that Packer's take on the world leads to a cul-de-sac.⁹

The first two of these elements can be read as leading to the third. The episode in the barbershop is in many ways nostalgic, to the point of being stereotypical: the traditional shop is located in Hell's Kitchen (an area well suited for being presented as "the old neighborhood"), the Italian barber used to cut Packer's father's hair too, and he tells stories of when Packer was young – making the barber almost a stock character. Accordingly, while Packer is comfortable there and even falls asleep in the chair (the novel started with him being unable to sleep), a return to such a nostalgic stereotype holds no ultimate appeal for Packer: he leaves in the middle of his actual haircut, before the barber is done. Even though he tests the waters, longing for the past is explicitly not for Packer, as he reflects already before entering the shop: "He wanted to feel it, every rueful nuance of longing. But it wasn't his longing or yearning or sense of the past. He was too young to feel such things, and anyway unsuited." (159) While the barbershop was the original goal of the journey across town, a return to a nostalgic past is no solution for a man primarily bent on collapsing the future into the present.

Likewise, the sexual pursuit of his wife (or, one might say the "search for love" as conventional motivation for a quest) does not offer any solution for Packer. During his journey, he has several sexual encounters (with a mistress, his female bodyguard, and the scene with his chief of finance) as well as several chance encounters with his wife, during which he expresses his desire for her, though she remains aloof. After the haircut, Packer encounters his wife again in a pile of 300 naked people in the street (for the purpose of shooting a movie scene, presumably artistic) – a scene where both (along with hundreds of other people) are literally and figuratively stripped bare and are equal, after which they have sex in an alley. The scene is short and uncomplicated, especially in comparison to the explicitness and extent of the description of the other sexual encounters. Yet while the scene is the culmination of a pursuit,

⁹ One can construe the novel in this respect as a diagnosis by way of a negative example, though one need not be tempted into reading the novel's ending as a traditional moral "cautionary tale."

with an emotional charge that steers towards a loving relationship between husband and wife, it does not provide Packer with a (stable) alternative for his self-destructive path: “The instant he knew he loved her, she slipped down his body and out of his arms.” (178) She gets dressed and disappears; love, too, is not the answer for Packer.

174 Both the haircut and the sex between Packer and his wife thus emphasize a traditional bodiliness that offers no recourse for Packer. In comparison to Packer’s transactions in the realm of global finance, for example, the haircut is basic, bordering on the primal, and in this context markedly “non-virtual” as a physical act. Similarly, with Packer and his wife having just stepped out of a pile of naked people (which one can take in this context as “stripping down to bare essentials” of the individual), the conventional pairing of physicality and love proves as fleeting as the yoctoseconds of cyber-capital. By the end of the novel, Packer’s self-annihilation seems as inevitable as it is inherent in his desire to push time, technology, and cyber-capitalism to their extremes; nostalgia and love are no remedy for Packer’s excesses.

Packer’s death, finally, is then best viewed as a denouement, as playing out the course set out by Packer’s views and actions. As Randy Laist underscores, the end is “really only a more explicit rendering of the implication of all of Eric’s visions of the future in which human experience becomes redundant and obsolete.” (269) The beginning of the episode resonates with Oedipa’s isolation at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, with Packer standing in the street without a sense of direction:

He stood in the street. There was nothing to do. He hadn’t realized this could happen to him. The moment was empty of urgency and purpose. He hadn’t planned on this. Where was the life he’d always led? There was nowhere he wanted to go, nothing to think about, no one waiting. How could he take a step in any direction if all directions were the same? (180)

However, while the moment in *Lot 49* is pregnant with possibility, on the threshold between the failure of the detective plot (and its modern epistemology) and postmodernity (extending out into America), the moment in *Cosmopolis* is just a dead end for Packer. Rather than adopt the alternatives that have come into view during the course of the novel (e.g.

to acknowledge irregularities instead of focus on chartable patterns, as his murderer tells him, embodied in the asymmetrical prostate), Packer has persisted in his pursuit of extremes, with self-destruction as the only available avenue left. Tellingly, only in his resignation to his death – as he goes in, guns blazing, to face his assassin – does he adopt some of the doctor’s advice: “He entered shooting. He did not aim and fire. He just fired. Let it express itself.” (186)

More specifically, in the context of my argument here, the interest in the final episode does not lie in the somewhat artificial major elements of the episode (e.g. the monologue in which Packer talks to his gun, or the fact that Packer shoots himself in the hand, for example) but in the way Packer is presented as no longer being a subject. This is made explicit when Packer and Levin both have their guns drawn: “The man fired a shot into the ceiling. It startled him. Not Eric; the other, the subject.” (187) After this, Levin is referred to several other times as “the subject.” In my view, the point here is not so much to construe Levin as a subject in binary opposition to Packer. Both are presented by their first names as well in the remaining dialogue, for example, and Levin as subject resonates with the phrase “subject reduced” (141) used by Packer’s bodyguard once they take out a pie-wielding assailant. Moreover, the novel certainly does not argue for Levin as positive example (he is as mad as Packer is cold-blooded), so one should not read this passage morally either. The crux, in my view, is that the presentation of Levin as “the subject” serves to underscore Packer’s position as one in which subjectivity crumbles; it is the consequence of the cul-de-sac that Packer, in pushing matters to their extremes, has ended up in.¹⁰ Packer’s death can be taken as the physical correlate of the demise of the discourse on which he bases his perception of himself and the world, of himself as a subject. In this respect, and to explicitly adopt medical metaphors in line with Simmel and Jameson, *Cosmopolis* can indeed be taken as a *diagnosis*: the novel’s reflections on capitalism, technology, time, and the body in the city are all in light of a “case” of excess, which proves to be terminal.

In conclusion, then, *Cosmopolis* can be read as symptomatic, particu-

¹⁰ In a reading of *Cosmopolis* in the light of Levinas, Aaron Chandler remarks that “Packer’s inability to see others becomes one of the novel’s leitmotifs.” (250) The acknowledgement of Levin as other and subject in this final episode only underscores this, much like the adoption of the phrase “let it express itself” coincides with Packer’s resignation to his demise.

larly when it comes to questions of the body and urban space. One can see this best in Packer's objections to what he deems archaic, if one reads them for more than their face value – such as the reflection on the skyscraper or the stethoscope. By way of a final telling example here that also coincides with an example that Augé gives: after the medical exam, Packer sees someone at an ATM (his assassin Benno Levin, in fact) and reflects on its antiquated nature:

He was thinking about automated teller machines. The term was aged and burdened by its own historical memory. It worked at cross-purposes, unable to escape the inference of fuddled human personnel and jerky moving parts. The term was part of the process that the device was meant to replace. It was anti-futuristic, so cumbersome and mechanical that even the acronym seemed dated. (54)

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This exemplary passage condenses Packer's view on the problem (also identified and thematized by Barthelme) of how language can relate to the world: the word is not transparent, but it bears the traces of its relations to the world – which in itself is a burden or problem. However, Packer does not offer any sort of alternative; his view is a negatively oriented one, in which the progressive present (which has supplanted the future) is defined in negative opposition to the past. He does little but lament the slow-down caused by anything that stands in his way – and it is this lamentation that the novel rejects. In line with Augé's treatment of the ATM as an element in non-place, the point of the machine is that one should not situate it in a discourse built on a modern/Enlightenment mold or a discourse of technological progress. One should rather take the ATM as exemplary for reconfiguring the relations between the subject, the body, and space in a new framework of virtuality – as well as emblematic for the way in which *Cosmopolis* explores the post-modern and posthuman. Hence, reading the novel as a diagnosis lays bare not only the dead end of Packer's take on the world, but also that the cure should not be sought in "simple" alternatives. Instead, to also bring into view issues like embodiment and incorporation, one needs to think within (postmodern and posthuman) coordinates to be able to account for the more complex (virtual) configuration of subjectivity and bodiliness in the postmodern city.

