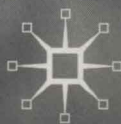


MODERNITY AND METROPOLIS

Writing, Film and Urban Formations

Peter Brooker



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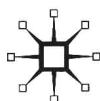
Writing, Film and Urban Formations

Peter Brooker

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Introduction: Beginnings in Endings

Modernity and metropolis

Doreen Massey describes cities as ‘the intersections of multiple narratives’, a nexus of distinctive and coexisting stories (1999: 171). I am interested in what follows in certain kinds of urban stories, those comprising some of the texts of modernist and postmodernist literature and film, and in how they interpret the changing physical forms, subjective and social experience of the city. I read these texts, so to speak, to understand how they have read the city, but also to discern how urban forms and processes have enabled or limited those readings. As this suggests, I see the ‘imaginary’ and the ‘actual’ as existing in a constitutive dialogue and therefore depart from recent post-structuralist accounts of the entirely discursive or written city (Wolfreys, 1998, Donald, 1999). Iain Sinclair speaks of the ‘city as a darker self: a theatre of possibilities in which I can audition lives that never happened’ (1999c: 7), and this captures my sense of the exploratory role of fiction and the symbolic imaginary as it uncovers alternatives within present realities. Above all I am interested in how single and collective urban identities are in this way made, undermined or re-imagined. My primary examples are of London and New York, commonly recognized as the leading ‘modern’ cities at the turn of and into the first half of the twentieth century, and described as exemplary ‘global’, ‘postmodern’ or ‘postcolonial’ cities at the century’s end. For some commentators this millennial moment is the time too of the ‘post-metropolis’, as urban life, even in established Western cities, moves decidedly beyond its earlier classic forms. I turn most directly to this theme at the volume’s close.

How are we to understand these changes and these terms? Modernity and metropolis are, as this book’s title suggests, a place at

least to begin. 'Modernity' we might suppose serves as a generic description of the social, economic and political developments structuring the development of twentieth century urban life. As we shall see, however, even so apparently straightforward a definition already suspends a number of problematic associations – of modernity with Western capitalism and the Enlightenment or 'modern project' – and distinctions – between social modernity, cultural modernism and post-modernism. A restricted sense of 'modernity' brings problems enough however. Ward and Zunz's *The Landscape of Modernity* (1992), for example, presents New York City at the turn of the century and up to the 1930s as a precursor of today's global cities. They characterize the New York of the earlier period as a city of harmonious 'rationality' and 'pluralism'. The late twentieth century, they say, has witnessed an imbalance, as the homogenizing influences of the post-war period have receded and the tendency towards pluralism, associated now with new patterns of immigration and an awareness of ethnicity, has become accentuated. 'Ethnicity is back in full force', they declare (13). Their response is to urge a new reconciliation between these competing 'kinds and visions of modernity' (12); between, in short, the capitalist and cultural versions of the 'modern project', pulling one way towards commercial interests and civic uniformity and the other towards social diversity.

The obvious problem here is that Ward and Zunz seek balance and harmony when there are, in their own account, tensions and shifts of emphasis across the century. Thus, though they present New York of the 1910s and 1920s as a precursor of the global city, suggesting a narrative of mirror-like continuity, the City is clearly not the same at these times, even in its basic configuration of forces. Their earlier New York is in fact less a precursor than a model of how the interests of business, planners and citizens were at one time accommodated. To invoke it now means suppressing the complications of the City's discontinuous history, squeezing the present back into the shape of the social democratic settlement of the pre-war period. All this is reinforced, moreover, by their choice of the single term 'modernity', when others (social planners, architects as well as cultural critics), would recognize the story they tell as one in which the keynote of modernity (rationalism), gives way to the keynote of postmodernism and post-modernity (pluralism). The historical narrative here is neither a linear one of before and after, nor of prediction, repetition or sameness. Nor will it quite do to think only of a later 'intensification' of earlier features already in place – not if we think, for example, of the

differences embodied in the internal immigration of African-Americans from the southern states to major Northern cities including New York in the 1920s, and the immigration of Hispanic and Asian groups to these cities in recent decades. The New York of the early century is not the global city of the end of century, nor does it 'still define[s] global cities throughout the world' (3).

