



Urban Microcosms (1789–1940). University of Bristol, 14.09.2015—16.09.2015.

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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (December, 2015)

Urban Microcosms (1789–1940)

From 14–16 September 2015 the University of Bristol held an international conference exploring the concept of ‘Urban Microcosms’, jointly organised by Margit Dirscherl (Bristol) and Astrid K  hler (London). The conference sought to set out a comprehensive comparative phenomenology of urban spaces for the period roughly from 1789 to 1940. Scholars working on social, urban, political, cultural, literary, art and theatre history and theory, across a broad range of regions, participated in the project.

ROBERT LETHBRIDGE (Cambridge) opened the conference with a keynote lecture on public and private gardens in 19th century Paris. He investigated the garden as a refuge from city life, an oasis of peace and tranquillity and a marker of class and privilege. Drawing on paintings by Monet, Manet and Renoir, Lethbridge demonstrated that the private garden functioned rather as an extension of city life – people are following the rules of urban behaviour representing an ‘outdoor salon’ of a society which is aware of its diminishing exclusivity and prestige.

DAVID DARBY (Western Ontario) presented his research on Berlin’s *Tiergarten*. He described the significant change in understanding urban spaces and the shifting notion of the *Zeltenplatz* at the end of the 18th century – from a place designed to be inhabited by the upper and upper middle classes to a public park where everybody could meet: ‘The place was teeming with people of every kind’.

SAMUEL HAMEN (Heidelberg) explored the viability

of the concept of urban microcosms in Stefan George’s poetry. By analysing the poem *Stadtufer*, Hamen emphasised the modernity of the poet George and demonstrated how urban poetry can establish a textual ‘microcosm’.

CHARLES JONES (Cambridge) focused on seaside paintings by Spanish artists between 1880 and 1920. In the wake of European Romanticism, an enthusiasm developed for modelling directly from nature. Since these were affordable places for living and working in, artists’ colonies were founded mainly in coastal villages. Yet this idea of escaping the city in order to return to nature soon became fashionable – and the colonies became famous holiday destinations where encounters of the bourgeoisie took place in an enclosed urban space – located entirely outside the city.

OLIVER BRETT (Leicester) offered insights into concepts of artificial microcosms such as the ‘lieu factice’ in Marcel Proust’s *Du c  t   de chez Swann*. Brett also considered other types of urban microcosms as represented in contemporary Queer documentary cinema after the turn of the new Millennium.

SVEN HANUSCHEK (Munich) opened the second day of the conference with a keynote lecture on two microcosms in Arno Schmidt’s novel *Scenes from the Life of a Faun* (1953) – namely the museum *Kunsthalle* and the department store *Woolworth*. Those ‘Gro  hausWelten’, ‘big house worlds’ facilitate educational experiences which immensely influence the (self-)understanding of the individual.

CRISTINA SASSE (Giessen) showed how urban mi-

microcosms are constructed on a textual level: she explored the significance of town directories as a historical source for the representation of cities. They enhance the reputation of the places concerned and therefore disseminate modern ideas of urban manners.

Transport systems are inevitably associated with city life. DAVID PELEMAN (Ghent) focused on the road conferences that took place in Belgium at the end of the 19th century – not primarily on their achievement in establishing a network of traffic arteries but rather on the salon-like composition of people in the conferences themselves. The *‘Hommes de la Route’* saw themselves as occupying a pivotal position in society, trying to accommodate both the general needs of the state and the economic interests of the road industry.

During the 18th century, when social institutions such as caf  s and restaurants flourished in Italy, the poet Giacomo Leopardi – refusing any belief in human progress – saw these city microcosms as a symbol of modern frivolity. ANDREA PENSO (Padua) showed how Leopardi’s pessimistic thoughts about the banality of men’s urban behavior created a new literary figure, the so called *‘Nuovi credenti’*.

LUCY DUGGAN (Oxford) considered the role of caf  s in German literature of the interwar period. At the beginning of the 20th century, intellectuals gathered in the caf  s of Prague, Vienna and Paris and retrospective descriptions of these cafes have shaped the representation of this elite in cultural memory.

MARIJA DJOKIC (Munich) scrutinized a very special tavern in Belgrade at the turn of the 20th century. *‘Branja’* Orpheum became a contact zone where people of all social classes came together, sharing cultural experiences as well as exchanging political information. This institution is an example of an urban microcosm. It reflected Serbian society at the time and had a significant impact on public opinion.

A less accessible microcosm is the *‘lunatic asylum’*, which MARKUS SCHIEGG (Bristol) explored as a principal example of Foucault’s concept of the *‘heterotopia’*. Based on patients’ letters he examined the hospital’s function as a microcosm where the inhabitants are secluded from the outside world, which they mirror at the same time.

An institutional microcosm appeared in Paris after 1848: the French Garde Nationale was an unarmed body of no military use during the Second Empire (1852–1870)

and was regarded as an epitome of the city’s identity. LOUISE ZBIRANSKI (Frankfurt am Main) showed how this phenomenon – made up of local citizens – represented the urban society of Paris and influenced political decisions about the autonomy of the city.