Coda: Narrativity and the City

By way of a coda to the previous chapter on *Cosmopolis*, but also to address a final issue to conclude this study as a whole, I would like to consider an essay by Don DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future” (2001). The text is an early response to the events of 9/11 (published in *Harper’s* in December 2001)¹, discussing terrorism, but also global capitalism, technology, and the drive towards the future, all firmly anchored in its presentation of New York City – in short, it covers much of the same ground as *Cosmopolis*, and could almost be read as a companion piece.²

More importantly, the essay takes head on an issue that has been tacitly present throughout my argument so far, but which still requires explicit discussion: the issue of narrative. In the previous chapters, I have explored the postmodern city, spaces, and discourses as represented in literary works, leaving the question of the nature of these representations themselves largely untouched – the primary focus has been on the urban rather than on the literary, for example. However, the fact that these representations are in narrative form cannot be discounted, of course. It is unnecessary for me here to engage in broader debates on questions of language, text, or visuality and the city, for such discussions have been carried out at great length elsewhere.³ However, in the context of this study, as well as the representation of the postmodern city generally, some consideration of narrative is needed here.

There are two additional reasons to specifically raise the question of narrative in this study. Firstly, the literary works discussed here, as *narratives*, all move away from “standard” conventions of narrative, which are basically those of a realist mode of representation (or perhaps even more specifically the conventions established by the nineteenth-century

1 The essay was reprinted in the UK in *The Guardian* as well (on Dec. 22, 2001).

2 Linda Kauffman explores another interesting connection between this essay and DeLillo’s much better received later novel *Falling Man* (2007), which (unlike *Cosmopolis*) directly concerns 9/11. For the sake of clarity, I want to emphasize here that my aim is not to engage in any debates directly about 9/11 or its aftermath. My reason for engaging “In the Ruins of the Future” is DeLillo’s approach of New York – not because the text’s subject matter is 9/11.

3 Of the studies already mentioned in the introduction, particularly insightful examples of such studies are Douglas Tallack’s article “City Sights: Mapping and Representing New York City,” Steven Marcus’ article “Reading the Illegible: Some Modern Representations of Urban Experience,” and Anthony King’s volume *Re-Presenting the City* (and particularly Rob Shields’ article “A Guide to Urban Representation and What to Do About It: Alternative Traditions of Urban Theory” in that volume).

novel). The works addressed in the previous chapters initially appear familiar – as stories with events unfolding – but at the same time they all feature a frustration or departure from narrative conventions. Both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *City of Glass* start off with a detective plot (drawing on a genre with strong conventions regarding narrative structures), but in both novels the quest for meaning (the epistemological motivation behind the plot) derails entirely, resulting in suspension rather than resolution of the plot. Furthermore, despite its episodic structure of an “odyssey” across Manhattan, *Cosmopolis* revolves more around its theoretical reflections than around its plot; or as Walter Kirn remarked in his review (not entirely incorrectly), “the novel stuff (like story) comes second.” Lastly, Barthelme’s “The Balloon” features a narrative about placing the balloon over the Manhattan sky and removing it, but this is minimal and nominal; the text revolves more around the juxtaposition of spatialities than about its plot. Therefore, none of them features a straightforward plot that plays itself out from start to finish. In fact, I would even suggest that in these works “the plot” (in the sense of the “main”) is only of secondary interest at best, if not largely beside the point.

Of course this is a matter of my selection here too, but I would argue that the different narrative structures in these works is not accidental, but meaningful in light of the postmodern (urban) world to which they relate. I would argue that narrative as a device for representing the world is in much the same situation as language generally is for Barthelme (in his essay “Not-Knowing,” as discussed in chapter 1): a world characterized by postmodernity is difficult to speak about with existing words (with all their ideological charge, or hollowness, for example) and perhaps it has become equally difficult to render this world in narrative form, at least within the conventions we are used to. From a Lyotardian perspective, one might conjecture that narrativity itself is a sort of grand narrative that can no longer be maintained in the postmodern in the first place.

Secondly, on a more general level there is also the question of how narrative and the (postmodern) city relate to each other. It is easy to see how the spatial, temporal, social, economic, political, etc. are all important dimensions of the city, but one cannot simply assume that narrative is too. For example, throughout this study I have favored space as a key category in which to think of the city. Yet the key feature of narrative is

the sequentiality of events, so the primary distinctive category here is time.⁴ One possible way to bridge the gap between the city as a spatial entity and the temporal category of narrative is to turn to *experience*, which can be narrativized.⁵ However, this would limit the idea of representation of the city to a realm that then hinges on the subjective (with the risk of reinstating a subject along Cartesian lines) and which would therein be severely reductive. Another difficulty would be that, however much the chronology of a plot may be altered, the structure in which a narrative is presented in a literary text is necessarily *linear* – a further reduction of the urban. If one were to play devil’s advocate and return to Lefebvre’s framework in *The Production of Space*, one might even argue that a narrative of the city is always a reductive “representation of space,” belonging to his second category of “conceived space” – a dominant category that needs to be counterbalanced, which would lead (as it does for Lefebvre, in his aversion to the textual/semiotic) to apprehension when it comes to narrative in relation to space. However, I would argue that narrative can certainly be part of “representational space” and can certainly represent the city – but that calls for narrative forms that do not reduce the spatial in favor of the temporal and that can accommodate the plurality of the city.

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Bringing these two points together shows that the development towards a postmodern world entails that the frameworks for narratives of the city developed in modernity can no longer function in the same way. The dominant conventions for city narratives – from which the texts discussed in the previous chapters depart – are those rooted in the nineteenth-century novel (e.g. Dickens, Balzac), where the city functions as the backdrop for a sequence of events to unfold. Often the city prominently features at the start, to “set the scene,” frequently with

4 To give just a few examples where time is considered to be the primary aspect of narrative: Marie-Laure Ryan takes as a starting point “the representation of a sequence of events, the most universally accepted feature of narrative” (25); Paul Ricoeur explicitly takes “narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate reference” (169); and lastly, for Mieke Bal “time is a given, a self-evident for the time-based arts... - narrative, theatre, film, video, dance, music, to name but the most obvious ones” (77).

5 Another potential avenue of exploration in the relationship between the city and narrative – worth mentioning, though not one to be pursued here – could take off from recent work in narratology such as that by David Herman (e.g. in his *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*) on “worlds,” or the world-building aspects of narrative. However, since Herman’s work is oriented mainly towards developing a narratology (for the purpose of reading narratives), it would be a completely different undertaking to attempt to see how these narratological tools can be put to work in understanding the relationship between the space of a world and actual urban spaces, for example.

a description of the city seen from above and from afar.⁶ The spatial dimension of the city, then, acts as the ground for a narrative structured by time. The works discussed in the previous chapters display a different relation between urban space and plot. For example, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa finds herself in urban landscapes permeated by the Tristero, teeming with possibilities for “projecting a world.” The city does not act as a stable (back)ground for a plot to play itself out to the end, but gives access to what is almost an *explosion* of tiny plots, with each connection to the Tristero spawning a new story, none of which leads to “resolution.” Urban space, then, is not a passive backdrop for a (linear) sequence of events unfolding (foregrounding the temporal), but instead the city constitutes a world of possible narratives. Narratives here take a different form than the “big” narratives one is used to from either the realist novel or the detective genre, for example, but they rather take the form of a constellation of smaller narratives emerging as individual episodic stories (e.g. of a funeral procession for a Sufi rapper in *Cosmopolis* or the history of the Peter Pinguid society in *Lot 49*) or small-scale spatial practices (like walking in the streets, or playing on top of a balloon). Not time, but space ties these narratives together.

To further explore the question of narrativity and the postmodern city, I want to consider DeLillo’s essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” which precisely investigates the possibilities of narrative in its response to 9/11. Furthermore, while the essay does not provide any definitive answers to the question how to respond to the catastrophic event, it (re)presents the city as at least the place to turn to. This move, I argue, ties the question of narrative (taken to its extreme in the context of a catastrophe like 9/11) to the issue of representation of the city, and demonstrates the kind of narrative that belongs to the postmodern city.