A different kind of explanation and sense of historical process is therefore needed to account for the persistence of similar features, for their augmentation and transformation, reversal and recession in the face of the newer tendencies a city such as New York illustrates. Does this mean we must think of 'postmodernity' as overtaking 'modernity'? The problems with the designation 'post' and divergent meanings of this term across different disciplines are well known. The major theoretical scenarios associated with Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard and J-F Lyotard present us with either a radical economic and cultural break *from* the modern, or an avant-gardist push beyond present paradigms which is understood as constitutive *of* the post-modern. David Harvey suggests we overcome these differences by understanding both modernism and postmodernism as an expression of the dynamic of capitalism and employ 'modernity' to describe this whole movement. This is at least to embrace both terms. It's clear, however, that Harvey himself remains committed to a 'modernist' perspective, both in the priority he gives to social class above other social indicators, and in his off-hand dismissal of postmodernity as modernity's 'chaotic nemesis', its 'nihilistic downside' or as 'unconstrained ... eclecticism' (1996: 419, 425, 433). As so often, postmodernism is made to figure as modernity's other – the superficial or 'merely' playful, the derivative or discordant – the 'chaos', in short, which threatens modernity's harmony and common purpose and to which it must be returned.

We might want to resist the nostalgia for wholeness and presence in this common denigration of postmodernism but wish still to confirm the grounding of culture in capitalism. As a general proposition this does not take us very far, however, or rather it takes us too far, since it would apply, in general terms, across two or more centuries of industrial society. A closer inspection is likely to reveal marked changes, even progress, as well as sameness, or decline. Lawrence Rainey (1997), for example, has shown how modernism was significantly implicated in commodity production and shaped as much by commercial as artistic priorities before anyone thought to suggest this of postmodernism. Rainey's intervention is an extremely useful one for the study

of modernism but again there is little gain in describing modernist culture as if it belonged to the financial world of the 1990s rather than the 1910s. The radically changed conditions and technologies of production, ownership, distribution (including the role of film and TV), affecting the market place for authors and printed books should tell us that both culture and commerce have been involved in a more complex narrative than one where the whole story is given in the first chapter.

A broad concept of modernity can therefore simply be a way of dismissing postmodernism. It can doom culture to a sorry after-effect of underlying economic turbulence, and bolster the assumption that there's nothing new; that modernism or New York in the 1920s got there first; that the past, in other words, embodies the future; even that we can recover an – inevitably – fuller and more harmonious moment of past wholeness. The real problem, however, is that to favour modernity and modernism in such terms is to ignore the tensions and dynamic of both the past and the present. For it is not simply – as in Ward and Zunz – that 'rationality' has receded and might return, but that capitalist rationality continues to operate, though on an entirely different scale and in a different sphere. The relevant comparison in this case would not be between the mirror images of latter-day New York and its supposed precursor, but between *kinds* of global city then and now.

But when does a city become a global city and is this the same as a 'metropolis'? And what of the 'modern' city? In one of its main uses, emphasizing the economic, technological and social character of urban development, the 'modern' city was the 'industrial city', with nineteenth century Manchester as its pre-eminent example. In the related sense deriving the modern from the Enlightenment tradition of rational scientific and human progress, the example would be late nineteenth century Paris (King, 1995: 110–111). Other European cities (and this is a Eurocentric tradition), such as Vienna or Berlin, though of lesser stature and with their own distinctive characters, followed this second modern type. But both types were then decisively outdistanced by London at the end of the nineteenth century. The term 'metropolis' had been used earlier in the century to help comprehend London's growing size and its national and international function, and by the 1840s it had emerged ahead of Manchester as 'the Empire's commercial stronghold and as the world's financial capital' (Garside, 1984: 229). By 1890, London was the largest city the world

had known with a population of 5.5 million (Sutcliffe, 1984: 5), and easily qualified for the description, 'A modern big city of international importance' as Andrew Lees glosses the related term 'Weltstadt' (1984: 67–68). London was, however, a distinctively imperial capital, at 'the heart of the empire' in C.F.G. Masterman's pointed title of 1901, whose every advantage, especially its ports, maintained its commercial, administrative and political hegemony in the world. Schneer (1999) prefers on these grounds to describe the London of 1900 as an 'imperial metropolis'. And this helps emphasise the *type* of global city London was – one whose pre-eminence was founded on a commanding economic and political position and depended on the mechanisms of military, ideological and administrative power. Globalization in this case, therefore, or this kind of globalization, implied conquest and exploitation, and the ideological processes of conversion, assimilation and subordination. The term 'metropolis' (from Greek 'mother city'), further implied that London performed a co-ordinating role in the nexus of power and control that defined Empire. Arguably, the shape and style of the city as well as its major forms of employment supported it in this role. Thus, in the 1900s, London employed 20,000 colonial administrators, while colonial investments enabled the wealthy to settle in the West End and to enjoy its developing communications systems, theatre and new department stores (Selfridges opened in 1909, Heals in 1917). The very physical appearance of turn of the century London – the use of 'Edwardian' or 'classical baroque' for buildings in Whitehall and elsewhere and the construction of Kingsway as an imperial avenue from the Strand to Holborn – played its part too in asserting the merits and magnificence of Empire (Schneer, 1999: 18–28).

