

Table of content

Introduction / 7

Chapter 1. THE RECENT THEORETICAL FOCUS ON SPACE AND THE CITY. NEW YORK CITY'S SPECIFIC SPATIAL, TEMPORAL, AND CULTURAL STRUCTURE / 21

Chapter 2. LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORY AFTER 1970 IN AMERICA: A HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION / 41

Chapter 3. EXCESS IN MANHATTAN: E. L. DOCTOROW'S *THE WATERBORES* / 55

Chapter 4. THE (GLORIOUS) **DEADLY DWELLING** HOTELS IN STEVEN MILLER LEE'S *THE HOTEL* / 71

Chapter 5. THE (GLORIOUS) **IN MANHATTAN, NEW YORK:** *THE HOTEL* IN POST-9/11 AMERICAN CULTURE / 87

Conclusion. MANHATTAN AS THE (NON)LOCUS OF THE SELF / 163

BIBLIOGRAPHY / 169

Table of content

Introduction / 7

Chapter 1. THE RECENT THEORETICAL FOCUS ON SPACE AND THE CITY. NEW YORK CITY'S SPECIFIC SPATIAL, TEMPORAL AND CULTURAL STRUCTURE / 21

Chapter 2. LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORY AFTER 1970 IN AMERICA: A HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION / 41

Chapter 3. EXCESS IN MANHATTAN: E. L. DOCTOROW'S *THE WATERWORKS* / 55

Chapter 4. THE (LOST) PARADISE OF DRESSLER'S HOTELS IN STEVEN MILLHAUSER'S *MARTIN DRESSLER* / 87

Chapter 5. E. L. DOCTOROW'S *HOMER AND LANGLEY*: CONSUMER CULTURE AND DEADLY DWELLING IN MANHATTAN / 127

Conclusion. MANHATTAN AS THE (NON)LOCUS OF THE SELF / 163

BIBLIOGRAPHY / 169

Chapter 1

THE RECENT THEORETICAL FOCUS ON SPACE AND THE CITY. NEW YORK CITY'S SPECIFIC SPATIAL, TEMPORAL AND CULTURAL STRUCTURE

Introduction

I will begin Chapter 1 by underlying the increasing importance of space and space theory in the recent cultural paradigm, often to the detriment of time in the last half of the twentieth century in America.

The main philosophical and literary preoccupation of the first half of the twentieth century was time, redefining and better understanding the essence of time, so much so that space was completely ignored. Differing from dynamic, versatile time as the ungraspable yet perceivable agent of duration and change, space was dismissed as immobile, fixed, inert, therefore unproblematic because easier to assess and consequently lacking all interest. It was only during the last decades of the twentieth century that a new, more general interest in space emerged. Such interest was also triggered by the specific context of the Cold War, with the isolation and closure it involved and which had a strong spatial dimension. Several changes that postmodernism brought about favoured space to the detriment of time: the scepticism concerning progress and linear narratives, the idea of difference and diversity which involve a plurality of dimensions in contrast to the uni-directional sense of time, the idea of displacement that accompanies migration. The later notion of globalization and, ultimately, a problematic "space-time compression" (Harvey 284) that annihilates distances and duration owing to an increasingly technologised and commodified world, all involve space both at a conceptual as well as mental level. Consequently, space has been rethought of as itself mobile, complex and problematic due to the plurality of social relationships that define it and are in turn defined by it.

In connection to this more general interest in space, a new attitude towards the city marked urban studies as early as the 1970s. It was the time when urban and cultural theorists started taking distance from a previous perspective upon the city that identified the latter with the historical processes exclusively. What characterized such a perspective was a view upon the metropolis as the distinctive sign of modernity, condensing historical and social meanings and

concentrating their significance. Over the entire nineteenth century and even later, the city was represented as the mere embodiment of the process of modernization – the concrete, tangible synthesis of modernity and space. Although this was the case to a large extent, it equally generated a process of depersonalization of the city in the fictional imagination that rendered it a universalizing, homogenizing, colossus-like entity. It also conferred the city an internal coherence and unity that it did not necessarily possess in reality. Yet, at the level of significance the image of a unitary city necessarily bestowed materiality upon modernity's complex problems, making them more easily graspable to city dwellers. Such is the case of the great American city novels of Dreiser or Dos Passos whose realistic plots recodify an otherwise meaningless, decodified city.

