

Berit Michel

Mapping the City – Narrating ‘Complexity’

Urban Space in the Contemporary Anglophone Novel

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Introduction

“Imagine you have been kidnapped, blindfolded, driven some distance and then released by your captors in a strange place. How would you know, when the blindfold came off that you were in a big city?” is the question city planner Solesbury asks in the first sentence of *World Cities, City Worlds*, a semiotic study of how we make sense of urban surroundings. He answers his question by drawing attention to the apparently unlimited onrush of impressions characteristic of the city:

[P]robably a busy atmosphere would be the first impression – traffic and people on the move, bright lights, noise. [...] Walking around, the variety of it might strike you next, with many kinds of faces in the crowd, all sorts of things going on, big and small vehicles. Before long something novel – odd behaviour, offbeat conversation or bewildering graffiti – could jolt you. Then, if you walked long enough, you would sense that this place seems to have no limits in time or space – it stretches as far as the eye can see and it keeps going twenty-four hours a day. These sensations – seen, heard, smelled – would tell you incontrovertibly that you were in one of the world’s cities. (1)

Solesbury goes on to ask the questions we would ask ourselves next – “But which city? One you know? Even the one you live in? One you’ve read about, seen on TV or in film or photos? Or one you don’t recognize at all?” (1). Solesbury’s study is just one among the many different approaches aimed at understanding how we experience a habitat that challenges the process of structuring and making sense of our environment. It illustrates how the environments of big cities, even if they are not specified, at first sight can all be characterized as overwhelmingly complex and to a significant degree unpredictable in terms of variety and possibility. Finding your way around such an environment seems reminiscent of an adventure. It is, however, an adventure that has become part of life in the 21st century, a century which is often referred to as the first urban century¹: The ‘challenge’ of finding one’s way around cities is a daily routine for the majority of the world’s population in increasingly mediatized surroundings. Even if we do not live in a city, the experience of finding our bearings in a foreign city has become a routine for a greater number of people than ever before. Solesbury’s description of how we would recognize the city as a city here is only testimony to a general interest in urban surroundings and the challenge of orientation. The concerns of his study will be pursued no further, but the situation he describes – the lack of orientation and the need to explore the city – illustrates what is at stake when it comes to questions of orientation in today’s complex cityscapes.

¹ *The Urban Century Institute* on their website, for example, speak of “the first century in which the majority of the world’s people will live in urban areas” and “the understanding” that the population living in cities “is now more than three billion people – an increase of over 30,000 percent in just four centuries – the net effect of which is natural and cultural transformation on a scale unprecedented in human history” (n.p.).

Today’s urban environments have not only inspired a variety of studies seeking to understand (our ways of seeing) the contemporary city, but, especially because cities increasingly turn into computational environments, they have also provoked calls for a cultural understanding of such changes.² This study focuses on urban novels that negotiate the way in which we perceive contemporary urban environments and asks how the narratives relate to and contextualize within recent discussions of a 21st-century experience of urban space that is inextricably linked to a changing media environment. Given increasingly mediatized urban environments, Faßler, who, in his preface to *Urban Fictions*, describes changing media environments as inseparable from the ways in which cities are *both organized and imagined* (cf. 10 *et passim*, italics mine), claims that in today’s urban environments the cultural knowledge we have about cities even more than in the past depends on the very impact of our visions of cities (cf. 21). Faßler explains that “media spaces today not only connect people, but have a considerable potential for urban cultural production” (cf. 21, my translation). Against this background, he points out that artistic processes are becoming more and more important for the development of complex and sensitive cultural knowledge (cf. 33). The novels discussed in this study are considered to be interpenetrated by today’s media-informed ways of imagining the city, while at the same time, as artistic representations of urban space, they constitute a cultural practice of negotiating urban spaces that (re-)produces a certain perspective on today’s urban environments.

This study focuses on narratives that envision, or rather stage, the ways in which we experience the complex urban environments of an increasingly digitalized world. Not all novels that choose the city as their setting, or even as a topic, form part of the group of fictions this study is interested in. As cities are becoming increasingly dependent on non-territorial media spaces (cf. among many others e.g. Faßler 21 *et passim*), the city is seen as more than just a place; in the sense of Faßler, it is seen as a cultural and medial environment that shapes our ways of experiencing space.³ Just as computational spaces are said to pervade urban space today, this study assumes that these culturally productive structures also become an organizing principle underlying the fictions’ stories and/or the fictions’ narrative structures. The present study thus discusses fictions that structurally emplot how we perceive today’s urban topographies

² To name but a few of the sources I will elaborate on later in this study, cf. Galloway and Manovich for their explanations of the need to regard computational environments as cultural practice and Gurr, “Urban Complexity” for the general need of cultural contributions in the field of urban complexity studies and city planning today. Cf. Gurr and Butler, “Urban Cultures” for the vital role of urban cultures generally to “the making sense of the dramatic demographic, economic, political and ecological challenges the metropolis has to face in the early 21st century” (139).

³ Apart from Faßler, for this point, cf. e.g. environmental psychologist Low, who, points out that the city, “as a site of everyday practice” is “not the only place where [the linkages of macro processes with the texture and fabric of human experience] can be studied” and specifies that “the intensification of these processes – as well as their human outcomes – occurs and can be understood best in cities” (2).