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James Donald. *Imagining the Modern City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. xii + 216 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-3555-9.



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In *Imagining the Modern City*, James Donald invites the reader to join him in a personal *derive*, or, as he might prefer, an exercise in *flanerie*, a purposeful and observant wandering through the complexities and discontinuities of the modern city. As the journey progresses, it becomes apparent that the tour guide is also a *bricoleur*, not only annotating, but also dismantling and reconfiguring his subject. Led from the era of Dickens to the present, the reader encounters the modern metropolis as depicted, studied, and imagined by a multitude of individuals employing a variety of media. This territory has been well trodden by contemporary scholars, poets, and artists, as Professor Donald admits (p.10). What he offers here, however, is an engaging and critical review of the literature and a personal point of view. The text is accompanied with beautiful and often haunting photographs and related illustrations, which are generally left to speak for themselves. For those interested in understanding modernity and the city, this book offers much to ponder. The multidisciplinary scope is prodigious, the imagery rich, and the author a very competent guide.

Each of the seven thematic chapters is at once descriptive, reflective, and evocative. Chapter One, "Fog Everywhere" (a phrase taken from Bleak House) introduces the reader to the "modern" city identified and defined by writers such as Dickens, T.S. Eliot, James

Joyce, and Dorothy Richardson and the pop-fiction writer W.R. Burnett and analyzed by Donald's own progenitors, Baudelaire, Robert Park, George Simmel, and Henri Lefebvre. The city in all these cases turns out to be, in the words of Park, "a state of mind." (pp. 8ff.) The premise of the book is thus established: "The city is an imagined environment." Throughout the remaining pages, we are to learn how the city is, or can be, imagined.

In Chapter Two, "Metaphor and Metropolis," the nineteenth and early twentieth century tendency to problematize the city as "disease" or as "evidence" is uncovered by visiting the urban planning of Hausmann, the writings of Engels and Kay-Shuttleworth and the utopian schemes of Le Corbusier. The rationalistic, and thereby simplistic, strategies of "therapeutic-modernism," to use Anthony Vidler's phrase, are here declared inadequate.

The next chapter, "Light in Dark Places," deals with the city in the cinema and the cinema in the city. Simultaneously distracting and training the citizen, the cinema became a fundamental institution of the modern city. It is the cinema, Donald suggests, that proves that the modern city "is not a place, (p. 92) but rather, "a mode of seeing" because "it names a structure of visibility." Even so, he submits that the cinema is only a prefiguration of a "new structure of visibility." It seems problematic here that one can easily and instantly become nostalgic about the cin-

ematic city even as newer, “hotter” media are replacing the projection of images of light in dark places. With apparent trepidation, Professor Donald proposes here that: “Whatever emerges, it is already clear that both ‘the city’ and ‘cinema’ are in any case slipping into history.”

Chapter Four, “The Citizen and the Man about Town,” introduces the classical definition of the *civitas* into his discussion of the otherwise alienated world of the modern city. “The Man about Town” is a concept drawn from a television version of an O’Henry story by that name. In the wake of Descartes, Schiller, and Rousseau, the man about town pursues “the increasingly aesthetic cultivation – and perhaps creation – of the self” as opposed to the “citizen” who “embraces the ascetic comforts of civic virtue as a means to psychologically authentic personal relations” (p. 106). The identity of the unconstrained modern self is, therefore, set in irreconcilable tension with Aristotle’s “*zoon politikon*.” Always aware of wearing a mask or playing a role, the modern man is obsessed with personal authenticity. “The only authority we claim is the authenticity of who we really are,” writes Donald (p. 109). The city, for such an individual, “provides an imagery for the way we represent ourselves as actors in the theatre of the world, and for what it feels like to act out that drama of the self on that stage” (p. 96).

Borrowing its title from Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Chapter Five, “The Fat Lady in Cab,” is, perhaps, the crux of this book. After dismissing the possibility of both the classical pursuit of the common good and the Enlightenment hope of solving urban problems, Donald develops what he means by “imaging.” “To imagine,” he writes prosaically, “is to make present to my mind’s eye what is absent” (p. 121). As it is treated here, however, the act of imagining the city, is more than a purely mental operation. It is, first of all, political – but not a politics that offers “the comforts of familiar rhetorics and conventional ways of solving problems” (p. 124). It is secondly, poetic-based on constructs of imagination. Its task is to “defamiliarize” traditional codes of urban order “in order to liberate new ways of thinking.” Three modes of imaging are outlined: “autobiographical remembering,” “novelistic description,” and “architecture.” The first is oriented toward the past, the second toward the present, and the third toward the future. Most provocative among these is the alliance of architecture with the “poetics of political imagination.” It is of little surprise that here Donald extols the critical architecture of Bernard Tschumi (in the final chapter, similarly homage is paid to the anti-critical architecture of Rem Koolhaas). Tschumi’s architecture is notable for qualities

of “dis-junction, dis-location, and dis-integration,” which are an attempt to “build in flexibility, tolerance, difference, restlessness, and change” (p. 142).

