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REVIEW

Chimeral Cities

Review of *After-Images of the City*

Anne-Marie Willis

This essay presents a review of *After-Images of the City* edited by Joan Ramon Resina and Dieter Ingenschay (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2002, 269pp.).

To understand the nature of contemporary urban experience and its historical roots can give some sense of potential urban futures. This is an important task, given that we are fast approaching a situation in which half the world's population will live in cities.

There are vast literatures on urban studies from many disciplines – sociology, criminology, history, geography, economics, planning, architecture, urban design, environmental studies, cultural, literary and art historical studies. *After-Images of the City* is a book of ten essays whose contributors are mainly from literary and Hispanic studies. They are concerned with how the city and specific cities are textually constructed in word and image, how these constructions circulate, inter-relate, mutate, fade in

and out over time, appear, re-appear – in short, how they come to take on a reality that intersects and becomes entangled with the experience of the materiality of cities to the point that such a distinction becomes impossible to make.

The cities of the imagination the contributors dissect include Madrid, Barcelona, Berlin, London, Tijuana and New York, each examined in terms of specific moments of historical transition, when one set of images displaces another “while at the same time retaining the ‘after-image’ of what went before”. There have of course been many other ‘images of the city’ books. What this book seeks to contribute to this already densely populated area of scholarship is a focus on historical change – thus the ‘after-image’ thematic.

‘After-image’ is also intended to evoke a theoretical stance, not as finalising as ‘post-’, and referring to an historical condition in which constructed image(ry) has rushed in to fill the void of the distinctiveness of place as it has been displaced by the rise of the generic non-places of what many of the contributors (citing Marc Augé) call ‘super-modernity’ (named elsewhere as hyper-reality) – the functional everywhere of urbanity like highways, high rise, malls, other typeform structures and infrastructures. ‘After-image’ thus alludes to the historicity of being after the arrival of the culture of the image.

But rather than discussing the success or failure of the ‘After-image’ approach and thus confining the book within the limits of the emergent sub-cross-discipline of urban cultural studies, I’d like to focus on the question of agency implied by such intellectual work. For while the more interesting essays in *After-Images* evoke a strong sense of urban experience as complex, multi-layered and intertextual, they also display something else more unsettling – an unstable mix of blind spots, failed nerves, resignation, half-hearted gestures of hope, or, worse, flippancy, in the face of the perceived loss of agency by intellectuals who seek to understand the nature of contemporary life.

Most of the contributors to *After-Images* are well aware of the homogenising forces of modernisation that have been at work for the last two centuries, relentlessly reducing the particularities of place to non-specific functionalised urban space – seen, for example, in the synergy between the grid as the planner’s favoured model of spatial order and speculative real estate’s commodification of space. In particular, Joan Ramon Resina’s account of a hundred years of civilian contestation of the state’s spatial delimitation of Barcelona (‘From Rose of Fire to City of Ivory’) adds layers of symbolic complexity to this urban history.

Other essays in the book are critical of official attempts to conceal power relations and cover over the machinations of urban functionality by the stage-management of urban space,

deploying imagery, forms and styles to construct a sense of place. Mark Seltzer, in the context of Berlin in 2000, writes of “the problem of the newly renovated ‘synthetic’ metropolis as replica or theme park or reality show ... (that) distributes across its landscapes ready-made versions of intimacy and publicness, putting in place, here and there, interactive replicas of its own condition, a perpetual reality show” (p. 72).

In response to over-determination by abstract structures and concrete (pun intended) infrastructures, the researchers and cultural critics in this volume are constantly on the look-out for signs of breakdown, opposition, resistance. They celebrate writers and artists who have sought the marginal, the incidental, the flipside, the underbelly. Thus Debra Castillo writes about the attempts of Mexican and Chicano film-makers and writers to negotiate Tijuana’s status as an icon of borderline culture, viewed from the north, by Americans, as a touristic Mexican Disneyland and from the south, in Mexico City, as a place of “Americanised inhabitants, tacky businesses, bad food, sleazy sex joints” (p. 159). David Harvey exhumes (his term) an unwitting critique of bourgeois values in Balzac’s cartographic imagining of Paris, while Jürgen Schlaeger’s essay (‘London: Tomorrow’s Yesterday, Future images of the Past’) contrasts the British Labour government’s failed attempt to reconstruct the image of London around the figure of the Millennium Dome with the London evoked by contemporary writers.

Tom Conley in ‘The City Vanishes’ examines “how visual representations of cities impose and simultaneously take away a sense of identity and belonging on a vast and anonymous public” focussing on the calculated mix of sponsor logos, composite panoramas and guest personalities deployed in TV sports broadcasts, noting that “rich areas of contradiction” can be found in the after-effects of such media programming strategies, “that can turn them against themselves and yield new and different practices” (pp. 210–11).

A number of the contributors to *After-Images* share a sensibility that Jürgen Schlaeger (quoting Iain Sinclair) describes as that of a “born-again flaneur” a “stubborn creature, less interested in texture and fabric or in eavesdropping on philosophical conversation pieces than in noticing everything” (pp. 58–9). For these textual flaneurs, the city is a vast and fascinating mystery, a palimpsest of meanings, images and associations that rise up from actual places, fragmentary details and experiences indistinguishably mingled with memories of texts and images.

