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# Spatial Politics in Contemporary London Literature

## Writing Architecture and the Body

Laura Colombino

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# Spatial Politics in Contemporary London Literature

Epistemologically adventurous, insightful and rigorously researched, this highly original, nuanced and always readable study is written with panache and an originality of argument and depth of insight that puts this volume at the head of such studies.

—Julian Wolfreys, *Loughborough University, UK*

The author combines methodologies and theoretical models with ease, and the interdisciplinary nature of the book is both necessary and refreshing.

—Letizia Modena, *Villanova University, USA*

Laura Colombino's intelligently researched and concisely written book provides timely and essential reading for anyone interested in contemporary fictions of London.

—Nick Hubble, *School of Arts, Brunel University, UK*

This book analyses the spatial politics of a range of British novelists writing on London since the 1950s, emphasizing spatial representation as an embodied practice at the point where the architectural landscape and the body enter into relation with each other. Colombino visits the city in connection with its boundaries, abstract spaces and natural microcosms, as they stand in for all the conflicting realms of identity; its interstices and ruins are seen as inhabited by bodies that reproduce internally the external conditions of political and social struggle. The study brings into focus the fiction in which London provides not a residual interest but a strong psychic-phenomenological grounding, and where the awareness of the physical reality of buildings and landscape conditions shape the concept of the subject traversing this space. Authors such as J. G. Ballard, Geoff Dyer, Michael Moorcock, Peter Ackroyd, Iain Sinclair, Geoff Ryman, Tom McCarthy, Michael Bracewell and Zadie Smith are considered in order to map the relationship of body, architecture and spatial politics in contemporary creative prose on the city. Through readings that are consistently informed by recent developments in urban studies and reflections formulated by architects, sociologists, anthropologists and art critics, this book offers a substantial contribution to the burgeoning field of literary urban studies.

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*Laura Colombino*

**For Pino, Franca, Barbara and Michael**

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# Introduction

Central to any discussion of the city is the question of the body, claims Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1991, p. 162). Urban dwellers can be analysed as members of classes, economic units or social monads but first of all they are embodied beings and their knowledge of the city is always pre-eminently a physical one. In contemporary discourse space has taken on the qualities of lived experience, an embodied practice performed at the point where the built environment and the body enter into relation with each other. This book brings out ways in which such an essential interaction produces, in contemporary British literature, a poetics as well as a politics of urban subjectivity, showing how the physical spaces of the city—which mirror and materialize specific political and social conditions—shape the concept of the self traversing the metropolis. The nexus of spatial and ideological approaches to the urban body plays—so I argue here—a crucial role in postmodern narratives of the city, and the aim of this study is to pursue major articulations of this connection through a focus on contemporary London writing.

According to Lefebvre, bodies generate space with their gestures, movements and spatial relations. Through their perceptions and affects they make sense of a tactile and emotive terrain; through their imagination they recreate built environments as 'loci of passion, of action and of lived situations' (1991, p. 42). In turn bodies are produced by the urban space they inhabit. This prescribes or proscribes gestures, routes and distances to be covered; with its arrangement—which, in the contemporary city, is moulded by the power of capital and capitalism—it influences the organization of bodies, from the construction of high-rises to the geographical distribution of labour. Since the post-war years and particularly after the advent of postmodernism, the relationship between the body and the built environment has formed the material for the reflections of intellectuals and the practices of architects, artists and writers. Increasingly, as architectural critic Anthony Vidler contends, the city's 'contours, boundaries, and geographies are called upon to stand in for all the contested realms of identity, from the national to the ethnic; its hollows and voids are occupied by bodies that replicate internally the external conditions of political and social struggle,

and are likewise assumed to stand for, and identify, the sites of such struggle' (1992, p. 167). The most recent production of neo-Situationist performers and body artists such as Marina Abramović point to the recentring of experience around corporeality, often as a strategy to halt, if only temporarily, the rhythms dictated by urban life. Contemporary literature offers further evidence of this tendency. A recent fictional exploration of the theme in American literature, for example, is Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003)—adapted for the screen by David Cronenberg in 2012—where the protagonist's crossing of New York, whose traffic is equated metaphorically with the flow of financial information, is interrupted by a performance of three hundred naked bodies lying on the street and filling a whole intersection (see DeLillo, 2004, pp. 172–76). In this episode DeLillo offers a neonaturalist description of bodily abjection, which points to the retrieval of a creatural, cosmic dimension in contrast with the increasing abstraction of economy and finance. All these cultural instances of a return to the real (see Foster, 1999) lend special urgency to a critical investigation of the forms that this pervasive fascination with the body has taken in postmodern literature on the city.