The present chapter will place New York City in a distinct spatial, but equally temporal paradigm, while revealing some of its myriad articulations and their relationships with fiction.

Recent theories of space

Three of the most important theorists of the last century, Henry Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, and Edward Soja insisted that space in general and more precisely the city was to gain its due place at the center of critical attention as itself an agent of radical historical transformation. This is the reason why urban theories emerging in the seventies increasingly distanced themselves from views that favoured a socio-historical determinism, and focused instead on the city's own role as a generator of meanings, as a place that shapes specific spatial relations and social paradigms. Counteracting a long tradition that privileged time and historicity, they pleaded instead for a distinctively spatial perspective in social theory as well as a more complex and diversified notion of urban space. This was a necessity in the 1970s, at a time when the American city in general was facing a deep crisis as a material space, that of its redefinition owing to processes of gentrification and urban sprawl. What resulted was a less coherent, less easily comprehensible image of the city but one whose advantage was that of replacing the initial single, grand narrative with more credible, multiple micronarratives.

The three important theorists mentioned above are therefore instrumental in irrevocably reversing the peripheral position of spatial hermeneutics in social theory and placing it centrally. Henry Lefebvre is the initiator of the spatial bent in recent critical studies. Michel Foucault and Edward Soja added different essential elements to Lefebvre's initial refocusing on space, modifying it, bringing in their own specific perspectives upon things. They were then followed by more and more theorists whose spatial awareness increased after the seventies.

Lefebvre spent an entire oeuvre introducing an analytical and critical interest in space into the overwhelmingly *historically* oriented materialism of

orthodox Marxism. Criticising the dominance of the socio-historical tandem, he brought space, more precisely the city, to the forefront of theoretical studies. Given the comprehensive nature of the urban paradigm and its predominance in the second half of the twentieth century, Lefebvre stipulated that this should entail a full epistemological mutation. The result was a new episteme, one entirely belonging to the urban. In Lefebvre's own words, "[w]e can say that the urban (as opposed to urbanism, whose ambiguity is gradually revealed) rises above the horizon, slowly occupies an epistemological field, and becomes the episteme of an epoch. History and the historic grow further apart" (qtd. in Prigge 49).

Lefebvre was also the first theorist to reject a view of space as an impersonal, passive and immobile holder, "a preexisting void, endowed with formal properties alone ... a container waiting to be filled by a content – i.e. matter, or bodies" (*The Production* 170). Instead, he famously talked of the "(social) production of (social) space" which reinforces the human element and its key role as part of a *process* that dynamically generates space rather than merely utilizes it. Thus he refutes the perception according to which space is pre-existing and inert, an empty "form" (26-27) in the way the Enlightenment perceived it. If time underlines notions of succession and/or simultaneity of events, space brings in its own specific concepts of "interrelationship", "coexistence and simultaneity" (73); such concepts imply that space is constantly being shaped by the various tensions at work there.

Differing from Lefebvre, Foucault never openly stated a focus on space in his work. On the contrary, his main preoccupation seemed to be with history which he famously redefined as "genealogy". Yet, space - more precisely the relationships spaces establish with the human body and with power – holds a central place in his genealogical perspective, especially in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). As the new cartographer of modern topology, according to French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, and someone who acknowledged our age as possibly, essentially, "the age of space" (qtd. in Prigge 46), Foucault situates space in direct relationship with delocalized, diffuse power in society, which makes all spaces the containers of power relations within varying degrees. As Deleuze put it, Foucault "no longer designates a privileged location as the source of power and no longer accepts any localization of power at one single point" (qtd. in Prigge 49). More than a mere container, space is equally a shaper of power relations whose specific ordering of hierarchies it further details and reinforces, as in the example of the Panopticon. No wonder then that in one of his important interviews Foucault dismisses the faulty popular view that attributes space a "reactionary and capitalist" role in opposition to history seen as the only "revolutionary" force (Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, and Power" 252). In his well-known article "Of Other Spaces" the French theorist further explains how space was ignored in modernity because of time being perceived as the more

complex and problematic of the two. He reveals, for example, nineteenth century's obsession with progressive history in the context of industrial development. As opposed to this, the change of paradigm towards the end of the twentieth century shows space as highly complex in its own turn, a milieu that defines us in most intimate ways.

