



Writing Visual Culture
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Introduction: Between Texts and Cities.

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I

This issue of *Writing Visual Culture* springs from the seminar *Texts+Cities: From the 1970s to the Present*, which Michael Heilgemeir and I organised at the University of Hertfordshire, in January 2014. The seminar and this issue, a partnership between Photography UH and the TVAD research group, are part of our project *Texts+Cities*, which explores the relationships between texts and urban spaces in contemporary society.

From the outset, Michael and I made the decision to restrict the scope of the project to developments taking place in the decades since the 1970s. The 1970s saw a series of key historical events that prompted a crisis of Capitalism still defining contemporary living:

- the energy crises;
- the increasing refinement of digital technologies and their introduction as lifestyle appliances, and to industries such as communications and finance;
- a new bout of globalisation that prompted an unprecedented worldwide integration of markets, politics, and values;
- and a resurgence of the power of capital.



Since the crisis of Capitalism of the 1970s, contemporary cities have provided a fertile ground for reflections on how to conceptualise the 'urban', so as to envisage potentially novel ways of producing effective action in them. The term "city" itself has been subjected to relentless questioning, as the classic distinction between urban and rural is being transformed radically. The logic of globalised capital extends urban sprawl further and further. It also assimilates what was once understood as the 'countryside', both by commodifying the experience of nature (through rural tourism, or through the gentrification of rural communities), and by integrating agricultural land into a continuum with urban-based systems of production and distribution. The same logic also produces the reverse movement, bringing consumerist versions of the countryside into the city. Economic and political ideologies shape the design, building, and inhabiting of physical spaces; historical and cultural texts and discourses are appropriated for the purposes of tourism and city branding; contemporary cities cannot be extricated from the production, consumption, manipulation, and circulation of texts in the form of data and information. At a most direct level, textual paraphernalia cover urban spaces, demanding engagement from users of those spaces. More fundamentally, cities are turning into environments that require to be explored at once physically, phenomenologically, and textually.

Reflecting on our seminar, the contributions and discussions helped us approach a basic question: can the contemporary, shape-shifting city, be 'read', can it be approached as if it were a text? This question is foregrounded by some of the contributors to the present issue, who have provided an array of examinations, analyses, and interpretations of the movement from text to urban space and back. Some of the papers move within a theoretical space influenced, or at least informed, by Semiotics – film, literary, and media criticism, in particular. Another area of concern is with the radical geography of the scholars responsible for the 'spatial turn' in the social sciences of the past half-century (notably the works of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey). Those authors have promoted a critical sensibility that is highly attuned to the instability of boundaries between representations and the material, physical, and social structures of urban space. Throughout the issue, the ghost of Modernism looms large, with its urban utopias in literal and metaphorical ruins. Larger still looms the spectre of Neoliberalism, a political and economic configuration that emerged in the wake of the structural crises of the 1970s, advocating free markets, free trade, and the strengthening of private property rights (Harvey 2005, 2-3). For some critics who see it already suffering its own crisis after the 2008 financial collapse, Neoliberalism is a planned effort by financial interests against the post-war Keynesian



compromise that saw the creation of the welfare state (Duménil & Lévy 2004, 2011; Glyn, 2006).

II

The issue opens with Christopher Garland's paper "Port-au-Prince is New Orleans: Race, Space, and the Spectacle of Suffering". Garland considers the role of photography, in the aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince, in constructing the figure of the disaster victim as "abject" (a term borrowed from Kristeva). The two cities, one in a first world country, the other one in the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, converge in this figure. Garland notes how visual representations framed the bodies of Haitians and of African-Americans in New Orleans as defined by poverty and by their race, and engaging in violence and lawlessness. In this, both Port-au-Prince and New Orleans are marked by their "otherness": the former as an embodiment of the West's fascination with the image of the global south as permanently on the brink of crisis. The latter, long considered one of the poorest and most unequal cities in the US, with the spectacular representation of its great catastrophe revealing not so much the differences between developed and developing worlds, but fundamentally, those between the state and its citizens.

The opening paper's theme of "otherness" of the Black body is reflected in the second paper, by Demetrios Kapetanakos, "The Neighborhood is Dangerous, But We Got There: Urban Space, Neoliberal Resistance, and Black Cultural Production in Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*". Kapetanakos' contribution explores Julien's presentation of New York in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and neoliberal London in the 1980s as mirroring in their particular times the trajectory of the Black queer experience through the city. The analysis teases out that film's critique of the political and cultural dimensions of neoliberal ideologies of the 1980s, and their atomisation of subjectivity.