In the ruins of the story

Even though DeLillo’s essay on 9/11 begins by offsetting the attacks against a picture of global capitalism, the issues that the essay takes on revolve not so much around the global socio-economic or political context, but around how to respond to the catastrophic event. The *form* of his response, then, is itself perhaps best seen as the essay’s main

6 As also mentioned in chapter 2, Burton Pike’s book *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* is excellent on this point.

argument, and the crux of that form is that one cannot turn to simple answers. One can therefore read the essay on two levels: on the one hand there is what DeLillo talks *about* (ideologies, actors, events, etc.); on the other hand, there is the variety of ways in which these elements are addressed, engaged, and suspended. Though perhaps obvious, this distinction bears emphasizing because on the level of “content” DeLillo evokes many of the elements one would expect (e.g. familiar oppositions, such as the U.S. vs. the terrorists, “us” vs. “them,” and most importantly past vs. future), yet he does not take any clear stance toward them on this level. In fact, as Marco Abel convincingly argues, “DeLillo’s essay demonstrates the impossibility of saying anything definitive about 9/11 – especially anything that captures the event’s meaning” (1237). Instead of argumentatively making a point, the text demonstrates that one cannot turn to existing or conventional straightforward frameworks (such as an essayistic argument) to come to terms with the event, but instead the essay seeks an appropriate response in the form of an abundance of stories and reflections.

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Instead of simply condemning the attacks or choosing sides in the political/ideological oppositions raised, DeLillo casts the problem explicitly in terms of *narrative*. From the outset, DeLillo claims that after 9/11 “the world narrative belongs to the terrorists” (33), and he initially presents the attacks not so much as events, but as a narrative:

It was America that drew their fury. It was the high gloss of our modernity. It was the thrust of our technology. It was our perceived godlessness. It was the blunt force of our foreign policy. It was the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind.

Terror’s response is a narrative that has been developing over years, only now becoming inescapable. (33)

The task that DeLillo seems to be setting himself, is likewise framed in similar terms: “The Bush administration was feeling a nostalgia for the cold war. This is over now. Many things are over. The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us *to create the counternarrative*” (34, emphasis added). In these passages, the word “narrative” is key (and it recurs often in the essay), but it is just that – a word, a statement. DeLillo claims

that terror's response "is a narrative," but he does not *tell* this narrative. Positing these elements as narratives does not serve as an introduction to recounting them, but as a priming device, to call attention to what is at stake in the essay – which is not so much politics or capitalism, but narrativity.

182 Accordingly, DeLillo answers a call "to create the counternarrative," which seems not to consist so much in finding a single, suitable (counter-), but more in finding the right form. The involvement of stories in the event is presented as evident: "There are a hundred thousand stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world... People running for their lives are part of the story that is left to us... There are stories of heroism and encounters with dread... There are stories that carry around their edges the luminous ring of coincidence, fate, or premonition" (34). However, the scale of the impact of 9/11 raises, for DeLillo, the question of the *adequacy* of narrative in the first place: "There are configurations that chill and awe us both. Two women on two planes, best of friends, who die together and apart, tower 1 and tower 2. What desolate epic tragedy might bear the weight of such juxtaposition?" (34). Evidently, finding a story itself is not the problem (DeLillo tells a basic story in a single sentence, after all) but what he is looking for is a narrative that can "bear the weight," that can adequately convey not so much the facticity of events, but the force or charge inherent in them. The question, as the consideration of the genre of epic tragedy also indicates, is what narrative *form* (or genre) is required.

This framing in terms of narrative is all the more relevant because two common modes of representation of events are deemed inadequate for the magnitude of 9/11: news coverage on the one hand, and analogy on the other. To make the first point, DeLillo draws a comparison with the (first) war in Iraq: "eleven years ago, during the engagement in the Persian Gulf, people had trouble separating the war from coverage of the war" (38). The intense coverage made it difficult to "honor the fact the war was still going on, untelevised" (38). In this case, the distinction between the events and their media representation became blurred, with the reality of the war entirely enveloped in the formats of broadcast media; the CNN coverage of the Gulf War collapsed war and media event into each other. DeLillo's implication here is that this coverage is

emblematic for today's regime of representation in news media.⁷ In the case of 9/11, however, even with incessant news reports, the catastrophe could not be reduced and captured by television cameras:

There was no confusion of roles on TV. The raw event was one thing, the coverage another. The event dominated the medium. It was bright and totalizing and some of us said it was unreal. When we say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions. (38-9)

The events of 9/11 were “too real” to be mediated by television; the events could not be subsumed in the type of coverage along the lines of the Gulf War. However, this does not mean that coverage of 9/11 returned to “objective” or “transparent” journalism either. What was at stake was not blurring or neutrality in the media: DeLillo's argument is that the impact of 9/11 exceeded what such media are able to adequately represent in the first place.

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More importantly, just as the events could not be “directly” conveyed by news cameras, they could also not be conveyed *indirectly* by making comparisons, for “[t]he event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is” (39). The point here, for DeLillo, is a more fundamental one: the shock and horror of the event cannot be approached by way of comparison, because nothing could do them justice - “In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity” (39). The singularity of the (traumatic) event cannot be represented by (straightforwardly) employing conventional rhetorical devices.⁸ There is only the shock and horror “as it is”; they are not “like” anything else. Yet this does not preclude reflection on the event, nor does it entail that one cannot speak adequately about the event at all, for DeLillo: “But living language is not diminished. The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us” (39). In other words, he recognizes the singularity of the event and

⁷ DeLillo's point here is in line with familiar discussions of the relations between media and war, such as emerge from the work of Baudrillard or Virilio, whose works *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002) and *Ground Zero* (2002), respectively, directly address the terrorist attacks of 9/11 – and war and representation are major themes throughout Virilio's work, of course.

⁸ For an insightful discussion of this issue, see Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996).

its implications, but simultaneously does not shirk from a (self-imposed) task as a writer to somehow come to terms with the event through language, through writing.⁹

184 The argument in DeLillo's essay, then, is that the event requires a response in narrative form. However, straightforward stories will not do, and the possibility of a single or correct ("the") narrative of 9/11 is out of the question. Instead, DeLillo presents shards of narratives that are difficult to understand productively in terms of conventional frameworks; little can be gained by focusing on temporality to understand the narrative parts of the essay, for example, rendering ideas like plot or fabula irrelevant. In my view, what DeLillo turns to in the abundance of (minimal or skeletal) narratives in this essay, is instead the representation of the city, of city scenes. Simply put, *DeLillo calls for narrative, and turns to the city* – shifting the focus in narrative from the temporal (sequences of events) to the spatial. The result is a profusion of narratives, embedded in and springing from the city.

A key element in finding an appropriate narrative form is to undercut any idea of a story as a means to uncover some "truth" or "meaning" in or behind the event. This strategy is particularly carried out in the essay's formal aspects. At the start of the text, it speaks of the situation in the world, and one would take the author to bear responsibility for what is said – as with journalistic/essayistic writing generally. However, part 4 of the text suddenly changes genres, presenting very clearly a (seemingly conventional) narrative recounting the experiences of a couple, Karen and Marc, and their children. Here is an illustrative passage:

They all moved into the stairwell, behind a fire door, but smoke kept coming in. It was gritty ash and they were eating it.

He ran back inside, grabbing towels off the racks and washcloths out of drawers and drenching them in the sink, and filling his bicycle water bottles, and grabbing the kids' underwear. He thought the crush of buildings was the thing to fear most. This is what would kill them.

⁹ Marco Abel's argument is that DeLillo's essay takes up this task by assuming an "aesthetic stance" that avoids representational language, focusing on "the affective quality of the event's singularity and on how language can stylistically image and, in the process, reconfigure what it means for contemporary thought to respond ethically to whatever the event's content might be(come)" (1237).

Karen was on the phone, talking to a friend in the district attorney's office, about half a mile to the north. She was pleading for help. She begged, pleaded and hung up. For the next hour a detective kept calling with advice and encouragement. (36-7)

Since the text was written by a major American novelist, this "excursion" into a familiar narrative mode might not be surprising; one could see this as DeLillo turning to literary techniques for the sake of his argument in the essay. One could easily take this account, for instance, as an elaboration or magnification of the type of story DeLillo identified in single sentences before. In that sense, this could illustrate, or be part of the narrative response that DeLillo calls for.