The primary concern of these urban theorists and critics, as well as the writers, film-makers and photographers, whose work they analyse, is with the experiential. This is exemplified in Jürgen Schlaeger’s characterisation of the writings of Patrick Wright

(*A Journey through Ruins* 1991) Geoff Nicholson (*Bleeding London* 1998) and Iain Sinclair (*Lights Out for the Territory* 1997):

Their London does not consist of history trails, improvement zones, conspicuous landmarks, monuments ... (It) does not consist of the bird's-eye view of town planners, the zoning graphs of demographers, or the arrow maze of the traffic statisticians; they do not fly over it, pore over maps, or move imaginary masses about. Rather they explore known and unknown territory in which literally everything – a house, a door, a scrap, a sign on the wall, even absences behind presences – can trigger complex memories, metaphoric transpositions, and associations to stories, events, and people. The city thus becomes a score for multiple self-projections, a space teeming with endless signification, a poly-palimpsestuous site inviting endless discoveries, mythopoetic activities in every possible direction. Living in the city means realising to the fullest extent its immense potential. (p. 55)

There is a significant ontological oversight here. The creative writing of the city is posed against the discursive practices of instrumentalism as if these were of the same order. 'Self-projections' are pitted against design actions that have major consequences. It is not as if planners and other urban designers 'move imaginary masses about' for their own amusement, but rather so as to prefigure the movement of actual masses (whether crowds flowing out of a stadium into spaces designed to channel them in desired directions, or cars flowing only where roads have designed them to go or masses of earth moved and concrete poured to create new plazas, apartment blocks, office towers or whatever).

Drawing upon de Certeau's *Practices of Everyday Life*, the oppositional practices endorsed by Schlaeger, Conley (and many other cultural critics beyond this book) are ultimately in the realm of individualised subjective experiences. The effort is to seek out aberrant modes of experiencing the city. The emphasis is on sensations, feelings, epiphanies. Implicitly and explicitly, such 'practices' are pitted against instrumental textual practices that are all about shaping space and materiality. This inappropriately pits an ontology of consuming against one of designing – or reactive practices against prefigurative practices. This points to a larger problem of the politics of this kind of cultural criticism – it takes as a *fait accompli* that there is nothing other to be but a consumer (albeit a finely-tuned cultural consumer, a connoisseur, perhaps). Certainly cultural studies redefined consumption as active, fluid, ever-changing and non-uniform, open to creative re-configuration, reversals, subversions, and the like – and clearly this a more nuanced understanding of consumer culture than traditional critiques that posited passive subjects consuming mass-produced

products. However, this close focus on the psycho-social implies that consumption is primarily a symbolic activity – that it's all about the exchange of signs and the manipulation of meanings. This tends to obscure material consequences. To take one example which returns us to the city: while meanings might circulate and eventually get exhausted in the consumer marketplace, the material goods that bear those meanings end up feeding the urban waste stream.

What kind of agency is implied in urban connoisseurship or in 'knowing' cultural consumption? Not much more than being a 'savvy consumer', momentarily just one step ahead of niche brands, viral marketing and other strategies used by capital to extend commodification into resistant spaces. (We can note here that certain TV shows are now being made in anticipation of cultural studies-informed audiences – with scripts full of irony, quotations and cross references to other TV shows, etc).

The celebration of non-compliant, individualised perceptions and experiences is fundamentally reactive. Action is abandoned in favour of the more passive pleasure of always being able to discover *more*. The flaneur is more interested in sights, than in sites. (it's no accident that the object of engagement of this book is *After-Images*). These cultural critics recoil from the mega-designing of architecture, urban planning and mass media. But in doing so, what is abandoned is the possibility of coming to understand the essentially prefigurative nature of design, this precisely in order to appropriate, reconfigure and remake other kinds of prefigurations – and thus make new worlds to encounter.

Design is just not recognised as a practice available to be made otherwise. Rather, the cultural practice endorsed by the flaneur is that of the artist. Frequently, what is celebrated is hyper-description, manic hallucinatory empiricism, such as the "psychogeographer's dream" (Schlaeger quoting Sinclair) of "embarking again and again on the endless journey of rewriting and reimagining the city" (p. 60).

Now of course writing is a practice as well as being a part of many other practices, including a good deal of design (one can think here of the importance of briefs and return briefs in architectural projects). Writing can be designing, it can prefigure possible worlds. Through writing, things can be imagined otherwise. But writing as pre-figuration does not figure in *After-Images of the City*. Here, writing tries desperately to catch up with the past or is trapped in a perpetual present.

"Not the result, but the process, is what makes the city what it is," concludes Schlaeger's essay. "No outside point of view can reveal its truth: only living it and writing it will bring readers close to what it means to live the city today" (p. 60). This statement provides the answer to another problem with *After-Images of the City* and similar cultural studies projects – which is the complete absence of anything other than/to urban life. To so vigorously advocate the

insider's view is to obscure from visibility the city's destruction, both within and without. This is connected to another major problem for urban studies, one that this volume does not articulate – which is that urban lifestyles, sensibilities, patterns of consumption, modes of thinking, etc are no longer confined just to cities. While 'city/country' continues to be a powerful binary and generator of desires from either direction, many of the differences have disappeared, while new ones have arisen that are barely yet recognised.¹

Note

1. This is one of the issues that will be explored in an 'urbocentrism' issue of *Design Philosophy Papers* during 2004. Also relevant here is a symposium on 'Three Sources of the Country-City' which Augustin Berque is convening at Cerissy-la-Salle (France) in September 2004 – further information in the next issue.