Another consistent attack against the pre-eminence of history and historicity is to be found in Edward Soja's 1989 volume *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. The theorist explains the longstanding appeal of history through its associations to the idea of emancipation and progress that fascinated industrial nineteenth century. As opposed to time and devoid of ontological relevance, space was perceived as fixed, unmovable, inert therefore unproblematic, while time was connected to dynamic, challenging ideas of movement, change and progress. The author shows how space was thus gradually devalued, while history was privileged throughout the whole history of philosophy, from Descartes through Hume and Locke to Bergson's decisive influence of the matter. Two opposite main concepts are shown to have erroneously defined the perception of space before 1970: "opaqueness" and "transparency" (7). The first one eliminates space on grounds of its fixedness and consequently unproblematic, objective presence resulting from its apparent capacity to be physically grasped. Thus space becomes "little else but measurement and phenomenal description: fixed, dead, and undialectical: the Cartesian cartography of spatial science" (7). "Transparency", the second error, has the opposite effect, in that it dissolves space, viewing it as non-existent, a purely mental construct. Under the influence of Foucault's ideas and equally of Marxism, Soja dismantles the two concepts and underlines instead an understanding of space as non-neutral and non-passive, one that dethrones history, brought along by the late twentieth century.

A critic of the postmodern paradigm in its entirety, Fredric Jameson attacked both the perception of space as well as time characterizing "late capitalism" as he famously designates our age in his volume *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). In Jameson's criticism of recent space the verb "to map" is a key one. A fundamental process of "cognitive mapping" would be necessary to counteract this heightened feeling of spatial alienation characterizing late-capitalism, as "the latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual body to locate itself [...], and cognitively map its position in a mappable external world" (44-45). In fact, Jameson's view reflects an older tradition of perceiving the city as alienating, irrational and maze-like that goes back to nineteenth century modernism and which recalls Baudelaire's fantasmagoric view of nineteenth century Paris (cf. Brown 181).

In fact, the phenomenon of analyzing and theorizing space in its own right equally occurred before 1970, despite recent theorists' claims to the

contrary. This was mainly due to the German school of sociology and then to the Chicago School of Sociology whose influence extended over decades to come and might be considered still valid these days. Rather dismissive of Chicago School theories, Soja, for example, talks about their colonizing of space by history and sociology and reduction of space to no more than a stage or an environment for modernity, devoid of autonomous ontological relevance. Or, as early as 1903, Georg Simmel went beyond a strictly sociological perspective to discuss city phenomena such as mental over stimulation, fragmentation and routine as inescapable conditions of city life, conditions that generate a special psychology and emotional behaviour in city dwellers.⁸ Also, Chicago School researchers Robert Park and Robert Redfield's conclusions, although originally sociological, reach far beyond sociology towards what is called today urban anthropology, where they investigated patterns of deviance and freedom in the city or the passage from folk to city culture.

As for the present situation in urban theory, in a paradigm increasingly dominated by cultural studies and identity politics, a view over space as coherent, unitary and neutral has been utterly abandoned. It was replaced by an explosive array of micro-politics of space, where discourses, conflicts and various practices constantly shape space. To the process of des-unification contributed postcolonial authors and theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak or highly influential feminist urban theorists such as Doreen Massey, Beatriz Colomina and Rosalyn Deutsche, who have all argued for a complex relationship between urban space and race, gender or ethnicity, a relationship that is not self-evident but mediated by power and ideology. Under the effect of post structuralism and deconstruction in particular, space as well as gender and race have come to be understood no longer as a matter of pre-given, substantial essences but as discursive representations.