However, the point of the story of Karen and Marc is precisely to dismiss this type of narrative as an adequate response. The suggestion of the story as emblematic, for example, is undermined by the question of who is speaking. As the story progresses, suddenly a first-person narrator emerges:

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When the second tower fell, my heart fell with it. I called Marc, who is my nephew, on his cordless. I couldn't stop thinking of the size of the towers and the meager distance between those buildings and his. He answered, we talked. I have no memory of the conversation except for his final remark, slightly urgent, concerning someone on the other line, who might be sending help. (37)

Up to this point, there seemed to be only a non-intrusive, external narrator. The sudden appearance of a first-person narrator *in* the story, contacting Marc over the phone, suddenly throws a spanner in the works. One could attempt to equate this narrator with DeLillo (to whom we would attribute the essay in the first place), but that would run into the problem of the curious mix of personal involvement (Marc being his nephew) and apparent omniscience throughout the rest of the story of Marc and Karen (narrating their thoughts and fears, for example). This does not seem to be a personal account by DeLillo, then, but instead it seems to be *fictional*. Yet DeLillo's point does not seem to be to turn to fiction, as if a stylized fictional account could metonymically represent the "shock and horror as it is" (39), for the essay explicitly argues against

that. The effect of this passage is a sudden rupture in the semblance of realism, calling attention to the narrative form; one sees how the story of Karen and Marc does not present the events “as they are,” but in a visibly artificial form.

Hence, the point of the story seems to be precisely its failure, as a singled out and stylized narrative, to constitute an adequate response. This point is underlined by tone of the ending of the section, with the main characters joining other people in the city streets, looking for safety:

They were covered in ash when they reached shelter at Pace University, where there was food and water, and kind and able staff members, and a gas-leak scare, and more running people.

Workers began pouring water on the group. Stay wet, stay wet. This was the theme of the first half-hour.

Later a line began to form along the food counter.

Someone said, “I don’t want cheese on that.”

Someone said, “I like it better not so cooked.”

Not so incongruous, really, just people alive and hungry, beginning to be themselves again. (37)

The section ends here, with a scene and a tone that indicate a different perspective than at the start. The contrast between, on the one hand, the terror and fear of the attacks and the towers collapsing, and on the other hand highlighting a preference for food without cheese on top is a juxtaposition in which one could see ironic or cynical overtones (even when faced with global terror, people quickly return to their everyday lives of luxury and picky behavior). If one had had any hope for the story of Karen and Marc to be a “truthful” account that might indicate some sort of “meaning” in the event, the narration and the rhetoric of the stylized ending together make sure that the point comes across: a straightforward, familiar narrative cannot do the event justice.

Instead, DeLillo seems to insist on the importance of *plurality* in a narrative response to 9/11. In his many examples and instances of small narratives, he moves away from the primacy of time as a structuring principle for narrative – a move towards the spatial, which allows DeLillo to escape the reductiveness of “large” and linear narratives. As mentioned

above, the text presumes a multiplicity of stories running through the city and the world, and immediately continues by listing some of them:

There are a hundred thousand stories crisscrossing New York, Washington, and the world. Where we were, who we know, what we've seen or heard. There are the doctors' appointments that saved lives, the cellphones that were used to report the hijackings. Stories generating others and people running north out of the rumbling smoke and ash. Men running in suits and ties, women who'd lost their shoes, cops running from the skydive of all that towering steel. (34)

One can imagine how these stories might be expanded and filled in with greater detail, but DeLillo already continues by zooming in on details, presenting them as stories themselves:

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The cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women. The box cutters and credit cards. The paper that came streaming out of the towers and drifted across the river to Brooklyn backyards, status reports, résumés, insurance forms. Sheets of paper driven into concrete, according to witnesses. Paper slicing into truck tires, fixed there.

These are among the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day. We need them, even the common tools of the terrorists, to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response. (35)

One can see here a multitude of stories, each object itself capable of spawning a story. The idea here is not that there is one "overall narrative" ("the" counternarrative) that would tie everything together, but rather that these "marginal stories" are part of a response that is itself a plurality. At the same time, one can also see here that these "objects and marginal stories" are not, in the strict sense, narrative at all, for they contain no events: DeLillo simply presents a list of objects *as a story*. In other words, the sequence of events that usually makes up a narrative is replaced by description, by the piling up of objects/stories. The

principle here, therefore, is not a progression in time, but a *compiling* of elements. As a part of the “strategy” of DeLillo’s narrative response, then, this list approach therefore accomplishes two things. On the one hand, it underscores the need for a perspective built on a conception of the event as in itself plural (or, conversely, it underscores the impossibility of a single perspective or story). On the other hand, it seeks narrativity not in (the causality or sequentiality of) events, but in the objects scattered randomly throughout the ruins. The combination results in a type of narrative that revolves around building up a plural world – a world that is close to (or even, I might suggest here, is) the city.

One can see this turn to the city in the middle of this part of the text, where DeLillo moves from kaleidoscopic accounts to a more sustained description of Union Square Park:

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In Union Square Park, about two miles north of the attack site, the improvised memorials are another part of our response. The flags, flowerbeds and votive candles, the lamppost hung with paper airplanes, the passages from the Koran and the Bible, the letters and poems, the cardboard John Wayne, the children’s drawings of the twin towers, the hand-painted signs for Free Hugs, Free Back Rubs, the graffiti of love and peace on the tall equestrian statue.

There are many photographs of missing persons, some accompanied by hopeful lists of identifying features. (Man with panther tattoo, upper right arm.) There is the saxophonist, playing softly. There is the sculptured flag of rippling copper and aluminum, six feet long, with two young people still attending to the finer details of the piece. (35)

This is a description of spontaneous memory practices that are highly public: people coming together in a public place, reappropriating it as a site for mourning and remembrance. In this regard, this type of practice is also typically urban, relying on the availability of public spaces as well as on the coming together of the diverse population of the city. Moreover, this practice is also an instance of Augé’s non-place: it hinges on a reappropriation of urban space by way of signage (flowers, candles, photographs, etc.), and it is a practice that is not rooted in the space in which it takes place. One could even take the act of placing flowers or

lighting candles as equivalent to the paradigmatic identity check in the non-place of the airport lounge – adding the participant in such memory practices to the list of “generic subjects” of non-place, like the driver on the freeway, passenger in transit, or supermarket consumer. Even though these memory practices emerge spontaneously, produced by the participants themselves rather than by a company or other institution (like with airports or supermarkets) they produce a spatial arrangement that configures new relations between individuals like in any non-place. In short, even though the scene is prompted by the singular catastrophe of 9/11, what DeLillo describes here is the non-place of the postmodern city.¹⁰ Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly here, seeing Union Square Park as a non-place not only underscores the urban dimension of DeLillo’s essay, but one can also read it as providing a model for the type of narrative that he calls for: a formation that can move away from temporality (as one finds in the historical rootedness inherent in anthropological place, for example) and instead finds ways of accommodating relations in the here and now in terms of spaces, signs, and objects – in line with the objects-as-narratives that DeLillo discusses.

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Lastly, the end of the essay likewise affirms the different take on narrative and the turn to the city. DeLillo describes a scene on Canal street, a few days after 9/11 and a month before.¹¹ Again, the accent is not on events progressing, but on building up an urban world:

On Friday of the first week a long series of vehicles moves slowly west on Canal Street. Dump trucks, flatbeds, sanitation sweepers. There are giant earthmovers making a tremendous revving sound. A scant number of pedestrians, some in dust masks, others just standing, watching, the indigenous people, clinging to walls and doorways, unaccustomed to traffic that doesn’t bring buyers and sellers, goods and cash. The fire rescue car and state police cruiser, the

10 This scene can be understood in terms of Pierre Nora’s well-known *lieux de mémoire* (1989) as well, of course. While it is not my aim to employ that concept here too, such a perspective would be compatible with my understanding of Augé’s *non-lieux*.

