



Kevin R. McNamara. *Urban Verbs: Arts and Discourse of American Cities.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996. vii + 311 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2645-0.



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Rhetorical Space over Time: Reading New York City

Urban Verbs, by Kevin R. McNamara, is not a grammarians' tour guidebook of New York City, but it is a guide to the representation of major cities through novels, cinema, and architecture. This is a very clearly written book, with much in common with the New York found in Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1982, 1996). His attention to the details of literature has much in common with Jennifer Bloomers's analysis of *Finnegan's Wake and London Architecture* (Bloomer 1990). This is a contribution to a new geography of urban disciplines that combines philosophy, architecture, art, geography, and political economy. Such works include those of Soja (1993, 1996), Harvey (1989), Keith and Pile (1993), Lentricchia (1988), Mitchell (1995), Mugerauer (1994), Wigley (1993), Wallis (1991), Wilson (1991), Vidler (1992), Zukin (1991), and many more.

Overall, the book takes on four major themes: (1) the appearance of allegory in the works examined; (2) the form of works of literature, art, cinema, or architecture; (3) the social or political practice that is acted out and recommended by each author; and (4) the displacement of the categories of public and private, which is an effect

of the elements of allegory, form, and practice. McNamara presents a historical development of these elements from realistic representation to the failure of representation to comprehend social practices. He argues that the failure or crisis of representation of urban America has become openly acknowledged over the decades. The consequence of this is that authors and others have begun to recognize that ambiguity, uncertainty, and conflict can be good in art and urban life. Ambiguity and conflict account for the actual diversity and unpredictability of urban life. The form of the works—closed and comprehensive versus open and unpredictable—depicts the reality and value of experience in cities. A city is, in the words of Henri Lefebvre, a “possibilities machine” (Soja, 1996, p. 81). The emphasis, therefore, of McNamara's book is on action, not representation of static symbols or conditions.

In contrast to works directly related to urban affairs, McNamara shares an interest in the ethics of form. One of the most salient early works of the century is Georg Lukacs, *Soul and Form*. There are many classics in American literary criticism that have examined the “content

of form” and the ethical and political implications of the shape of novels and poetry. That is, a novel may be gathered and a character’s troubles organized to create a happy or tragic ending, or a poem may be directed to wrap all the described events, objects, or emotions around a single symbol. Conversely, contemporary literature (Martin, 1988) or even theory (Jameson, 1971a, 1971b; White, 1973; Soja, 1996) itself foregrounds ambiguity, uncertainty, and an endless gathering of conflicting or contrasting material. I submit that another title for McNamara’s book could be something like “Open Form and the Urban Imagination.” He attends to the politics of form on several levels: (1) the patterns of “pluralist” relationships among “Americans” and immigrant “ethnic” groups; (2) the shape of buildings and the built environment; and (3) the form of the works of literature, poetry, cinema, and architectural theory.

An appeal to ambiguity and uncertainty is often associated now with a way of thinking loosely called “deconstruction.” His focus is on a “text-centered approach” that reveals “contradictions and lacunae in the discourses on which the authors, artists, and architects draw to represent the complexly woven texture of cities” (p. 5) His style of reading is a hybrid of Barthes, Baudrillard, Foucault, and Derrida. Even though the works examined here are read closely according to this hybrid methodology, the primary and secondary works of historical interpretation McNamara uses are not. Such a mixture of textual and historical interpretation makes for colorful and persuasive reading. However, purists in any of these camps may find this unappealing. This is a very interdisciplinary book, and McNamara has a rare command of topics in literature and urban history and economics. Purists who will not tolerate, in the name of rigor, such discipline-bending will find this book disappointing. McNamara’s willingness to take on the unlikely combination of literary analysis and urban economics should be congratulated. He presents an excellent deconstructive reading of *Sister Carrie*, while tracing post-structuralist themes of power, social conditions, and crises of representation in the other chapters.

McNamara puts the work of Richard Sennett to good use. The book begins with reference to the intellectual history and urban history contained in these works (p. 2) (Sennett, 1994, 1990, 1980, 1974, 1970). Though not based on an extensive reading of Sennett’s work, it is consistent with it. McNamara sums up Sennett’s views in terms of how New York in particular “has failed to achieve its promise as a place where people’s lives are turned outward and liberated from the psychological burdens of in-

teriority.” While this book is not an exposition of Sennett’s work, McNamara does not explain sufficiently the significance of his use of it. However, Sennett’s work may be neither as well known, even to urban scholars, nor as non-controversial as McNamara needs it to be to strengthen his arguments related to Sennett’s ideas.