A perspective that shifted away from space as static, unitary and unproblematic as it was understood from the eighteenth to the twentieth century to space as both the producer and product of social relations and a container of diffuse power mechanisms triggered an enormous multiplication and diversification of the notion of space. Therefore any study in recent and contemporary fiction today must seemingly resist a simplifying and totalizing view of space, just as the present study itself attempts to do.

⁸ Also Robert Park, one of the leading figures of the Chicago School, stated that "The city is not ... merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it" (qtd. in Ghent Urban Studies Team 124).

Time Also; Past Reconstruction in the Recent American Cultural Paradigm and in the City

If space started being seen as a level of being on its own increasingly after the 1970s, this does not mean that a temporal paradigm can or should be disentangled from spatiality, or even partially ignored as some of the space theorists attempted to do. After all, the second half of the last century brought not only a reassessment of space but equally one of time in relationship to history in particular. We only need to think of the successive reconceptualisations of historical time over the second half of the last century, starting with *L'École des Annales* notion of *longue durée* and the consequent emphasis on quotidian life that this triggered in historical discourses, moving on to Foucault's "genealogy" and his insistence on the strict historicity rather than transcendence of the subject, and to Jameson's complaints of a weakening of historicity in the postmodern paradigm and subsequent urge to place events in their strict temporal context ("Always historicize!"). All these are crucial in connection to late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries American fiction. The novels under analysis here are themselves counter-histories of the subject, with the latter shown to be no longer transcendent in relation to a field of events or preserving its void sameness throughout history. Attempting to purify space of its temporal dimension would run the risk of turning space into yet another dominating *grand récit*, which is precisely what the time paradigm had itself been reproached.

Indeed, how can one talk of spatially determined phenomena without taking into account space's own shaping in time by history? Is space not physically altered under the influence of various tastes, styles and renewed necessities that change with time, just as space itself gives time and history their specific mould?⁹ Moreover, time partakes of the very essence of modernity seen as transience, which Baudelaire acknowledged already in 1863 when he defined modernity as "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable", in *La peinture de la vie moderne*.

Regarding the specific relationship cities have with time, what defined urban modernity especially starting with the mid nineteenth century was the embracing of radical newness, with cities being a key element in the elaboration of novelty both at a material and conceptual levels. Not only did they concentrate the forces of the modern process but they gave shape and substance to most of the

⁹ An example of space moulding history or at least of the interrelatedness of space and time might be that of the European and major American metropolises which gave the modernist *Zeitgeist* its specific contours, or the urban mass dwelling phenomenon in Eastern Europe as one of the key elements shaping the second half of the twentieth century.

social phenomena of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Writers, philosophers and sociologists alike discussed this identification of the city with newness, starting with Baudelaire and later Simmel, for whom the city was the locus of the modern experience, then Benjamin and recently Marshall Berman who underlined the general liquefaction of all previous values in the modern city and the existential crises this generated (cf. Berman, *All That is Solid*).

Although modernity especially in its earlier industrial stages was more trustful of the future, there is a distinct tradition partaking to it¹⁰ that looks backwards and deals instead with the feelings of loss that for example Benjamin was discussing in *The Arcades Project*.¹¹ It is this tendency that postmodernism inherited in its distrust of progress and the future and its consequent fascination with the past, with memory and reconstruction. In an urban context, this had to do with the rapidly disappearing past of the city and the anxiety this generates, as, paradoxically, solidly drawn urban structures seem the most vulnerable to destruction and change. The city's attachment to novelty often strives to dissolve its past, forcing people to live exclusively in the present, yet the past as a locus of spectrality persists, woven into the city's own quotidian existence. Urbanites often continue to inhabit two worlds simultaneously. If we insist to chase away the spectres or fail to identify them correctly, the city's present identity, its rich complexity, and its continuity in time might be affected - this is the reason why traces need to be recuperated, rediscussed and eventually reactivated.