11 At this point in the text, and at several others, the description of street scenes in the first person singular can unproblematically be attributed to DeLillo (or at least equated with the overall speaker of the essay). It is telling that, apart from the narrator in the story of Karen and Marc, DeLillo reserves the first person singular for presenting direct experiences in the street. By contrast, the first person plural is used in the more general passages reflecting on global politics etc. (along the lines of “we Americans”). One could surmise from this distinction that the kind of subjectivity suggested in this essay is one that is rooted much more in the immediacy of urban space than in abstract discourses, for example.

staccato sirens of a line of police vans. Cops stand at the sawhorse barriers, trying to clear the way. Ambulances, cherry pickers, a fleet of Con Ed trucks, all this clamor moving south a few blocks ahead, into the cloud of sand and ash.

One month earlier I'd taken the same walk, early evening, among crowds of people, the panethnic swarm of shoppers, merchants, residents and passers-by, with a few tourists as well, and the man at the curbstone doing acupoint massage, and the dreadlocked kid riding his bike on the sidewalk. This was the spirit of Canal Street, the old jostle and stir unchanged for many decades and bearing no sign of SoHo just above, with its restaurants and artists' lofts, or TriBeCa below, rich in architectural textures. Here were hardware bargains, car stereos, foam rubber and industrial plastics, the tattoo parlor and the pizza parlor. (40)

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These descriptions are in a form that is familiar from realist narratives, where this type of description often establishes the setting for the plot. However, in DeLillo's essay these descriptions do not "set the scene" at all – they *are* the scene. In effect, these two street scenes follow the model for narrative set out in the essay: their logic is that of compiling, putting together objects and events, people and machines – in line with the rest of the essay. For example, the first scene presents what DeLillo described earlier as "part of the story that is left to us" (34), the city showing the signs of the destruction of the towers. The scene a month earlier follows the same model: elements adding up to shape the representation of the city. The structure here is not that of realist narrative (a backdrop of urban space, in which a plot unfolds in time), but instead urban space is the structuring principle – the city is where the multitude of tiny narratives comes (and is held) together.

Yet there is, of course, also an obvious (temporal) contrast between the two scenes: the ruin in the first scene is mourned, while the panethnic jostle and stir of the spirit of Canal Street are enjoyed. However, the juxtaposition should not be read as simply setting up a mournful eulogy for the second, for example. The event can only be done justice if taken "as it is," within or behind which one should not try to find meaning by

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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.

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.

Samenvatting

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Reflecties van/op de Stad: Literatuur, Ruimte, en Postmoderniteit is een interdisciplinaire studie van literaire representaties van de postmoderne stad. Waar het begin van de 20ste eeuw gekenmerkt werd door de metropool met een hoge concentratie van mensen en bedrijvigheid, wordt de tweede helft van de 20ste eeuw gekenmerkt door enerzijds een ander soort stad – uitgestrekter en flexibeler, alleen te vatten in andere kad-ers – en anderzijds door een veranderd gebruik van bestaande stedelijke ruimte. Deze studie verkent facetten van de postmoderne stad aan de hand van Amerikaanse literaire werken uit de periode van ongeveer 1960-2000. Deze facetten van de stad worden uiteraard weergegeven in literaire teksten, al gebruik ik literatuur om uitdrukkelijk buiten letterkundige hokjes te kijken. Literaire werken bieden namelijk niet alleen een reflectie van, maar ook een reflectie op de stad. Mijn doel is om stedelijke vraagstukken te benaderen vanuit literatuur als manier van denken over de stad, die dan ook samengebracht kan worden met theoretische en sociaal-wetenschappelijke manieren van denken.

Deze studie draait dus enerzijds om bepaalde facetten van de stad – zoals de positie van het individu, kenmerkende soorten ruimte, en de rol van het lichaam – maar tegelijkertijd ook om het ontwikkelen van een benadering die verschillende vakgebieden verbindt. Ieder hoofdstuk is een interdisciplinaire verkenning van een ander stedelijk vraagstuk – of anders gezegd, aangezien deze vraagstukken natuurlijk in elkaars verlengde liggen, ieder hoofdstuk bekijkt de postmoderne stad telkens vanuit een andere invalshoek door verschillende perspectieven en concepten met elkaar te verbinden. Tezamen genomen vormt deze studie daarmee een brede beschouwing van de postmoderne stad, waarin een interdisciplinaire manier van denken wordt opgebouwd en uitgebouwd in de verschillende hoofdstukken.

De introductie zet de centrale begrippen voor deze studie uiteen. Een van de kernpunten is het samenbrengen van een geesteswetenschappelijke en een sociaal-wetenschappelijke blik. Vakgebieden als geografie, sociologie, en urban studies hebben een goed instrumentarium om (empirisch) te kijken naar stedelijke vraagstukken, maar dit is vaak niet toereikend voor vragen over betekenis (veelal aangeduid als

een “symbolische” dimensie van de stad). De geesteswetenschappen zijn daarentegen goed toegespitst op betekenis, maar zijn minder in staat vragen over representatie en betekenis te verankeren in de (stedelijke) werkelijkheid. Zoals bijvoorbeeld ook naar voren komt in het invloedrijke werk van geograaf Edward Soja, vraagt met name de postmoderne stad om een nieuwe manier van denken waarbij een literair perspectief van dienst kan zijn: literaire representatie is immers niet gebonden aan meetbare categoriën, maar kan bijvoorbeeld een goed beeld geven van de pluraliteit van de postmoderne stad.

Een ander centraal concept in deze studie is “postmoderniteit.” Deze complexe term vereist een heldere invulling vooraf. Om te beginnen hanteer ik een strikt onderscheid tussen “postmodernisme” en “postmoderniteit.” Het “-isme” is een nauw begrip, voor een esthetiek/thematiek in kunst, literatuur, architectuur, etc. Postmoderniteit is een breder sociaal-cultureel fenomeen waarin verschillende, bijvoorbeeld filosofische of socio-economische vraagstukken van de tweede helft van de 20ste eeuw samenkomen. Om in vogelvucht hier mijn begrip van postmoderniteit in te kaderen en academische verwantschappen aan te geven: mijn focus ligt op de representatie van werelden (ofwel, meer McHale dan Hutcheon in de literatuurwetenschap); op manieren waarop aan ruimte betekenis gegeven wordt en door tekens vorm krijgt (meer Venturi dan Jencks in architectuur); op een veelheid van kleine i.p.v. grote verhalen (Lyotard); op het samenbrengen van culturele representatie en socio-economische factoren (voortbouwend op Jameson); en op de flexibiliteit en pluraliteit van de stad (zoals die naar voren komt in de L.A. School in urban studies). Tenslotte kijkt deze studie weliswaar naar werken die in een canon van postmodernisme passen, maar het is me uitdrukkelijk niet om het postmodernisme van deze werken te doen, maar om de postmoderniteit waartoe ze zich verhouden – waarvan en waarop ze een reflectie bieden.

Hoofdstuk 1 bekijkt de positie van het individuele subject in de stad, aan de hand van het korte verhaal “The Balloon” (1967) van Donald Barthelme en Paul Auster’s korte roman *City of Glass* (1985). Deze teksten snijden de vraag aan van de relatie tussen het postmoderne subject en het vaste raster van straten van Manhattan – een ruimte van discoursen die oorspronkelijk samenhangen met de moderne metropool en het moderne subject.

Het verhaal van Barthelme draait om een kolossale ballon die plots boven Manhattan verschijnt. De ballon heeft geen vaste vorm en biedt daarin een alternatief voor het stratenplan op de grond. Dit plan is een belichaming van efficiency en instrumentele rationaliteit – waarden die zich opdringen aan de mensen. De ballon, daarentegen, laat zich niet duiden of interpreteren – het is geen reclame of monument, bijvoorbeeld. Hij laat zich alleen *gebruiken*, om op te wandelen, spelen, of om op af te spreken. De ballon biedt de mensen daarmee de mogelijkheid tot “mislocation of the self” – de mogelijkheid om zichzelf te verliezen. Het verhaal draait dus om het contrast tussen enerzijds een rigide ruimtelijkheid en bijkomende subjectiviteit, en anderzijds een alternatieve ruimtelijkheid en bijkomende bevrijding-door-verliezen voor het subject.