From the mid-1980s, the emphasis on corporeality in architectural and urban studies has been mirrored in sociology and other related disciplines by a veritable explosion of interest in the body, 'reconstructed and reimagined as a privileged site where a special kind of meaning is created and enacted' (Schabert, 2001, p. 87). Various explanations of this interdisciplinary phenomenon have been advanced. The most widely accepted is the reaction against the pervasiveness of bodiless things—of media, telepresences and digital worlds—which has characterized the turn of the millennium, causing Arthur and Marilouise Kroker to call the last decade of the twentieth century 'the flesh-eating 90s' (1996, *passim*). Equally significant, though, is the interpretation of the concern with corporeality as a protective move against the attack at the wholeness of the self levelled by deconstruction: 'if personal identity is reasoned away, one might like to take refuge in the body' (Schabert, 2001, p. 112). In the context of social studies, Bryan Turner offers a further insight—which has proven vital and consequential for my analysis—relating this cultural turn to 'the rise of a "somatic society", by which he means "a society within which our major political and moral problems are expressed through the conduit of the human body"'; this is 'imagined as something capable of language, and of translating abstract meanings into material signs and symbols' (Fraser and Greco, 2005, pp. 2 and 21). Similarly, in *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler shows how signifying practices are embodied practices: the state of being in the body, she claims, is a way of acting out discursive meanings, and she calls this 'performativity' (1993, *passim*). As we will see, contemporary literature provides potent indications of this propensity for embodied knowledge. Suffice it to mention the example offered by Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), an inaugural text of British postmodernism: the pivotal conceit of

the novel, which is set at the time of India's attainment of autonomy from Britain, is that the protagonist's corporeality becomes the site where larger political, social and ethical struggles are enacted:

> the body of Saleem, its narrator, and one of the children born on the midnight hour of Independence, begin [sic] to somatise the splits and schisms of the new independent state. [. . .] The fragile and disintegrating body is conflated with the emerging 'unrepresentable totality' of the new post-colonial and globalised worlds of the late twentieth century. (Waugh, 2010, p. 117)

But this call for renewed attention to the body cannot be separated—and on such a conjunction this book is premised—from the contemporary spatial turn so widely discussed in the burgeoning field of urban studies. 'What are [. . .] the connections between this concern with the body as an object of analysis and our understanding of the global and the city?', wonders John Rennie Short (2006, p. 141). As shown in the following in this Introduction, Michel Foucault, Marshall McLuhan, Fredric Jameson and particularly Lefebvre have all provided invaluable insights into these relations. For now, it is sufficient to stress that their common starting point is the acknowledgement of a weakened sense of historicity in the present epoch and the attendant increasing predominance of the concepts of space, simultaneity and globalization. As Edward Soja claims in *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, 'we are becoming increasingly aware that we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities' (1996, p. 1). The recognition of this new paradigm has led some intellectuals to carry out an analysis of spatial biopolitics, that is, the exertion of individual and social control over bodies through techniques such as the privatization of public space, territorial mapping and surveillance. Others have produced radical critiques where alternative, more liberating forms of spatial politics are propounded.

Combining critical debate over the return of the body in architectural and literary production with studies focusing on the individual and social production of space, this book interrogates the relationship—largely neglected by literary critics—between corporeality and urban architecture, in a field, that of contemporary London fiction and non-fiction, which has recently drawn increasing attention. In some circles of academia, scholarship on the literature devoted to the British capital city is thriving, as evidenced by myriad journal articles, papers, theses and dissertations. Since 2003, Literary London Annual Conferences have been hosted by a range of London universities, boasting high attendance numbers and inviting readings of the city also in cognate disciplines, including architecture, urban sociology and painting. In British and American universities, there are masters in contemporary writing and culture which concentrate on British works

sometimes with a special emphasis on London; architecture masters with an interdisciplinary scope including literature can also be found, such as the MA Architectural History, Theory and Interpretation at the London MET, which devotes sections of its course to different notions of the relation between literature and architecture, explored through the works of Louis Kahn, the Smithsons, Daniel Libeskind and Coop Himmelb(l)au, but also Walter Benjamin, Homi K. Bhabha, S. T. Coleridge, John Ruskin, James Joyce, Iain Sinclair and Patrick Wright.