Leaving the conceptual level aside for the moment, as concerns the material aspect of cities and their connection with the past over the last decades of the twentieth century, such a focus on temporality materialized on a large scale tendency of history revival, especially local history, that resulted in the phenomenon of "heritage movement". Cultural critics and theorists define the phenomenon as an omnipresent "rising interest in reconstructing and marketing the past" that gained great popularity especially in Great Britain and America and which also permeates forms of visual and written culture apart from the structure of cities (cf. Katz 815). This occurred as part of a larger, late twentieth century process of commodification of culture that took advantage of people's feared loss of identity and memory generated by the fast pace of contemporary life, in the context of significant waves of displacements and migrations that define our increasingly globalised world.

An age of "space-time compression" – this is how David Harvey characterized the end of the last century owing to the extreme speed of

¹⁰ According to Andreas Huyssen, Svetlana Boym and Susan Stewart, who investigate the relationship between modernity and memory, amongst other things.

¹¹ For Benjamin the experience of a city is made up of a constant negotiation with the ghosts and residues of previous experiences. Cf. Caygill 316.

communication and travel which induce feelings of simultaneity and deny distances and differences as if “present is all there is” (Harvey 284). In such a context, cultural occurrences that revive bygone times act out a necessary, beneficial *decompression* of both space and duration. They might be seen as reintroducing a much needed feeling of palpable distance from the past, while striving to augment the specificity of an epoch and a place, thus fostering cultural specificity. As mentioned above, especially central cities have been modified to accommodate various reconstructions of the past under the pressure of the heritage industry.

Fredric Jameson is probably the harshest critic of a postmodern view of the past, in an age that he famously deplors for lacking both a substantial rendering of space and a strong notion of historicity. What he mainly accuses postmodernism of is the dissolution of historical truth into a gratuitous play of surfaces which further aggravates our time’s irremediable loss of reality (cf. *Postmodernism*). To Jameson, the endless intertextuality that characterizes postmodernism ends up eliminating the referent, while history becomes a matter of a succession of aesthetic perceptions, “the history of aesthetic styles displac[ing] ‘real’ history” (20). Instead, in *The Political Subconscious*, probably his most important earlier book, he insists that a hard core of traumatic history subsists specifically in literature but can be revealed only at the end of a specific, neo-Marxist process of interpretation. Here as well as elsewhere Jameson expresses his particular view of history as a persistent, hard nucleus of truth defined by trauma, that “hurts” (*The Political* 103). Such a nucleus is impossible to fully capture in any narrative, which it disrupts from within.

Participating in the postmodern as well as partly in the incipient post-postmodern paradigms, the novels here are concerned with temporality in a particular way. One would be tempted to say that, since it is a past Manhattan that they project, they deal less with the perpetual fast forward move of modernity or with ideas of newness and change. Yet, interestingly enough, their topic is precisely modernity and its avid thrust into the future as well as its obsession with novelty and alteration. Moreover, the past appears as a complex construct that is often employed to provide a more or less veiled view of our times. *The Waterworks*, *Martin Dressler*, and *Homer and Langley* all deal with the desire to escape time altogether by means made available as a result of industrial progress.

New York – An Overview of the City and Its Cultural Landscape

As a city, New York is almost impossible to define – material excess as well as surplus of signification are its main characteristics. The metaphor of the

perpetually “unfinished city” employed by historian Thomas Bender in his book with the same title echoes Le Corbusier who in his turn insisted that New York “is not a completed city” but a “city in the process of becoming” (*When the Cathedrals* 44). In his book, Bender explores the specific type of metropolitan culture of New York and the way it changed over two hundred years. The metaphor of the “unfinished city” perfectly captures the spirit of the place in a double sense: that of its resistance to “metropolitan completion” and equally that of a plurality that denies “a single logic”, exceeding it (xi). While Boston for example was established in light of a strict Puritanical ethic, New York was from its beginnings a secular place of trade, determined both by money transactions and enterprise.¹² While trade involves exchange and communication, enterprise supposes the initiative of daring, solitary individuals, two features that might be said to have shaped New York’s destiny to our days, as I will presently show, even as a place that exceeds binary definitions.

