



The City and the Imagination. St. John's College, Cambridge, UK: David Midgley, Christian J. Emden, 30.06.2003.

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The City and the Imagination

Since its inauguration in 2001, the research group "Cultural History & Literary Imagination" at the University of Cambridge has organized a regular series of seminars and an annual conference centered on current topics at the intersection between Anglo-American "cultural studies" and German "Kulturwissenschaft". Linked to the Department of German at Cambridge University, and supported by St. John's College and Sidney Sussex College, its main purpose is to foster and develop research into the relationship between literary texts and their cultural and intellectual contexts, in theoretical, interpretative and historical perspectives.

In light of the renewed and increasing interest in urban space among literary scholars, historians, anthropologists and geographers, the next major project planned by the research group is an international and interdisciplinary conference in 2004 on cities and the ways in which imagination shapes both the perception and the representation of the city as a highly symbolic place for the intersection of different historical and cultural identities. As a preparation for this large-scale conference, the conveners of the research group, David Midgley (Cambridge) and Christian J. Emden (Houston), organized a one-day conference at St. John's College on "The City and the Imagination", involving scholars who have particular kinds of expertise and experience of the many ways in which cities and urban spaces have been conceived and discussed in the context of medieval, modern, and contemporary culture.

In her opening paper, Catherine Keen (Leeds) pro-

vided a detailed overview of medieval views of the city, focusing in particular on the relationship between "civitas" and "urbs" as it is discussed in the tradition from Isidore of Seville to Dante. Noting the complex relationship between the city as a symbolic and material space of social and political exchange, this paper was followed by Susanne Hauser's (Kassel/Berlin) contribution on "modern(ist) views of the city", which not only provided a detailed assessment of recent urban theories, but which also emphasized the particular ambiguity of the so-called "Zwischenstadt" as a mixed space that is part of both city and landscape. In his response to these papers, Peter Burke (Cambridge) highlighted the social and political effects generated by the spatial organization of the city. Following the initial distinction between "civitas" and "urbs", urban consciousness and the theoretical discourse about the city seem to be structured along binary oppositions, or relations, according to the urban-rural divide, the differentiation between center and periphery, and the shift from an ordered to a quasi-chaotic state of urban space. Although the projection of biblical, mythical and classical comparisons onto the modern city since the Renaissance (e.g. Sodom, Jerusalem, Athens, Rome) seem to safeguard forms of cultural and historical identity within the city, which are furthermore supported by both urban iconography (paintings, statues, etc.) and political representation, such forms of identity are fragile constructions based on specific forms of exclusion (slaves, women, immigrants, etc.) and inclusion (citizens, men, patrician families, etc.). Against this background, the contributions of Keen, Hauser and Burke questioned the way in

which cities have been controlled and regulated through spatial configurations and forms of representation. Following the direction of their approach, it would be necessary to ask, for instance, how the rituals of everyday-life in the city are linked to the separation between private and public space, and how the city is reclaimed after a period of political instability, or in the aftermath of political oppression. At the same time, it would be worthwhile to consider whether it is possible to think about the city without reference to the binary oppositions mentioned above, especially since there are crucial differences with regard to the spatial configurations of European and non-European cities (e.g. London, New York, Lagos).

In his paper on Thomas More, Wilhelm Ribhegge (Münster) discussed the ways in which the political imaginary is conceptualized in an image of the city as utopia, which – emerging in the late Renaissance – continues to have an effect on the idea of a cosmopolitan Europe. The close relationship between political imaginary and architectural space certainly generates an array of complex issues that would need to focus, on the one hand, on the realization of utopian visions as a specific form of built environment that itself has an effect on the metaphors that shape both political consciousness and architectural theory. Does the built environment, in other words, have an effect on the dynamics of social structures and the political imaginary, or is this the other way round? On the other hand, the way such utopias are embedded in specific intellectual fields changing over time raises the question, for instance, of how we are able to speak about utopia under the technological conditions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Returning to the modern city, Nigel Thrift's paper (Bristol) outlined the future directions of urban theory within the discourse of cultural geography. Emphasizing the need to examine the city as structured by technological devices, the construction of urban space through the emplotment and control of the human body through such devices (screens, CCTV surveillance, touchpads, automatic teller machines, ticket dispensers, coin operated toilets, traffic lights, etc.) raises problems that have been underestimated by traditional urban theories. At the center of these problems stands the function of "address", that is, the way in which social life within the city is imperceptibly organized by barcodes, network nodes, postal codes and credit card numbers, which lead to an enormous amount of knowledge, for instance, about where goods originate, where they are delivered, what they are, where they are at any given moment in time, and who produces and receives them. As such,