The impressive bulk of creative works on the capital city, both past and present, guarantees an enduring interest in London literature for ages to come. Yet it makes any attempt to engage in wide-ranging discussions all but prohibitive. Even narrowing the scope to the last decades, we are faced with, and bewildered by, an unmanageable variety of texts: the urban theme recurs so frequently in so much of recent British writing that any endeavour to reach a comprehensive view is bound to failure. Hence my choice to concentrate specifically on some significant and illustrative authors and texts where the placement of the geographic or spatial involves more than a descriptive act or a mimetic attempt to transcribe our lives. The aim is bring into focus and investigate primarily the fiction in which London provides not a residual interest but a strong psychic-phenomenological grounding and where the awareness of the physical reality of buildings and landscape conditions shape the concept of the subject traversing the city. A range of authors and texts will be considered, those commonly cited alongside others usually neglected, to map the relationship of body, architecture and spatial politics in contemporary creative prose on the capital city. The writers analysed include J. G. Ballard, Peter Ackroyd, Geoff Dyer, Michael Bracewell, Michael Moorcock, Iain Sinclair, Geoff Ryman, Tom McCarthy and Zadie Smith, but their urban visions will stimulate significant comparisons also with other authors such as Ford Madox Ford, Will Self, Virginia Woolf, Patrick Wright and the film director Patrick Keiller, to name but a few. Each of the main writers brought into focus is given a different emphasis according to his or her importance in the context discussed: the richness, idiosyncratic quality and significance to the field of Ballard and Sinclair account for the chapter-length analyses of their works; the relevance of the other novelists to the definition of the wider tendencies of an epoch, or to the investigation of themes transversal to more decades, justifies their juxtaposition and comparison within single chapters.

According to Short, 'the full exploration of the relationship between bodies and cities has yet to be achieved' and 'remains one of the more alluring possibilities for future urban theorizing' (2006, p. 141). Capitalizing on the idea of the return of the body (often abject, traumatized or dismembered) in late twentieth-century culture, this book broaches the idea that through the observation of the body–space relation and the interrogation of its ideological underpinnings, a meaningful analysis of contemporary London literature can be attempted. Previous studies published in the field of

late twentieth-century writing on the capital city differ substantially in their contents, aims and methodologies. Lawrence Phillips's *London Narratives: Post-War Fiction and the City* (2006), for example, has a historical and sociological perspective. Compared with *Spatial Politics in Contemporary London Literature*, it is wider in scope, in that starting from the Blitz, but provides no in-depth analysis of works by writers such as Sinclair or Ballard (with the exception of *High-Rise*), because psychogeography and spatial politics in general are not its foremost concerns. Slightly closer in scope, Julian Wolfreys's *Writing London*, vol. 2 (2004), has a distinctive textual and Derridean perspective; writers discussed include Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, Maureen Duffy, Ackroyd, Sinclair and Moorcock. More compact, Merlin Coverley's *Psychogeography* (2006) offers a bird's-eye view of psychogeography's Anglo-French origins and only a brief survey of its later London developments in Ackroyd, Ballard, Sinclair, Self and Stewart Home. Yet the contemporary London context sketched in the last chapter of Coverley's book is a useful starting point, and my aim is to elaborate and expand upon his premises, widening the field of observation to other authors while offering close readings of significant novels, short stories and travelogues. Finally, Sebastian Groes's *The Making of London: London in Contemporary Literature* (2011) traces a major shift from the writers' shoring up of London's myths against the ruins of the social fabric in the long Thatcher–Major years to the retrieval of more factual narrations in the urban writing at the turn of the millennium.