SINE BIRKEDAL NIELSEN (Glasgow) concentrated on the Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades* project, suggesting that Benjamin regarded arcades as uniquely modern microcosms that can only be captured in writing by reinventing literature itself.

The last day began with an exploration of more elusive microcosms. The keynote lecture by ESTHER LESLIE (London) focused on the role of radio waves and snow globes in Benjamin’s writings. While radio as a mass media has a communalising mediating power for inhabitants of a city, the snow globe as a miniature microcosm metaphorically refers to the threshold between inside and outside, past and present.

Before metropolises came into being, church bells played a pivotal role for inhabitants of villages, acting as an auditory epicentre. Drawing on passages from 19th and 20th century literature, ELIO BALDI (Warwick) described how the symbolic significance of church bells changed with the advent of big cities. They noisily challenged the idea of their marginalization.

Presenting the exceptional example of the German language press in the Bukovina (1848–1940), CHRISTINA SPINEI (Iasi) highlighted the profound impact of media on the composition of *‘social formations’*. The local press had an unusual high density and formed a microcosmic local identity by offering a special relation between the centre and the peripheries through communication.

GODELA WEISS-SUSSEX (London) examined the department store as a symbol of modernity in Georg Hermann’s novel *Der kleine Gast* (1925). She explained that department stores tend to have a negative connotation: they were associated with materialistic consumption and (female) seduction. In the novel, Hermann creates a counter-pole to that conception and thus helped to alter the notion of this urban microcosm to a place where sophisticated men understood themselves as *‘Herrscher   ber diesem ganzen Riesenbau’*.

Throughout history, harbours have been crucial to urban settlement and development. JOHANNA BUNSCHUH-VAN DUIKEREN (Berlin) argued that in early to mid 20th century Dutch literary aesthetics, har-

bours, which were originally located in the heart of a city, can still be categorized as thoroughly urban spaces even though they were increasingly consigned to the periphery of the city.

In two roundtables, the concept of urban microcosms was further explored and the insights of the individual papers were brought into dialogue with each other. In the course of the conference, it became clear that the concept of urban microcosms is not a straightforward one, yet it has considerable potential as an explanatory tool in the arts and social sciences.

Conference Overview:

Keynote Lecture

Robert Lethbridge (Fitzwilliam, Cambridge): *Jardins publics and Jardins privés: Fictions of Urbanity in 19th-century Paris*

Panel 1

David Darby (Western Ontario): *The place was teeming with people of every kind: The Social Life of Berlin's Tiergarten*

Samuel Hamen (Heidelberg): *Who can behold this clutter with different wits: Stefan George, Stadtufer*

Panel 2

Charles Jones (Wolfson, Cambridge): *Spanish Seaside Paintings: from Danger to Safety, 1880-1920*

Oliver Brett (Leicester): *Queer Documentary Cinema and the lieu factice*

Keynote Lecture

Sven Hanuschek (LMU, Munich): *What does New York City denote anyway? Big city is big city. I have been to Hanover often enough: Museum and Department Store in Arno Schmidt's Scenes from the Life of a Faun*

Panel 3

Cristina Sasse (Gießen): *For public business or amusement: Places and Spaces of Urbanity in Town Directories, 1760-1820*

David Peleman (Ghent): *Les Hommes de la Route*

dans le Boudoir: the Road Conference as Urban Microcosm and the Emergence of an Urban Society (1910-1938)

Panel 4

Andrea Penso (Padua): *Views of Italian Urban Microcosms in Giacomo Leopardi's Works*

Lucy Duggan (Oxford/Prague): *Kafka didn't often come to the café: the Role of the Café in the Mythologisation of Prague German Literature*

Panel 5

Marija Djokic (LMU, Munich): *The Happiest Corner of Belgrade: Brana's Orpheum (1899-1914)*

Markus Schiegg (Bristol): *Patient Narratives as Distorted Mirrors to a Heterotopia: 19th-Century Letters from a Lunatic Asylum*

Panel 6

Louise Zbiranski (Frankfurt): *The Strange Continuity of an Urban Microcosm: the French National Guard under the Second Empire (1852- 1870)*

Sine Birkedal Nielsen (Glasgow): *Fragmenting Paris: Benjamin's Urban Aesthetics*

Keynote Lecture

Esther Leslie (Birkbeck, London): *Waves and Globes in Walter Benjamin's Microcosmic Cities*

Panel 7

Elio Baldi (Warwick): *For whom tolls the bell? An Exploration of the Changing Meaning of Church Bells in 19th- and 20th-century Literary Descriptions of Cities*

Cristina Spinei (Iasi, Romania): *Small Czernowitz on the Backdrop of Big Vienna: the German-language Press in the Bukovina*

Panel 8

Godela Weiss-Sussex (IMLR, London): *The Department Store as Habitat of the Sophisticated Urbanite: Georg Hermann's Der kleine Gast (1924)*

Johanna Bundschuh-van Duikeren (FU, Berlin): *Harbouring Urbanity*

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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Citation: Teresa Paulina Scheiring. Review of , *Urban Microcosms (1789–1940)*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. December, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45791>

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