Other European cities developed as variations on this model of world or imperial global cities. New York, however, introduced a new type. For it was not a political but a commercial capital, and was above all a cultural city in which the famous symbolic verticality of its skyscrapers, the ambitious iron work of its first bridges and its elevated transport system conveyed a sense of the modern as 'newness' in the here and now. By the 1920s, New York was 'the type of the modern metropolis' (Keating, 1984: 140), a model which spoke of the present and of an imagined future society in a way London, Berlin or Paris did not. This symbolic role was part, we have to recognize too, of New York's own global identity: the shape of things to come, calling other older nations and their citizens to a new future.

Saskia Sassen suggests this future has come to pass, after a fashion at

least. For 'the agglomeration of high rise corporate offices we see in New York, London, Frankfurt and Tokyo ... has emerged as a kind of representation of advanced city form, the image of the post-industrial city' (1996: 23). But this homogeneity of urban forms in the economic sectors of cities worldwide, is intersected, Sassen adds, by other tendencies in outlying districts associated with the traditional working class and new immigrant communities 'beyond the central urban core' (23). Thus finance capital and old labour, white middle class and immigrant poor, coexist in uneasy juxtaposition and Sassen goes on to detail the disparities as well as the connections between these groups and neighbourhoods.

How is this different from an earlier New York? In terms of its general structural morphology it is not different. Like other global cities, New York continues to exhibit tensions throughout the period between homogenization and decentralization, between the transnational and the local, or between rationality and pluralism. There are differences in scope and scale, however, bordering on a difference in kind. For in the later period globalization has produced a different 'World Order' in which the technologies of power are controlled by an 'electronic herd' (Friedman, 1999), rather than Tammany Hall, and the instrumental rationality which served mid-century capitalism has shifted from the boardroom to the faceless, indeed placeless, information and finance networks or 'flows' which circuit the globe (Castells, 1996). The last two decades have seen the undermining if not erosion of the manufacturing base of first generation global cities, the widely noted expansion of the service sector, the growth of uniform consumer outlets, the recruitment of workers in all sectors to short term contracts and the extremely rapid development and inescapable penetration of information and media technologies.

These are the features of 'post-Fordism', so named because of the passing of a way of work and of life embodied in the production techniques, work practices and controlling influence of the magnate Henry T. Ford over his workforce and their families. Fordism presents a model of monopoly capitalism, or of early to mid-century modernity: the emblem of a productivist economy before the swing into predominantly consumer societies. In post-Fordism the rock-like associations instilled by the Fordist factory regimen between class, masculinity, workplace and hours of work, and of women and the home, have proved porous, while our social, ethnic, sexual and psychic lives have been further moulded by media technologies. The world is in the home: by way of the PC monitor or TV screen, or, what might be the

same thing, is nowhere particularly. The effect, as many writers and commentators have noted, is dramatic, especially in the city, where these developments have produced a sense of new possibility and self-invention alongside a sense of unbelonging and an urban mentality of fear, paranoia or nostalgia (Kennedy, 2000).

I would add some further observations to this account, related to Sassen's analysis of coexistent extremes. Firstly, that the wealthy, the working class and social minorities are now different people, by number, age, gender, ethnic group and relations to kinds of work, education, technology and mainstream culture. Secondly, that there is an unprecedented combination across the urban spaces of contemporary cities of physical proximity and socio-economic distance: as, for example, in the face to face encounter between advancing corporate capitalism with its everyday accoutrements of wine bars, boutiques and high price warehouse conversions and the Bangladeshi community in London's Spitalfields, or the uneasy coexistence through the 1980s and early 1990s of a gentrified middle-class and the homeless of New York's East Village (see Abu-Lughod, 1994 and chapters 4 and 6 below). Thirdly, there is a commonly recognized generalization of these features. That is to say, the complex connections and disconnections across extremes are themselves common to global cities, both East and West. The effect, belatedly recognized in the West as Anthony D. King points out (1995: 120–121), is the coexistence of polarized modes of production (from manual to high-tech) or of housing (luxury lofts above cardboard cities), together with their associated classes and ethnicities, which bring the 'Third World' into the 'First'. If parts of New York are felt to resemble Singapore and others to resemble Beirut or Cairo, as King and others aver, this is, I suggest, an expression of the present City's distance and difference from an earlier New York.