What differentiates my analysis from previous studies is, first and foremost, the methodological approach, which is interdisciplinary in various ways. Firstly, this book interrogates the transformations of London's urban texture from post-war redevelopments to millennium architecture, to consider their ideological import and define their impact on the contested realms of identity as it unfolds in literary texts. Secondly, the book explores the influence of architectural and artistic theories and practices on the writers discussed. Thirdly and finally, it is consistently informed by recent developments in urban studies and reflections on spatial politics formulated by architects, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers and art critics. In this respect, the intent is to sustain and foster cross-pollination of various disciplines and particularly of literary and architectural studies.

Ballard was the initiator of the interest in the relationship between architecture and the body in contemporary British literature. Chapter 1 is, as far as I know, the first sustained consideration of how his representation of post-catastrophic dwellings was influenced by the London-based architectural avant-gardes of the 1950s and 1960s. The aim is to interrogate the impact on his fiction of Archigram's fantasies of bio-technological responsive environments and of contemporary theoretical ideas on dwelling and the city (as found in McLuhan, Reyner Banham and others). But the chapter also illustrates the continuities of his spatial poetics with major concerns of existentialist philosophy related

to dwelling, authenticity and the unhomeliness of the world. A strong emphasis is placed on the key architectural concept of modularity—introduced by the Bauhaus and inherited by Brutalist architecture and Pop Art—which is shown to inform transversally Ballard's representation of corporeality, the mind and the city. Capitalizing on the findings of this analysis, the chapter moves on to consider how such ideas of habitation and the city apply to three early London novels: *The Drowned World* (1962), where his indebtedness to British Pop Art 'as found' poetics is explored; *Crash* (1973), seen in relation to modularity and Eduardo Paolozzi's industrial mythologies; and *High-Rise* (1975), investigated with reference to the posthuman and Archigram's environments. Finally, the chapter closes by interrogating the continuities between the grammar of urban modularity and Ballard's views on the artist's re-invention and transcendence of reality.

Part I of Chapter 2 focuses on the 1980s. In search of a *Zeitgeist* in the spatial politics of the London literature of this period, I have chosen to focus on three fictional works as diverse as Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor* (1985), an illustrative example of historiographic metafiction; Dyer's novel *The Colour of Memory* (1989), a celebration of lowlife in Brixton; and Bracewell's novella on a terrorist architect *Missing Margate* (1988). After reconstructing the transformations of London's urban texture in the Thatcherite era, the chapter traces the journey of these writers through the ruins of the city's changing landscape. In their works the vagrancy caused by high unemployment rates and the pervasive rubble of the daily destruction of council houses become—so I argue here—powerful literary metaphors for the impermanence of the human condition and the voracious metabolism of the city. The sense of estrangement from an increasingly unrecognizable and alienating urban landscape is shown to redouble uncannily in the representation of the subject's estrangement from its own body. The chapter tackles the riddle of the intensely masochistic or nihilistic drives shared by the three works, trying to make sense of their insistent representation of the body's incorporation into the formless substance of the capital city as well as their protagonists' craving for some kind of mystic or surreal transfiguration. The second half of the chapter considers the overcoming of this sense of impotence through the regenerative powers of the writer's memory and imagination. Illustrative works by Moorcock and Sinclair are analysed, where bodies and minds, strained or even in pain, pursue the aim of embodying the complex but intensely poetic forces of the city. In this connection, the impact of chaos theory on both writers is interrogated.

Chapter 3 is devoted to Sinclair's major fictional and non-fictional works. It investigates the interaction between two spatial modes: a capitalist and alienating London reminiscent of Jameson's postmodern hyperspace and a cosmic capital city conceived as organic substance. The two modes imply a redefinition of the writer's identity as both the

subject of trauma and the conductor of the chaotic natural dynamics of the city. One of my contentions is that Sinclair transforms politics into a highly individual, psychophysical experience, where corporeal trauma and abjection function as tangible evidence of the hostile forces of the city—financial, political, religious. My investigation aims at disclosing the reasons behind this redefinition of the subject (and its solitary politics) under the auspices of trauma and the motivations of this knowledge of the landscape through its somatization. Sinclair's voracious walks, the images of visceral bodies as well as the opposed ones of ghostly insubstantiality are discussed in relation to the issues of urban surveillance, complexity and informational overload. The final section of the chapter proposes a psychosomatic reading of Sinclair's love of the arcane, analysing its anthropological and shamanistic aspects with reference to Marc Augé, Mircea Eliade and Marcel Mauss.