At first glance, the reader in philosophy or most of the humanities may wonder what burdens “interiority” places on people from which they need to be “liberated.” Hasn’t the motto of Western philosophy been to “know thyself”? Especially since he wrote *The Fall of Public Man*, Sennett has criticized the value recent Western cultural trends have placed on seeking comfort, self-analysis, authority, and therapy in an individual, subjective, state of consciousness. This cultural and political attention to subjectivity neglects appearance, action, and diversity in public life. In *The Uses of Disorder*, Sennett tried to give value to adolescent and counter-cultural revolt as a sign of differences among people and ideas. Written before so much attention had been placed on issues of identity and difference, Sennett makes paradoxical, maybe even idiosyncratic, arguments about the value of “exposure to the outside.” “New York should be the ideal city of exposure to the outside. It grasps the imagination because it is a city of differences par excellence, a city collecting its population from all over the world” (Sennett, 1990, p. 128). From such provocative theses, Sennett has been regarded as a progressive or a conservative during different stages of his scholarly work. His recent work, *Flesh and Stone* has been criticized as weak in classic scholarship or too closely associated, personally or professionally, with the work of Michel Foucault. I agree with McNamara’s use of Sennett’s work, but other humanists and urbanists may not. I think that McNamara’s work is consistent with Sennett’s and has merit for being so. McNamara tries to get readers to focus on the outside of the cultural object, through a close reading of it, as well as the outside of privately circumscribed lives.

Urban Verbs can be roughly described in terms of four general thematic factors: the literary mode of representation, an example of that mode, the political-economic context of that example, and the influence of place or the built environment on the author and the work. The modes of representation range from realism to fantasy, to the failure of representation. The political-economic context ranges from industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century to the managerial capitalism of the mid-twentieth century to the global information economy of the late twentieth century. The places discussed begin with New York and move, according to the examples, to

Chicago, to Washington, D.C., and Las Vegas, and many other U.S. places.

For example, McNamara reads Henry James's *The American Scene* as an allegory of James's concern with the "illegible word" and the constitutive or creative talk characteristic of New York's immigrant population and conversation in general. The form of *The Americans*, in spite of James's interest in the culturally colorful life of the various immigrants, is still that of a closed system. James is viewing the immigrants' lives still as an outsider, who may relish their culture but will not admit that it has anything to do with him. Walled off in James's erudite family and situation, he feared "penetralia," which is James's word for the fenestration of one culture by another. Immigrant culture, however picturesque, need not breach the differences between them and him. Central Park may be a place of utopian mixing of cultures, but they only pass by each other in public. James turns this "practice into form, categorizing and reconstructing the scene as a closed system viewed from outside. James produced a narrative in the familiar accents of his idiosyncratic late style, embellished with personal memories, to supply the margin that would preserve his finely formed consciousness from 'Tingurgitation'" (pp. 52,54).

The most striking of McNamara's readings is of *Sister Carrie*. He reads the novel, not as realism of industrial society, but as an allegory of supply-side economic equilibrium. This is not the sham supply-side economics of Reaganomics, but the original supply-side economics of Say and Marx. "The novel allegorizes Say's Law by the balance between Carrie's desire and the opportunities at hand for its satisfaction—not by an imbalance, as Walter Benn Michaels contends, and by the ease of her movements along the circuit of her success" (p. 70). The novel is caught between a "'Herbert Spencerian romance'" of natural self-interested motivations and the romance of managerialism in business, government, and social science. Carrie's misadventures are not the result of acquisitiveness by a self-promoting individual, but are the result of an individual's being consumed through the trade in women by men (p. 81) and by an individual fighting for self-creation in the midst of cultural and economic change (pp. 91, 92). "The individual in *Sister Carrie* is neither a molecular self nor a pure speculative desire. It is a culturally produced effect—an effect of the agony of power—whose being foregrounds the paradox implicit in Spencer's theory that individuality is the product of social evolution and Dreiser's representation of the relations of managerial capitalism as potentially conducive to this individuality..." (pp. 87, 88). Again the form of the

novel is of a closed system in which Carrie is the object of exchange, but, following Say's Law, there is a tendency toward mobile equilibrium. Chicago, famous for turning the energy of grass from the Great Plains into cattle and returning it to farmers as tin housewares and steel plows (Cronon, 1991), was and is all consuming. The closed form of the novel, in an apparent equilibrium, allegorizes how economic, cultural, and architectural tensions might be resolved by better management.