Seeing the city as a personification of entrepreneurial spirit accounts for its singularity as a place of its own making and different from the rest of America, at times even arrogantly defying the latter one. Unmindfully renouncing the statute of national capital that it occupied temporarily in 1789, it chose to represent itself instead, “its own metropolitan culture and economy” (Bender, xi). Ever since, New York has consolidated its reputation as “something other than America” (185), as it often challenges the most fundamental values of the New World, subtly deriding them while at the same time constantly rethinking them, being based on “premises not quite shared by the nation generally” (185). New York has even been resented as non-American at times, mostly because of the exuberant liberties, its assumed secularity and especially its variety of ethnic groups. All these are feared in a nation “historically suspicious of cities” (xiv) and tending to demonize them as they contradict a deep attachment to the Puritanical principles of small town communitarianism and Jeffersonian agrarianism that characterize the rest of the nation. Or, New York was long described as “the only definitely anti-Puritan metropolis in America”.¹³ Its extravagance as well as its corruption and violence render it the opposite of the much dreamt of earthly Jerusalem, the “city on a hill” in the discourse of the Founding Father John Winthrop.

Yet, even if different from America, New York also reiterates the former’s destiny and divorce from the Old World, standing in a metonymical relationship to the rest of the country as an orphan of a larger culture that it traded in for freedom and self reliance. Or, “America itself was an orphan of sorts. [...] Orphans, by definition, originate their own genealogy; they are disinherited,

¹² Fur pelts and dried cod were the initial items of Dutch trading after 1620 (cf. Rykwert 190).

¹³ Ford Madox Ford (qtd. in Douglas 10).

perhaps, but free” (Douglas 27). This feeling of a self-assumed orphanhood is precisely what attracted immigrants to New York, as the freedom the city promised and delivered was crucial in their reinventing themselves and starting anew, away from the old family, social and political hierarchies of Europe or of rural America.

Forever paradoxical, if New York is as individualist and solitary as a true entrepreneur, as a place of trade and exchange it is also famously receptive to difference and this is precisely the reason why it succeeded in absorbing great waves of immigration in time. The coexistence of immense numbers of culturally different groups that mutually influence each other made New York, once again, “the most ‘foreign’ of American cities”, in Eric Homburger’s words (qtd. in Patell 4). Its luring promise is no more no less than that of the American Dream itself, reflected in endless stories of success and defeat.

Even if open-minded concerning the idea of otherness, New York is also, paradoxically, a place of alienation and solitude generated by several factors, amongst which the very orphanhood mentioned above. The much praised tolerance of New York is seen by some urbanists as just another word for loneliness, the result of individuals ignoring each other, each of them closed within his or her own insulated difference. In New York, urban theorist Richard Sennett insists, a walk “reveals ... that difference from and indifference to others” (129), a phenomenon connected to the idea of “disengagement” in the city (129). Solitude is deeply inscribed within Manhattan’s very urban structure, the Grid, as an embodiment of separation and uniformity simultaneously, in the context of the high population density unique to that place. Partaking to the negative image of the city is also its reputation as a destructive place of corruption and crime. In time this has added a Hell-like dimension to New York, a complement to its Eden like characteristics of promise, freedom and plenty. As such, the metropolis seems to possess a double identity, being “both an archetypal place of divine aspiration and ... an archetypal place of worldly temptation, ... a heavenly New Jerusalem and a hellish Babylon” (Rosenthal 28). The place’s terrifying stories of violence, crime or drug abuse coexist with the unimaginable opportunities it offers.

Many of New York’s crucial features can actually be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when as a result of increasing urbanization and industrialization there occurred a radical redefinition of space, society and the individual. Always ambiguous, New York City experienced a period of great optimism and trust in the future, alimanted by the industrial boom and the resulting material plenty; this was soon counterbalanced by feelings of fear and disappointment concerning the same industrialism. As the *centrum mundi* of modern times, the “Empire City” was a place of promise and opportunity that mesmerized everyone, locals and immigrants alike. Yet, the exploitation and excesses associated mostly to fierce industrialism seemed to annihilate all traces