In effect, this is to sketch the economic and social forms of the metropolis in an age of 'pluralism'. Ward and Zunz associate this term with a resilient ethnic and cultural diversity, with 'diverse people shaping neighbourhoods' (12) in competition with the corporate builders, regulators and real estate speculators who see 'seeming chaos' and 'undisciplined suburban sprawl' (5, 9). But there is more to say about the historical composition of New York's neighbourhoods and about the recent movement of business and peoples out of the City. For the transformation in recent years, which Ward and Zunz point to, of the minority population of African-Americans and Hispanics, Asians and other new smaller groups into the majority population of New York City, once more distinguishes the City in this period from

earlier decades, both in numbers, ethnic groups and their associated neighbourhoods (Brooker, 1996 127–130). Furthermore, changes of this kind are accompanied, and indeed in part explained by the effects of recent de-industrialization and out-migration. Both these latter tendencies, as Peter Hall (1984) observes, have again been common to major Western cities. Of the USA, he writes:

economic activities of all kinds, it seemed, no longer required the immediate, dense face-to-face contacts that – as recently as the 1950s – had provided the basis for metropolitan agglomeration ... Thus technological and economic forces were taking entrepreneurs in the newer, expanding activities far away, while social forces – residential preferences, fear of crime, the search for a better environment – took the people away too (444)

Not all the people moved away however. For the age of de-industrialization and ‘white flight’ to the suburbs and small towns has seen a concentration in the inner city of both older and newer ethnic groups, and of a disadvantaged underclass to which they and a displaced white working class now belong. As identified by William J. Wilson (1987), the creation of an underclass in the urban ghettos has resulted from the shift from manufacturing to an informational production basis. They are in Scott Lash’s account, a ‘new class’, which is at once excluded from access to information and communication structures, and ‘downwardly mobile from the working class’ (1994: 130). We can understand then, in one of the most divisive ambiguities of the post-modern, how ‘pluralism’ and the diversity, decentralization, or deterritorialization this term implies, can be read as either positive and liberating or as evidence of unprecedented inequality, destitution and neglect.

In Peter Hall’s view these tendencies are signs of the ‘new reality of metropolitan decline’ after ‘the golden age of dynamic capitalism’ in the 1950s and 1960s (1984: 431). London, he believes, shares this experience with New York. The ‘assumption that planning could lead to a harmonious steady state’ in London, he argues, was confounded by ‘unplanned’ fluctuations in the birth rate and the movement of people first from the North to the South and then away from London in the late 1970s and 1980s (34). In the newly recognized ‘inner city’ of the period, contraction of the manufacturing base produced unemployment which helped ignite ‘race riots’ in Notting Hill, Brixton and Tottenham, as second generation African Caribbeans protested against

social disadvantage and institutional racism. Though these conditions continue, African Caribbeans and an expanding South Asian community (together numbering over 1m of the city's population), are established in distinct areas in South and West London and the East End. In London, as in New York and elsewhere, 'ethnicity', as Ward and Zunz put it, 'is back in full force'. This is an important emphasis for an understanding of changed identities and perceptions of the self and other, and is of interest throughout this volume. What should be clear, however, is that the range and awareness of ethnicities (with all the associated issues of cultural difference, social inequality and political policy), mean that these cities, at this stage of globalization, differ, as a matter of detail, from each other, and in social and economic terms differ quite radically from the global cities of earlier decades.¹

Political leaders in the US and Great Britain seek to maintain a collaborative settlement between business and the state. As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, for the British Labour Party under Blair and American Democratic Party under Clinton, this so-called 'Third Way' 'brings us back to the first and only way. Global capitalism with a human face' (1999: 7). Nick Cohen views Charles Leadbetter's volume *Living on Thin Air: The New Economy* (1999), as an apologia for the Blairite conception of modernity 'as a computer driven global knowledge economy' whose slogan is 'Globalization is Good' (1999: 33, 34). Blair of course insists his way is the 'modern' or 'modernizing' way. To hold to a belief in an alternative political modernity means challenging this monocular view of a monopolizing capitalist economy in the name of social diversity and a different unity founded on social equality. Raymond Williams was one of those who tirelessly posed this challenge. Hence Williams's belief not simply in socialism (an unpronounceable concept for Blair and Clinton and an unthinkable one, one suspects, for George W. Bush), but in 'socialisms' – 'since there are many peoples and cultures, there will be many socialisms', said Williams (1989b: 297). A future common culture, indeed 'any society towards which we are likely to move', as Raymond Williams also liked to point out, will be more complex, not simpler, nor more 'singular and unilinear' than earlier forms (1989b: 37, 295). We cannot approach this complexity by dissolving the distinction between modernism and postmodernism into the uninflected all-embracing dynamic of capitalism, as inescapable as this system appears; nor hearken back to the supposed harmony of an earlier moment. Instead we need to re-articulate the relation between these moments in terms