Chapter 4 brings together an update of developments, circling back to Ballard. The accounts of Ryman and McCarthy reveal how 1970s concerns with the 'non-places' (Augé, 1992) of modern cities—which, for the early Ballard, were synonymous with post-war functional architecture—morph, at the turn of the millennium, into concerns with the city reimagined through information technologies and reconfigured by globalization. A path is charted from Ballard's early representation of London as a 'machine for living in', in Le Corbusier's celebrated definition (1924, p. 151), to McCarthy's post-9/11 understanding of the capital as part of global dynamics and traumas, a point on a grid. Questions are raised concerning the body's negotiations with abstract spaces in these writers. Why do Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1973) and Ryman's *253* (1996) need to enact violent chance transgressions of the system through islands of being wedged within it? And what is the significance of McCarthy's intensely physical and gruesome urban theatres of alienation and ritual embodiment in *Remainder* (2005)? The chapter devotes its energies to the interrogation of physical pain as an instrument these writers use to attain the rematerialization of bodies and space. The spatial politics enacted in these works are further illuminated through a comparison with analogous practices in art and architecture, from Georges Bataille's anti-architecture to Peter Eisenman and Jacques Derrida's project for the Parc de la Villette in Paris, from Archizoom's *No-Stop City* to experiments in performance, body art and constructed situations such as those by Abramović and Tino Sehgal. The end of Chapter 4 brings to a close the exploration of abstract spaces, this time considered in relation to Smith's novel *White Teeth* (2000). Her treatment of the postcolonial city is placed in the context of millennium London and its architecture. The main focus is on her deconstruction of the neutral spaces produced by the liberal discourse of multiculturalism, which are revealed to be instrumental in concealing and justifying exclusion. But an equal attention is devoted to her emphasis on the semantic significance of circumscribed spaces and fixed locations—houses in particular—whose importance takes over from the effects of drifting predominant in contemporary London literature.

Smith's domestic focus suggests that any treatment of the interaction between the body and the built environment entails questions about the inner and the outer. For this reason, my exploration of contemporary London literature will acknowledge not only new conceptions of corporeality and the urban space, but also the changing relationships between private and public spaces, interiors and exteriors. As we will see, houses and other enclosed spaces are often conceived as sensitive membranes, where exchanges take place between the inside and the city outside; but they can also work as metaphors of the body itself or, alternatively, as microcosmic projections of the larger metropolis.

## GASTON BACHELARD AND MARSHALL MCLUHAN

In *The System of Objects* (1968), Jean Baudrillard claims that post-war interior design determined a fundamental shift in the way home was conceived. Prior understandings of furniture and decoration, he argues, had revolved around the haunting human 'presence' they seemed to emanate, the sense of the domestic space as moulded by a certain lived experience and hence replete with unique symbolic overtones:

> Such furniture, Baudrillard suggested, was characterized by its permanence and monumentality, arranged almost theistically to facilitate the rituals of orthodox daily life. It was a solid reflection of the patriarchal structures of the family that it served, while at the same time it embodied those relationships as an organic extension of the bodies that dwelled there. Ultimately, argued Baudrillard, the traditional interior was understood as a form of material reification, an organic ossification of certain domestic practices that embedded daily life within a complex structure of affect and experiential depth. (Hornsey, 2010, p. 212)

Le Corbusier's modernist project proposed to consign to oblivion these cluttered interiors, with their moral resonance and overburdening sense of the past: 'if no cranny was left for the storage of the bric-a-brac once deposited in damp cellars and musty attics, then memory would be released from its unhealthy preoccupations to live in the present' (Vidler, 1992, p. 64).

In *Earth and Reveries of Repose*, which appeared in French in 1948, Gaston Bachelard is adamant in his rejection of Le Corbusier's modern apartments: 'I do not dream in Paris, in this geometric cube, in this cement cell, in this room with iron shutters so hostile to nocturnal subjects' (cited in Vidler, 1992, p. 65). In an age of so much homogenized space, Bachelard wants to demonstrate that interior places can and should be poetry, and he does so by writing one of the most appealing and lyrical explorations of home, *The Poetics of Space*, published in French in 1958. The book shows that our perception of domestic spaces, from cellar to attic, shapes our thoughts,