There is a telling equivocation in McNamara's writing that is the key to understanding his reading. He writes: "the narrative's illusion is that Carrie succeeds when the 'mysterious powers' have made her their subject. Her final role is as a name and a face invoked to demonstrate that 'natural' powers benevolently guided [her to] [sic] do important social work" (p. 89). The equivocation is about the word "subject." On the one hand, McNamara simply means that Carrie has been subordinated to the mysterious powers. On the other hand, McNamara is pointing out that Carrie is made a subject, which is capable of being a desiring agent for her own or other's avarice or benevolence. Putting more emphasis on the double meaning of subject—subordinate or agent—strongly suggests that Carrie is a self-creating agent of a particular mold, neither natural and autonomous nor totally managed and subordinate. Carrie and *Sister Carrie* represent the "'organization of feeling'" (p. 84) and the dialectic of consuming and being consumed (p. 82).

Dreiser and William Carlos Williams are transitional figures in this framework. Dreiser's character, Ames, is an engineer who has a pivotal but little-discussed role in the work. The desires and opportunities of managers and engineers cannot be realized fully when the general political, economic, and cultural context has not changed. Williams's attempt to write a "whole poem," under the aesthetic influence of Ezra Pound and others, is defeated by his own experiences and analysis of Paterson, New Jersey. The poem changes as he changes and when he recognizes that the history of Paterson and himself cannot be totally captured in a literary exercise. William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* is not just about the difficult history of a place. It is also an allegory of the difficulty of capturing personal experience, time, and space in poetic form. It is, in Williams's words "...the vague accuracies of events dancing two/and two with language which they/forever surpass" (p. 173) The form Williams sought was unity in the existing diversity (p. 145) Being more informed and self-reflective about the complexity of history and place, Williams tried to achieve that dynamic unity, which Dreiser obliquely illustrated. However,

bringing the American Indian background, white settlement, local historical personalities, multi-ethnic population, and self-reflection on the task of poetry defeats the task of bringing all this time and space into a total poetic form. In the defeat lies the revelation about poetry itself. As a result, “[w]riting the poem of Paterson forced Williams to rethink the pragmatics of actual representation” (p. 167). Williams brings a “new geography” to poetry in which the search for unity in the metaphor of “marriage” is displaced by a pragmatics of “‘dissonance’” (p. 168). Poetic development becomes a record of social upheaval, exploitation, and the destruction of nature. Such a complex history, which always hides secrets and uninvestigated details of the past, is filled with nuances. Those nuances could be indefinitely elaborated in the present and continually unfolded in the future to become more secrets and nuances. The “whole poem” is defeated by its every attempt to represent all of those changes. In the defeat lies the victory. The crisis of representation is good because literary or poetic form cannot fully implement the “limits of a constraining consensus” about the meaning of events and ideas being represented (p. 169). Therefore, “[a]rt becomes,” McNamara writes, “part of the open-ended, constitutive conversation of past and present without which we would not know, or add to, what (we think) we know, not the storehouse of treasures he [Williams] rebelled against” (p. 171).

Historically, such a realization either did not or has not stopped attempts in “culture” or through “culture” to control what is represented and how. McNamara’s discussion of the film, “The Naked City” (Dassin, 1948; Wald and Maltz, 1979), illustrates this. His point throughout the book is that among cultural, economic, and artistic representations of differences among people, authors, artists, and architects are “subjects” (in the double meaning mentioned above) in the worlds they create. There is always an opportunity to render those differences in some personally appealing, politically expedient, or culturally acceptable form. McNamara’s focus is on the practice of authors who, finding themselves in bewildering worlds, take this rendering upon themselves. I mean that in two ways: authors render the differences and complexity into forms they find acceptable or expedient and find themselves constrained from the forms they strive to represent. James, Dreiser, Williams, and Robert Venturi (Venturi, 1972) are liminal figures in American history because they attempted to break from existing forms of art, architecture, and social relationships. The task is to seek more “open-ended community” and be vigilant about the “goals of, and obstacles to, representation

in a democracy” (pp. 140, 141).