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Deze configuratie is te bekijken met behulp van Foucaults concept heterotopia. In het kort is heterotopia, bij Foucault, een concept om de relatie tussen ruimtelijke en discursieve ordes te bekijken. Het gaat niet om één soort “andere” ruimte – allerlei ruimtes kunnen “heterotopisch” zijn – maar juist om de (samen) *werking* van ruimtelijkheid en discursiviteit. Dit is een kernpunt in Barthelmes verhaal. Het gaat niet om de ballon op zichzelf, maar om het feit dat door de ballon duidelijk wordt hoezeer de stedelijke ruimte van Manhattan een invulling geeft aan de levens van mensen – dat de discursieve “lading” van ruimte verstrekkende gevolgen heeft voor het individu in de stad.

Het verhaal benadrukt de noodzaak voor een ruimtelijkheid waarin meer factoren van belang zijn. Hier is het invloedrijke werk van Henri Lefebvre relevant. Lefebvre’s hoofdpunt komt voort uit een afkeer van de beperktheid van wat hij “abstracte ruimte” noemt. Abstracte ruimte hangt op een reductie – denk bijvoorbeeld aan een opsplitsing in “verkeer,” “winkelgebied” of “woonerf.” Dit doet altijd de diversiteit van de werkelijkheid tekort en maakt het sociale ondergeschikt. Lefebvre beoogt daarom een herbalancering in het denken over ruimte, met ook aandacht voor *gebruik* van ruimte en bovenal voor wat hij “geleefde” ruimte noemt, met het sociale op de voorgrond. In Barthelmes verhaal speelt dezelfde herbalancering. Het stratenplan van Manhattan is een belichaming van abstracte ruimte: een rationele, doelmatige, en efficiënte vormgeving van ruimte. De mensen in de stad voelen zich hierdoor gereduceerd, beklemd. De ballon biedt een schets van een nieuwe, postmoderne ruimtelijkheid: zonder vaste vorm, met nadruk

op alledaags gebruik en op de sociale dimensie – en daarmee ook meer vrijheid voor het subject.

In Austers roman *City of Glass* draait het precies om gebruik van de stedelijke ruimte, en specifiek om lopen. De hoofdpersoon, schrijver/detective Daniel Quinn, verliest zichzelf graag al wandelend door de stad. Hij krijgt de opdracht iemand te schaduwen die hele dagen door de straten van Manhattan loopt, waarmee hij de letters van een boodschap “schrijft” (van bovenaf gekeken) met zijn routes door de stad. Dit is goed te begrijpen met behulp van Michel de Certeaus bekende stuk over lopen. De Certeau stapt net als Lefebvre af van het idee van abstractie als primair of bevoorrecht – zowel als het gaat om de stad als om het subject. In plaats daarvan komt de nadruk te liggen op een subject dat bestaat in en door de alledaagse praktijk. Individu en stedelijke ruimte moeten samen bekeken worden in hun interacties – waarvan lopen een paradigmatisch voorbeeld is: subject en ruimte krijgen betekenis doordat beiden een element zijn in de fysieke actie van lopen door de stad. Austers roman beaamt dit perspectief, want in de roman staat het subject in de postmoderne stad niet alleen letterlijk maar ook figuurlijk veel meer met beide voeten op de grond. Hierdoor verschilt de roman van de klassieke flaneur – icoon van stedelijke moderniteit, zoals bij Baudelaire – die als bevoorrecht subject betekenis toedicht aan de stad om hem heen, waartoe hij een zekere afstand neemt. Uit de roman en De Certeau komt dus een blik op de postmoderne stad naar voren waarin niet vooraf bedachte, abstracte ideeën bepalend zijn, maar waarin de nadruk ligt op subjectiviteit en ruimtelijkheid die voortkomen uit de alledaagse praktijk, uit concrete interacties van mensen en stad.

Hoofdstuk 2 richt zich op de vraag wat voor soort ruimte kenmerkend is voor de postmoderne stad, aan de hand van Thomas Pynchon's korte roman *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965). De “mislocation of the self” waar het bij Barthelme om ging, is in *Lot 49* de crux van het landschap van de Zuid-Californië: een uitgestrekte, bebouwde vlakte (“urban sprawl”) bijeengehouden door een netwerk van snelwegen, waarin niet makkelijk overzichtelijke structuren te herkennen zijn. De epistemologische tocht van hoofdpersoon Oedipa Maas om alles uit te zoeken verzandt, waardoor Oedipa tot het besef komt dat ze zich bevindt in een wereld waarin ze zich niet kan oriënteren.

Dit is ook een kernpunt van Jamesons beroemde bespiegeling op het

Bonaventure hotel in Los Angeles. Hij beschrijft postmoderne ruimte vooral in negatieve termen van tekortkomingen – alsof het subject niet in staat is zulke ruimte aan te kunnen. Maar Jameson is hierin vooral retorisch, om een modern idee van subjectiviteit te handhaven – met nadruk op het kennende subject als middelpunt van de beleving van de wereld. Maar door zijn analyse schetst hij ook juist een positief beeld van een postmoderne subjectiviteit in zulke ruimte. Het gaat daarbij om ruimte die vorm krijgt door veranderbare betekenissen, door bijvoorbeeld tekens, borden, en teksten (zoals bij Venturi et al.). *Lot 49* heeft eenzelfde insteek doordat de tekens en hoedanigheden van het subversieve W.A.S.T.E. postnetwerk vorm geven aan de stad. Het is niet een vooraf bepaalde, onderliggende structuur die betekenis geeft, maar een flexibel regime van tekens en betekenissen die de stad bepalen.

Een beter concept voor zulke ruimte is Marc Augés *non-lieu*. In tegenstelling tot ruimtes waarin mensen vooraf of van oudsher al banden hebben (denk aan traditionele dorpsstructuren), worden *non-lieux* gekenmerkt door het aanmaken van nieuwe, tijdelijke banden. Hierin zijn tekens (bordjes, instructies etc.) bepalend voor de mogelijkheden van het individu. Het voorbeeld bij uitstek is een vliegveld, waar een individu tijdelijk een generiek subject wordt door een ruimtelijke indeling (gangen, hekjes, rijen) en tekens (paspoorten, tickets, wegbewijzing). Zo'n model van ruimtelijkheid is meer toegesneden op de pluraliteit en veranderlijkheid van de postmoderne stad. Juist in *non-lieux* kan het subject vrijheid vinden in tijdelijke anonimiteit, bijvoorbeeld – een mechanisme dat keer op keer terugkomt in *Lot 49*. Maar dat laat niet onverlet dat *non-lieux* niet neutraal zijn, met name in politieke zin. In een andere tekst van Pynchon, een essay over Watts in Los Angeles (1966), beschrijft hij goed dat er scheidslijnen werkzaam zijn in L.A. die sommigen toegang geven en anderen uitsluiten van het systeem van de stad, in ruimtelijke maar vooral ook sociaal-economische zin. In de *non-lieux* van Los Angeles als de postmoderne stad van de entertainmentindustrie behoort het generieke subject tot de blanke middenklasse, bijvoorbeeld.

Hoofdstuk 3 verkent de relatie tussen de postmoderne stad en het lichaam. Het uitgangspunt is een terugkerende roep om aanpassing van het lichaam als het gaat om nieuwe soorten stedelijke ruimte, zoals de behoefte aan nieuwe organen bij Simmel en Jameson, bijvoorbeeld. Deze roep past in een lange traditie van denken over het lichaam in ter-

men van een tekortkomingen die door technologische middelen (prothesen) verholpen kunnen worden. In deze moderne manier van denken dringt de stedelijke omgeving zich op aan het individu, waardoor het individu het lichamelijke eigenlijk moet ontstijgen of verhelpen. De postmoderne stad vereist daarentegen een ander kader om over het lichaam te denken.