Chapter Six, “Noisy Neighbors,” returns to the nagging question of the polis: “How can stropky strangers live together without doing each other too much violence?” (p. 147). Although this may seem like a rather impoverished variant of Aristotle’s question about the common pursuit of happiness, Professor Donald is clearly unwilling to abandon political discourse altogether. As noted in an earlier chapter: “The city as a place of politics – axiomatically, the polis – has returned to haunt and reanimate political theory and philosophy” (p. 96). In fact, like the philosopher, he sees a necessary connection between politics and ethics. Here the reader is presented with a list of the cardinal virtues of the “real-imagined city”: “toleration, responsibility, justice and space” (p. 170). Writing like a postmodern St. Paul, he then announces: “It is tempting to conclude that the greatest of these virtues is space” (p. 171). Modern community, he continues – following the work of Jean-Luc Nancy – is to be understood as space. The space-defining nature of architecture would seem to support the proposition that it is a primary means of “imagining the city.”

The final chapter, “Postcards,” summarizes the personal, poetic, and academic strands woven throughout the book. Offering his parting perspective, Professor Donald, writes: “This imaginative recovery of the city is the only way I know to think on behalf of a time to come . . .” (p. 187). For Donald, the enigmatic “principle of the city” for which he has searched throughout the book in “built, planned, governed, unbuildable, fictional and cinematic cities,” is the very process of imagining.

Professor Donald’s method, summed up in the term “imaging” is simultaneously analytic and synthetic, critical and poetic, objective and reflective. Like much of contemporary criticism, it is written in a personal, almost confessional style. Self-analysis and scholarly disinterest in the academic subject are seen in dialectic. In the end, however, he is writing within the context of a community. The community is identifiable by what the text assumes and what it excludes. He assumes, for example, that his readers are personally acquainted with his convictions. Frequently he expounds upon his opinion with remarks like: “My guess, hardly surprizing, . . .” (p. 170) and, “This I would say (of course I would) . . .” (p. 171). What is excluded, presumably because of assumptions within his community, is a direct engagement with classical or traditional theories of politics and urbanism.

“Transcendence” is “gone,” the “ideal of virtuous citizenship” is dismissed a priori (p. 170).

The ontological, moral, and political bearings of this book are imaginary. Intriguing, universal propositions are made: “It is imagination that produces reality as it exists” (p. 18). “[I]magination emerges as an instrument of truth” (p. 19). Moral judgments are proclaimed or implied throughout the book. Justice, democracy, toleration and “the right to urban life” are obvious moral goods. “Nostalgia,” or, worse still, “communitarian nostalgia, on the other hand, are self-evident evils. Professor Donald recognizes that the city is essentially political, but he supposes, following Richard Kearney, that “it is the business of imagination to make politics distrust itself, and to remind it that its principles are not literal facts but constructs of imagination” (p. 124). Thus, we are left with indeterminate constructions such as: “Politics is about the always-to-be-achieved construction of a bounded yet heterogeneous, unstable and necessarily antagonistic ‘we’ (p. 100).” Professor Donald seems to loathe dogmatic truth claims, but he cannot escape making them. Propositions like: “The question of community is not one that has a right answer.” (p. 151), for example, are not only dogmatic, but also self-negating.

A remarkable undercurrent of restless longing surfaces occasionally in this book: “All of us hope for a place that is bounded and secure,” he states, “where the noise stops, and where we are sustained by the love of those we love, This urgent desire for home is real enough, and should not be dismissed as hopeless nostalgia” (p. 145). Unfortunately, a hermeneutic of suspicion constrains Professor Donald to reject the pursuit of traditional civic virtues such as hope, security, peace, justice, and happiness, but at least the virtues are not forgotten. Beyond the “indeterminacy,” “the inevitability of violence and desire” and beyond the general unheimlichkeit of the “real” or “imagined” city of this book is another city, which is referred to only by implication. One can hardly escape the conclusion that it is this city-between-the-lines that is the true object of the author’s quest of “recovery” (187). The city of “civilized socialization” (p. xi) that is “equitably governed” (187), the city of “hope” (passim) haunts the pages of this book, but it cannot be found here. To find it, the reader should be referred to the writings of Augustine.

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