Through his discussion of *Learning from Los Vegas* (Venturi, 1972), McNamara argues that “even if our post-modern economy depends on the production and reproduction of representations and styles, it also depends upon the vast majority of consumers not reflecting critically on their content or the world they construct” (p. 237). McNamara is by no means preoccupied with a vulgar economic reflection theory of representation. His point is rather a cultural one—with sound reference to politics, economics, and bureaucracy—that cities are “geographic pockets of concentrated difference [and] it is incumbent upon all citizens not to withdraw from life in common by practicing a limiting identity politics or becoming preoccupied with inner space, but to find common ground on which to rebuild cities as physical, political, and ethical spaces shared by different communities whose overlappings weave the social fabric” (p. 247).

Differences among geographies and identities as well as the global economy now affect social life and politics all over the country. Among the many books on urban representation and social issues, many are about New York and Los Angeles. Both areas have been posited as the quintessential postmodern city. McNamara presents a compelling interpretation of *Learning from Las Vegas* because he neither takes the book only for its comic value when its authors mock architectural criticism nor presumes that it is deadly serious architectural criticism jack-hammering modernism into dust. He is interested in its irony, but is more interested in how the authors’ “commitment to the value of the complex and contradictory landscape is not supported by an appreciation of the fragmented urban self [and its] relation to the urban landscape...” (p. 221).

The themes of allegory, form, practice, and place can be applied to *Urban Verbs* itself, not just to the examples McNamara provides. *Urban Verbs* is an attempt to grasp historical change in a rapidly changing political-economic environment. It is an allegory of how an author might produce a book to tell readers that their fears of urban life and social change are limited by the ways cities are represented. However, trying to represent this as historical development is problematic. By choosing works to analyze, he gives readers the impression that these are the major influential works that have tried and failed to represent our century. He writes as if there is a historical progression. Having written a book much like this myself, I contend that any number of works covering the periods of *Urban Verbs* displayed the ranges of modes of

representation analyzed. For example, looking for an adequate form of representation in literature, Georg Lukacs wrote *Soul and Forms* between 1908 and 1910 (Lukacs, 1974). In architecture, despite his appeal to rational city planning in the 1920s, Le Corbusier's work is a quite contradictory and "postmodern" document that defies periodization (Crow, 1989). There are many sources of allegories about this problem, and they are still being written. McNamara points to the consequences of different modes of representation.

The story never ends, and the architectural representation of American culture to itself is taking dramatic geographic and representational turns. McNamara's book covers examples from New York, Chicago, Washington, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas. Just in time for the arrival of his book, "New York, New York," the hotel-resort-casino, opens on January 3, 1997, in Las Vegas (Forgey, 1996). This is a cartoon-colored mammoth hotel. With detailed replicas of the Empire State Building, Chrysler Building, Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, and the teeming density of mid-town Manhattan, it is held together in part by styrofoam on steel backing. In another confusion of architectural trends, Las Vegas is going to New York City. On the "New 42nd Street" a Los Angeles development company has signed a lease for an 18,000 square-foot theme restaurant called "Vegas," which will have live entertainment, Las Vegas-style shows, and all-you-can-eat Las Vegas-style buffets (ULI, 1996) New Year's Eve in New York this year had the Disney corporate imprimatur as the New Times Square turns into a Los Angeles production. This is a book about cities and urban representation, but mentioning these new phenomena would have been great additions.

The visible magnitude of texts and buildings in these cities attracts attention like magnets, while the subtleties of other areas go unexamined. Cities concentrate these issues, but these issues are no less palpable in rural areas. McNamara's concerns apply to rural areas and to the U.S.-Mexico border areas as well. Differences among places other than the "urban" landscape should not be neglected or discounted because the magnitude of texts and buildings about urbanism is seemingly so great. One must develop ears and eyes to discern them. McNamara's book does not attend to this possibility because he deliberately focuses on cities, which is his purpose. While he has moved around from New York, to California to Texas, he has had ample opportunity to begin to understand this. I am not suggesting that this book is lacking because border issues are not examined. I am pointing out that there a number of books are now applying in-

sights from contemporary theories of geography to areas rarely interpreted in this fashion (Soja, 1996; Olaquiaga, 1992; Crow, 1996).

This is an exciting book, and, like all good books, it has many layers of meaning and significance. Beyond being well researched and written, it is an appeal for reflection, tolerance, and enjoyment of the changing social life. McNamara tries to shine a ray of hope on the historical drama of cities so that we will not have to be "shocked into recognition" that we are neither alone nor have to be afraid. He brings literature, cinema, and architecture out of the library and museum to show how their rhetoric and form can speak on behalf of the vitality of places.

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