De roman *Cosmopolis* (2003) van Don DeLillo verkent precies deze vraagstukken. Hoofdpersoon Eric Packer is een miljardair die zijn fortuin heeft vergaard door het systeem van de financiële markten uit te buiten. Zijn lichaam is voor hem een ouderwetse beperking; liever zou hij zijn geld verdienen met fluctuaties op de valutamarkt in fracties van seconden – volledig in het domein van computers en kapitaal, ongehinderd door lichamelijke. Dit is dus het moderne kader voor lichamelijke, gericht op tekortkomingen en technologische verlengstukken, dat ook past bij de moderne metropool, bijvoorbeeld in de nadruk op het mentale (Simmel). De roman verkent hoe de rol van het lichaam anders ligt in de postmoderne stad, aan de hand van vragen over grenzen en organen – Packer is continu bezorgd over zijn asymmetrische prostaat, bijvoorbeeld. Hier is het werk van N. Katherine Hayles over een “posthuman” perspectief van nut, met name twee van haar centrale concepten: om te beginnen haar begrip van “virtualiteit,” als de verwovenheid van het “materiële” (lichamen, maar ook machines en ruimte) en het “informatieele” (kennis, discoursen, informatie-systemen); en daarbij haar invulling van “belichaming” als performatief en specifiek (t.o.v. “het lichaam” als abstract idee). Hayles biedt daarmee een ruimere set coördinaten voor subjectiviteit en het lichaam dan bijvoorbeeld een Cartesiaans model waarin het abstracte bevoorrecht wordt.

Het verkennen van de coördinaten om lichamelijke te begrijpen komt goed naar voren in Packers tocht dwars over Manhattan in zijn witte limousine. De auto is voor Packer een technologisch verlengstuk: volledig uitgerust met computer zodat hij de markten kan volgen en direct toegang heeft tot zijn systemen. De limousine is een “huid,” een prothese om door de stad te bewegen en om de stad op afstand houdt, bijvoorbeeld door beeldschermen in plaats van ramen om naar buiten te kijken. Maar de roman benadrukt ook juist dat het lichamelijke heeft een onreducerbare rol heeft in de postmoderne stad; het gaat niet alleen om techniek en abstractie, maar ook om fysieke en materiële in-

teractie. Eenzelfde beeld komt naar voren in studies naar automobilititeit: het rijdende subject vervangt de wandelaar – zoals de flaneur, of als in De Certeau – zodat mobiliteit in stedelijke ruimte techniek en lichamelijke samenbrengt. Het draait dus niet om een radicaal andere rol van het lichaam in de postmoderne stad, maar om andere kaders: niet eenzijdig (lichaam als obstakel, voorkeur voor abstractie en kennis), maar met ruimte voor de wisselwerking tussen lichaam en informatie, ruimte en techniek.

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Tot slot kijkt deze studie in een “coda” naar narrativiteit en de stad, aan de hand van een essay van DeLillo dat reageert op de aanslagen van 9/11. DeLillo vraagt zich hierin af wat voor reactie recht kan doen aan de catastrofale gebeurtenissen. Een “betekenis” van de gebeurtenissen is niet te vatten in “het” verhaal van 9/11, want zowel het idee van een betekenis als het idee van één verhaal reduceren de werkelijkheid en kunnen er geen recht aan doen. Het antwoord, voor DeLillo, ligt in een wildgroei van verhalen – waarbij ieder aan element van de stad, van de straat, of van de ramp een eigen mini-verhaal ontspruit. Deze veelheid aan verhalen is de enige adequate manier om een reflectie van en op de ramp te geven – en die veelheid ligt voor DeLillo juist besloten in de pluraliteit van de stad. Het idee van de stad als bestaand uit een pluraliteit van kleine verhalen is een kijk op de stad, op postmoderniteit, en op narrativiteit die naadloos aansluit op de benaderingen in de verschillende hoofdstukken.

Curriculum Vitae

On June 9, 1979, Daan Wesselman was born in Amsterdam. After finishing secondary school, he began studying English at the University of Amsterdam in 1997. Towards the end of his English program, Daan received a grant from the university for an extra year's study, spent in the Sociology department taking courses in sociological theory and urban sociology – to feed an already developing interest in cities. After completing his MA in English *cum laude* in 2002, Daan decided he could do with more training in literary and cultural theory, so he decided to enroll in the UvA's MA program in Literary Studies in 2003. Finishing this MA was interrupted by a first stint as a lecturer in his old English department. In 2005, Daan got a position as an English teacher at Tilburg University. In 2006, he decided to complete the remaining parts of his second MA program. In 2007 he rounded off his MA in Literary Studies *cum laude*, which also served as the basis for a PhD project under the supervision of prof. Ernst van Alphen at Leiden University. Daan continued to work at Tilburg University while working on his dissertation as an external PhD student at Leiden. In 2011, he received a grant from NWO which allowed him a year off work to concentrate entirely on finishing his dissertation. After completing his dissertation, he got a position as a lecturer at the Literary Studies department at the UvA, bringing him back to his alma mater once again.

“reading into” it.¹² This is succinctly illustrated in a comment by another person looking at the ruins, in another description of a street scene close to Ground Zero a few days afterward, where DeLillo describes a comment made by a person next to him: “‘Oh my God, I’m standing here,’ says the man next to me” (38). The response of the man here is self-affirming and logically redundant, yet at the same time it is a perfect response that does not interpret (and thereby attribute meaning to) the event, but it simply *responds*. This is the type of response that DeLillo proposes: not a (sequential) narrative that leads to a “meaning” (or “reads into” the event), but a response to the “shock and horror as it is,” which (in my view, not coincidentally) foregrounds not so much the temporal but the spatial – “standing *here*,” in the street.

The description of the scene a month before works towards an affirmation of the city as a plurality that can accommodate all. DeLillo presents an example with elements that could easily evoke the oppositional mode of thinking and interpreting so readily available, especially in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. However, DeLillo uses his example for a final and very explicit turn to the city:

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Then I saw the woman on the prayer rug. I’d just turned the corner, heading south to meet some friends, and there she was, young and slender, in a bright silk headscarf. It was time for sunset prayer and she was kneeling, upper body pitched towards the edge of the rug. She was partly concealed by a couple of vendors’ carts and no one seemed much to notice her. I think there was another woman seated on a folding chair near the curbstone. The figure on the rug faced east, which meant most immediately a storefront just a foot and a half from her tipped head, but more distantly and pertinently towards Mecca, of course, the holiest city of Islam.

Some prayer rugs include a *mihrab* in their design, an arched element representing the prayer niche in a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca. The only locational guide the young woman needed was the Manhattan grid.

I looked at her in prayer and it was clearer to me than ever, the

¹² In the context of this study, I might draw a parallel here between DeLillo’s essay and Barthelme’s story “The Balloon,” in which the idea of taking the city as it is also features prominently: “we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena” (54).

daily sweeping taken-for-granted greatness of New York. The city will accommodate every language, ritual, belief and opinion. (40)

192 The example of the Muslim woman praying in the streets presents persons, objects, and actions, yet the point is not some (limited or reductive) sequence, but the totality of the urban world that it builds up, working towards the affirmation of the “greatness of New York,” inclusive and plural.¹³ The city is presented as capable not only of accommodating and including, but also of extending outward toward the world, with the Manhattan grid serving as a guide for the qibla, the direction for Islamic prayer. The woman uses the grid “as it is,” – not, as presented in “The Balloon,” as a symbol for an instrumentalist logic that leads to lives being “rather rigidly patterned.” (57) Instead, the woman uses the grid almost as the balloon: as a space to be used in everyday practices (like walking in *City of Glass*), without being fully predetermined (as in Lefebvre’s abhorred abstract space). In effect, the city is a space of possible narratives, plural, for spontaneous memory practices after a catastrophe as much as for religious practices taking place in public amidst stores and street vendors. In this sense, the woman’s prayer is akin to the scene in Union Square Park: the woman creates her own non-place – a space without roots yet establishing spontaneous (global) relationships – out of the city itself and her prayer rug, with the markers of her religion serving as the signs that delimit non-place. DeLillo turns to the city, I would argue, precisely for the possibility for even a single person to freely create their own space, to make use of the city in their own way, or (to go along with DeLillo’s phrasings) “to tell their own story.”