of the distinction Williams also emphasised between dominant, residual and emergent cultural tendencies in a given conjuncture, allowing for both continuities and discontinuities within an economic order which can only paradoxically maintain itself and remain 'the same' by pursuing a commitment to flexibility, expansion and diversification.

We need, what is more, to adapt such a model to different moments within and across cultures. The experience of 'space-time compression' identified by David Harvey, and the altered sense of personal and social identity accompanying this change, is generally recognized as a principal effect of globalization. I take this up again in the later chapters of this book. There is something to add at this point, however. John Berger has argued that 'modern history' begins 'at different moments in different places' (1992: 203). Homi Bhabha similarly identifies modernity's 'ambivalent temporality'. For just as cultures follow their own sense of the passage from the past to the modern present, so 'each repetition of the sign of modernity is different, specific to its historical and cultural conditions of enunciation' (Bhabha 1994: 247). There is such a thing too as 'becoming modern' and we might, after Lyotard, and Homi Bhabha, understand the 'post' as a sign of this emergence: a movement 'beyond' existing conditions which germinates within a present dominant order until the point of unmistakable breakthrough. The dominant in other words was once subordinate; the taken for granted a mere possibility. But we need then to see this process less as the 'perpetual' drive towards newness, as Lyotard would have it, than as activated at different times within specific histories and cultures. Thus it is, as Clyde Taylor comments in relation to African cinema, that 'Blacks can only dubiously be post-modernists' when a first modernist phase 'has in fact hardly begun' (1988: 108). In similar vein, Jeremy Seabrook detects a pattern of change in the rapidly developing, 'post-industrial' societies of the East which echoes the experience of workers in Great Britain at a much earlier point of industrialization (1996: 1-3). The implication is that if microtechnologies work in league with a globalizing economy to compress space and time and to homogenize world cultures into a single market, these same processes have simultaneously helped to foreground worldwide disparities in wealth and opportunity, to reveal parallels and divergencies across space and time, and to produce combinations of the premodern, modern and postmodern in the one culture, community or city which jostle the regular into an irregular sequence.

Reflexivity

My argument is that the distinction between the modern and post-modern, as usually understood, will not capture the process of mixed and uneven development characterizing contemporary globalization nor the concentrated intersections of the local and global in the overlapping modes of modern life experienced in present day cities. By 'modernity' I mean to imply this patterning, in urban sites particularly, of shifting relations, layered tropes and common but divergent narratives moving in a process of recession, becoming and realization. For as Harvey argues, we need a theoretical model which comprehends both becoming and being: both 'spatial forms and temporal process' for 'the dynamic of urbanization [process] and the construct of the city [being] exist in a fundamental creative tension' constituting 'a critical point of socio-ecological transformation' (Harvey, 1996: 436). I join Harvey here too in seeking to formulate a perspective upon what he describes as "'uneven spatio-temporal development'" or "'uneven geographical development'" (1996: 429–30). I want consequently to stress the coexistence of 'modernities', each realized in its own time of the present and bearing the traces of past forms and possible alternative futures. Modernity is therefore at once a retrospective and forward looking project in which a present or prospective form can, as Beck and Giddens imply in their concept of 'reflexive modernization', critique and radicalize an earlier expression. Giddens points to the susceptibility of all social and institutional forms to 'chronic revision in the light of new information and knowledge' (1993: 293–4). The reflexivity of modernity confounds Enlightenment thought, though it is its product, undermining Enlightenment certainties and installing a 'methodological principle of doubt' which disrupts intellectual paradigms and is '*existentially troubling* for ordinary individuals' (1993: 294).

As this suggests, reflexivity operates also upon conceptions of selfhood and identity, since individuals, now bereft of the certainties of family, community and nation, are, Giddens concludes, bound to create their own biographical narrative. Individual lives become a lived instance of the 'risk society' where unexpected economic, social or ecological disruption lurks within the mechanisms of a late capitalist order. In itself, the internal operation of 'reflexive modernization', Beck argues, is spontaneous and unmotivated. 'Risk' results from the unlooked-for side effects of unrelenting modernization, as for example in the advent of global warming. Nevertheless,