the city will need to be regarded as a network of commercial relations, financial circulations and flows of energy and communication – from postal services and telegraphs to wireless networks, sewers, drains, pipes, etc. –, which cannot be discussed anymore within a theoretical framework largely informed by the reception of the nineteenth-century city. Within this context, the problem of "attention" emerges as a central topos of the modern city. On the one hand, this leads to the question of how urban experience is measurable and quantifiable. On the other hand, this also leads to a reconsideration of time, emotion and affect in the modern city. Since the emotional reaction to a particular stimulus tends to precede its rational reflection, it is necessary to assume that this "temporal gap" will have a profound effect, for instance, on traffic and business transactions. But the speed of urban perception also increasingly defines the city as a symbolic space for the commercial production of experience (e.g. public relations, event culture, advertisement, clubbing, marches, demonstrations, funerals, processions, protests, riots, shopping, prostitution). Modern cities are designed to illicit affects and emotions within a temporal framework based on a dialectics between the strange and the familiar. At the same time, Helen Watson (Cambridge) pointed out from an anthropological perspective that cities can hardly feature in their entirety as a specific research object: they are too large, too fragmented, too incoherent. It is precisely in this sense that urban space can only be understood in terms of a symbolic site and, therefore, as a theoretical construct.

In his paper on Berlin, David Midgley (Cambridge) focused on the city as a "palimpsest" of different historical layers that become manifest both in terms of architectural alterations and in terms of the spatial reorganization of urban space. Considering the Potsdamer Platz, the Reichstag, the neighborhood of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum, and the discussion about the reconstruction of the Berliner Schloß, he highlighted the ways in which the past, especially a specific historical epoch or point of reference, is either written into the structure of the city, or re-written within this structure. Historical consciousness and identity as embedded in the architectural and spatial fabric of the metropolitan city culminates in a "topography of memory" whose archaeological metaphors and models also inform the theoretical and political discourse about the city. The selectivity of that which is remembered and forgotten within the city (e.g. the lack of GDR memory in post-"Wende" Berlin) questions the epistemological status of historical categories (e.g. Enlightenment) and points of reference (e.g. Prussia, Holocaust).

Keeping in mind this dynamics of memory, it would be necessary to examine how the changing “palimpsest” of the modern city is dependent on the influence of specific social groups, intellectual movements, representations and rituals. As Paul Julian Smith (Cambridge) argued in his presentation, it is especially the importance of movement and action within the city that marks the production of space. Along the lines of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Manuel Castells, and furthermore exemplified by recent Spanish film, Smith *À* like Thrift *À* pointed out that urban theory requires a substantial re-orientation away from the paradigm of “representation” to that of “performance”.

Summarizing the results of this one-day conference, a more detailed and wide-ranging discussion about the relationship between urban space and the cultural imagination, broadly perceived, would need to address five central themes: (1) the city as a place of utopia, myth, and the political imaginaire; (2) the effects of the social, political and spatial organization of the city; (3) the city as a historical space; (4) the city as a technical/technological space; (5) the role of time, emotion and affect in the city. Any serious discussion of these issues would need to consider, on the one hand, long-term historical transformations relating to these themes, and on the other, the differences/similarities between European and non-European cities. As a consequence, this would also lead to a fair amount of theoretical questions

that an interdisciplinary approach to the city needs to face: Is our discourse about the city limited to particular stereotypes, such as Berlin, Paris, St. Petersburg, New York, London, Los Angeles? Is it possible to speak about cities without moving within a framework dominated by Weimar thinkers, especially Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel? Should the discourse about the city shift its attention from representation to performance as a new guiding theoretical paradigm? Is it possible to grasp the structure of urban experience and imagination before they become manifest in specific representations? What are the conceptual differences between “civitas”, “urbs”, “regnum”, “polis”, “Stadt”, “city”, “town”, “cit^À”, “metropolis”, “cosmopolis”, etc., and what is the effect of these conceptualizations on urban experience itself? What is the relationship between, on the one hand, the literary, cinematic and artistic perception/representation of the city as being marked by a certain immediacy, and on the other, the theoretical reflection of such perceptions/representations? Seeking to bridge the gap between different approaches in the social sciences, literary studies and historical disciplines, the organizers envisage that the 2004 conference would provide opportunities to consider precisely these themes and questions. A specific call for papers shall be circulated shortly.

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