In privileging economics and individual responsibility, neoliberal ideology finds its spatialised expressions in urban sites of heightened economic activity, and in those sites where such activity can be reproduced. In this configuration, Kapetanakos argues, the image becomes a pivotal medium for the dissemination of neoliberal ideology. Thus, representations reinforcing the notion that the lives of the Black community are centred on welfare-dependency, poverty, and crime; and the early responses to the AIDS crisis, contribute to framing the Black gay body as criminal, non-productive, and amoral.



The city in this paper is the medium and expression of socio-spatial practices: at once the arena where contests over cultural and racial representations are played out, and the site in which the very subjects it disenfranchises construct their spaces of resistance.

Kapetanakos' paper examines the carving of personal spaces for otherness and resistance. Lance Hanson's paper, "Edgelands Aesthetics: Exploring the Liminal in Andrea Arnold's *Fishtank*", likewise, is concerned with "other" spaces: boundaries, thresholds, spaces at the margins. The paper takes as its point of departure the notion of an "accented cinema", a term coined by film scholar Hamid Naficy to describe how experiences of exile and diaspora are translated into cinema. Hanson sees "edgelands", interstitial spaces found in urban environments, not-quite-wild landscapes, and post-industrial wastelands, as places of otherness and "pure potential" (Deleuze), reflecting and amplifying the alienation and longing experienced by the main character in Arnold's film. The paper also identifies some forms of built environment that function not only as settings for action but also as entities possessing their own narrative possibilities. Hanson catalogues and analyses products of industry and technology, and topographic elements in the film – the shoreline, wind turbines, and wastelands – showing them as symbols of liminal spaces of contemplation, of wonder, and of the potential for escape.

The next two papers share a concern with fictional and media representations of life in housing estates designed during the UK boom in mass housing building of the 1960s-1970s. The first of these papers is Peter Clandfield's "Red Road Re-visions". Clandfield draws on Bernard Westphal's Geocriticism, a cross-disciplinary form of analysis that argues that literature – and narratives, metaphors, as well as other modes of discourse not subject to the constraints of veracity and falsifiability – do more than represent the world: they contribute actively to its shaping. Clandfield focuses on Red Road, the high-rise housing complex in Glasgow. The estate attracted media attention recently for the plans for its demolition through controlled implosion ('blowdown') as a set piece for the opening ceremony for the 2014 Commonwealth Games. The paper examines the overlaps between that event (which was eventually scrapped) and fictional representations of Red Road, such as Andrea Arnold's *Red Road*, Alison Irvine's novel *The Road is Red*, and Denise Mina's crime novel *The Red Road*. In particular, Clandfield discusses Mina's description of a blowdown similar to the one planned for Red Road as resembling a "public hanging" – a grim metaphor for the fate of mass public housing under the neoliberal pressures of urban regeneration.

Nicola Mann's paper, "A Disconnected Community? (Re)Visioning the Heygate Council Estate Through Digital Activism", focuses on community-initiated narratives of everyday life in



the South London estate. Produced in opposition to popular culture and the media representations that portray Heygate as a hotbed of crime and deprivation, these initiatives use web-based activism to put forth affirmative stories that commemorate the residents' attachment to the place. In her analysis of these initiatives, Mann introduces the notion of "usable memory", a tactic that articulates the connectivity between shared history, and physical and social structures. The term is indebted to figures such as historian Van Wyck Brooks, anthropologist Paul Connerton, and sociologist David Harvey.

Like Peter Clandfield in the preceding paper, Mann provides a critique of the role of private developers in leading urban regeneration initiatives. Mann notes in particular the rhetoric of demonisation of life on the housing estate, which she identifies, through a discussion of statements from residents of the estate, as a product of regeneration discourses. Mann finds the catalysts and defining events of that rhetoric in the three decades of public disinvestment in council housing since the 1980s, in Margaret Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme, and in increasing privatisation – effectively, in the retrenchment of the welfare estate promoted by neoliberal policies.