This example of the woman praying thus shows how to read the story “that is left to us” (or “the counternarrative” for that matter): as parts that can be tied together in New York as a plural and complex (and post-modern) city.¹⁴ The “hundred thousand stories” circulating after 9/11

13 Obviously, the prayer scene draws upon elements that, in the context of the attacks on the World Trade Center, were highly charged. In fact, DeLillo ends his essay with an image of the hadj, as an image of equality and inclusion, and the phrase “*Allahu Akbar*. God is great” (40). This use of an image and phrase from Islam to round off his response should be seen, in my view, as a highly argumentative attempt to exclude any possible readings of DeLillo’s essay as supporting any oppositional perspective (“us vs. them,” and specifically “West vs. Islam”), which might underlie responses along nationalist lines, for example. In any case, DeLillo’s essay uses these images and oppositions to open up possibilities for a positive and inclusive outlook, as emerges from the prayer scene he describes, for example, which is in line with his argument throughout.

14 I should perhaps re-emphasize here that I explicitly read DeLillo’s essay with the benefit of over a decade’s hindsight, and therefore hope to avoid the oppositions (“us vs. them”) often mobilized in the aftermath of the event. For example,

continue what took place in the city in the first place, namely a narrative that works through compiling objects and people, events and histories. The type of narrative that DeLillo calls for and demonstrates throughout the essay is one that focuses on the possibility of accommodating the diversity that goes with the “greatness of New York” – a narrative geared towards the city. This different take that DeLillo calls for as a response thus seems to search for ways of telling that can adequately convey, or do justice to, the urban world he focuses on, its plurality, complexity, diversity. Therefore, the narrative DeLillo seeks to construct, I would argue, is not so much a story in or of the city, but is the city.

Narrative cities

In my reading, therefore, DeLillo’s “In the Ruins of the Future” presents the city under extreme circumstances, which intensify precisely those elements in the representation of the postmodern city that I have tried to bring out throughout the previous chapters. The point of DeLillo’s essay is that the *reflection* of the city, in the narrative response to the events of 9/11, is at the same time a complex *reflection* on the city, a meditation on how to understand and experience the city. What DeLillo demonstrates is that the two types of reflection are part of the same, double gesture.

This, finally, is also where his reorientation of narrative stems from. The idea is not to dismiss temporality, of course, or to dismiss the capacity of stories to convey meaning or to have a meaningful impact – in fact, DeLillo constantly plays with these very characteristics. Instead, the idea is to keep in view what is at stake, which in the essay is “the greatness of New York,” which concerns urban space more than time here – with the city as a social space where different individuals (but also discourses, subjectivities, and narratives) are possible alongside each other, for example. What one reads such reflections of/on the city for, then, is not plot but the construction of spatialities (be they non-places or heterotopias, for example) and subjectivities that go along with them. DeLillo’s essay produces a subject in the here and now, part of a plural city of lived/

I do not take the example of the praying woman as suggesting that the “greatness of New York” would lie in some multi-cultural idyll to counterbalance perceptions of New York as city of trauma. Speaking (and reading) with some distance to 9/11, I would suggest that even though the image of the woman praying is charged (in the immediate, historical context of 9/11), the elements at play in the example are rooted in the city, not in the (traumatic) event, and thereby point towards the city precisely as a space for overcoming oppositions (such as a “pre- and post-9/11” framework developing as a master narrative for viewing New York, for example).

representational space and everyday practices that can (re)shape that city and those subjectivities. The relationship between individual and city in the essay, then, could even be read as each facilitating the possibility of affecting and extending into the other – an understanding of the type of virtuality that Hayles distilled in the context of technological advancement, but which I maintain is equally pertinent when it comes to the individual and the postmodern city.

194 In short, in reading DeLillo's essay, one could deploy any of the concepts I have been using in the previous chapters – be they drawn from Lefebvre, de Certeau, Augé, or Hayles, for example. The point, of course, is that each of those concepts approaches the same issue from different angles – and the same is true for the literary texts I have discussed: they all address questions of the position of the individual in the late-twentieth century city, or (in the appropriate terminology) the question of the subject in the postmodern city.

For all of them, the same elements are at play: having reached the conclusion that straightforward language, transparent representation, and simple stories do not suffice in the face of an urban reality that is complex and plural, new ways of thinking about the city need to be found. Barthelme's "The Balloon" is perhaps the most conceptual in its treatment of the complexity of the postmodern city. With respect to the story's narrative, the constellation of spaces is what motivates what (minimal) plot there is, with the balloon as the site where different signifying practices come together with individual usage – a compilation of "small" narratives explicitly not leading to a "meaning" behind the balloon. By juxtaposing the spatialities of the grid and of heterotopian space, the story zeroes in on the reductiveness inherent in (the abstract space of) the modern city, and the concomitant straitjacket for the individual subject in the city. The alternative of the heterotopian balloon brings into view the need for new spatialities and subjectivities, free from strict signifying regimes and instead based more on spatial practice. What such practices can look like, though, is brought into view better in *City of Glass*. Here the city literally acts as a signifying space, though not in the vein rejected in "The Balloon" (or by Lefebvre), but as a "canvas" for signifying tactics. The subject is accorded agency in the city, capable of signifying through spatial practices like walking, but also in encountering and engaging objects in urban space, thereby spatializing language.

As a narrative, Auster's novel has a clear trajectory: not towards the end of the sequence familiar from detective fiction (e.g. private eye solves the crime), but rather frustrating that sequence, ending up instead in disappearance (rooted in walking the city streets) – or what in “The Balloon” was presented as the desirable alternative of “mislocation of the self.”

However, the type of spatiality and subjectivity put forward in Barthelme and Auster do not imply a return to a (re)centered Cartesian subject, as becomes clear in *The Crying of Lot 49*. The landscape of the postmodern city cannot be understood as a whole, and does not allow for a meaningful totalizing view. Instead, postmodern urban space is characterized by non-place – spaces organized through signage, to which an individual (or rather: some intended individuals, but not everybody) can gain access for a specific purpose, though requiring a shedding of particularity. Non-places can then be located “over by the freeway,” and individuals adopt the position of a generic individual – like the traveler in an airport lounge, or Arnold Snarb, looking for a good time. In an urban world saturated with clues and signs, *Lot 49* is emblematic as a narrative in which conventions (of the detective) spiral out of control, so that instead of a main plot there is a profusion of tiny ones – tied together not through the logic of temporal sequence, but in the space of the city (and the spatialized symbol of the post horn).

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Lastly, *Cosmopolis* adopts a different narrative strategy, an odyssey across the city. The novel is largely chronological, but progress in the sequence is marked by the position in the city – which part of Manhattan the limo is in – and the discourses that are brought into play in those spaces (and come under discussion inside the limousine). DeLillo makes time, and to some extent character, second to the exploration of theme engrained in the city of global capitalism. In doing this, DeLillo's novel adds to the consideration of the spatialities, subjectivities, and spaces of the postmodern city the question of the body – and the virtuality that marks its relationship to the city. What emerges is a conception of an embodied subject in the postmodern city, where the body and the city can extend into each other. This virtuality of the body and postmodern urban space also expands the conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between urban spaces, discourses, and the individual (embodied) subject.

All in all, then, the literary works I have discussed in this study complement each other, in that each adds another component for an interdisciplinary approach of the postmodern city. I should stress, though, that at the end of this study I cannot present a “clear picture” of the postmodern city – for the idea of a single, clear picture is precisely what my argument hopes to move beyond (in line with Soja’s argument, discussed in the introduction here). Like DeLillo’s essay, perhaps, the crux of my argument is that if one wants to understand the postmodern city, its spaces, and its discourses, what one needs is an approach that does not reduce, but that is capable of including different concepts, of expanding, of accommodating the plurality that marks postmodernity. As I have tried to show, this calls for an interdisciplinary approach, combining literary works, theory, and urban studies. Specifically with regard to literature (the “ground” for my approach) and the city, I hope to have shown the value of taking a work of literature as a reflection both *of and on* the city – not just as a representation of the real city, but also a discourse that addresses issues and problems of its contemporary urban world, and that can be brought together with other fields and other (new) ways of thinking about the city.