The papers by Peter Clandfield and Nicola Mann on the Red Road and Heygate estates converge, albeit in ways that are specific to their particular concerns, in their analyses of how media-produced dystopian views frame those housing estates as sites of delinquency and social exclusion. In this they echo the argument made by David Kapetanakos that neoliberalism furthers the marginalisation of Black queer bodies by portraying them as unproductive, diseased, and deviant.

The contributions by Clandfield and Mann delve into the interplays between a variety of texts in the construction of a sense of place, and the dynamics that enable those texts to produce material effects on those places. Fictional accounts explore the complex social and spatial relationships in those estates, and digital activism initiatives from residents highlight their sense of community and shared cultural identity, in opposition to the threat posed by developers. Those views also testify to the rhetorical power of the tower blocks and sink estates of Glasgow and inner-city London as signifiers of a real or perceived failure of post-war Modernist mass housing design to live up to its utopian ideals.

The next paper, "Superstudio's Dystopian Tales: Textual and Graphic Practice as Operational Method", by Daniela N. Prina, also addresses issues concerning Modernism and its legacy on cities, but from a different perspective. In the papers by Clandfield and Mann, the promises and failures of Modernist utopian planners are discussed from the perspective of



people who live in the very estates spawned by those planners. In contrast, Prina focuses on critics of that utopianism from within the architectural profession itself, specifically Florentine architectural practice Superstudio. In their reflections on the paradoxical role of architecture, of text and the image, and of visual communication, Superstudio's theoretical output and speculative designs produced from the 1960s onwards absorbed a wide range of influences: Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of technical rationality; Pop Art; the technological iconography of Britain's Archigram; and dystopian classics of literature such as Orwell and Huxley, as well as popular science fiction. The paper provides a review of Superstudio's key projects, highlighting the continued relevance of their imaginary cities to contemporary critical architectural and urban research.

This issue's final paper is Sebastian Klausner's "Ōtomo's Exploding Cities – The Intersection of Class and City in Ōtomo Katsuhiro's Works Before, During, and After the Bubble Economy in Japan". We move from Superstudio's counter-utopias to the sublimation of class divisions through the othering of Tokyo's collective capitalism in Ōtomo's *anime* fiction. The theme of the city being destroyed is a well-known staple of *anime* and *kaijū*: in battling their foes, Ultraman, Ultra Seven, as well as Godzilla, have been reducing Japanese cities to rubble for some time. Klausner explores the key leitmotiv of exploding buildings and city blocks in Ōtomo's fiction as expressing the entwinement of place, class, and visual culture in Japan. The *danchi* (high-rise public housing complexes that sprang all over the country to accommodate the expanding urban population) in *Dōmu*, and vertically structured cities in *Akira* and *Metropolis*, appear as spaces of social and urban entropy, ripe for a literal 'creative destruction' of Japanese society and its built forms. Despite the exoticism of his works' science fiction/fantasy setting, Ōtomo's concerns echo those explored in other papers in this issue: the alienation in Andrea Arnold's *Fishtank*; Superstudio's imagined cities, at once alluring, disconcerting, and oppressive in their revolutionary fervor, amplifying and distorting traits of existing ones to the point of ecstasy; the otherness and marginality discussed in the papers by Kapetanakos and Garland. Even the aesthetics of explosion and destruction of the city, a key trope in *anime*, finds a parallel in the plans for the blowdown of Glasgow's Red Road tower blocks.



III

As editors of this issue, Michael Heilgemeir and I would like to thank our colleagues at the University of Hertfordshire: Dr Grace Lees-Maffei, Reader in Design History and Leader of the TVAD research group, and Dr Steven Adams, our Associate Dean of Research. Grace and Steven have been extremely generous to us in their support and encouragement. We would also like to thank Dr Susan Parham, Head of Urbanism at the University of Hertfordshire's Centre for Sustainable Communities. Susan's advice throughout the production of this issue was invaluable, and helped us enormously in shaping the project. And of course, we would like to thank the seven contributors to this issue of *Writing Visual Culture*, who have responded so readily and generously to our call with papers that move between accounts of the city from media, fictional or community voices, design disciplines, and theoretical perspectives. In this, the present issue hopes to contribute to wider debates within the arts and social sciences that relate to the overlaps, discontinuities, intersections between text and city. Our aim has been to provide an arena in which to investigate ways of thinking and inhabiting the contemporary city that are at once experiential, material, physical, and symbolic, abstract, representational, in a multilayered, multiform web.

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