

*Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life.*  
By Steve Pile. London: Routledge, 2005. 232 pages. £21.99  
(Paperback).

The city is a key concept and term of reference for urban geographers and social theorists alike. More so, the city is an idea in the minds of those who dwell in it, as well a physical configuration of buildings, facilities, functions, and other institutional forms. As Pile points out, for some urban geographers the city has always been about social relations, so that 'what is vital about cities is that they bring together people in such a way that this makes a difference to what goes on between them', (p.1). From this seemingly uncontentious premise, Pile weaves together a thesis, regarding the 'reality' of cities, via a reading of selected aspects of Simmel, Freud, and Benjamin; a heady brew of critical theory and psychoanalysis.

For Pile the reality of cities encompasses the emotional and imaginary elements of urban life, which he feels have been neglected. The theoretical arguments are developed in the early chapters which give way to a series of what can loosely be described as exemplifying case studies of the ways in which cities can be, and are lived as dream like, or in his preferred phrase, phantasmagorias. These case studies are a mix of actual, fictive, imagined and remembered cities organised around the interpretative lens of dreams, magic, vampires and ghosts.

Pile makes it clear from the outset, that he wants 'to play with the notion of what is considered real about city life' (p.2), to focus on their intangible and ethereal qualities and moods. He discusses the work of 'psycho-geographers'; experimental artists, filmmakers, and novelists, who have explored the way the city is 'stitched' together from fragments of experience, often fleeting and transient, articulating with historical and idiosyncratic narratives of particular places and monuments.

Through Simmel, the author connects city life with modernity and urban forms of sociality. It is in the city that the modern attitude, of indifference and rationality, is developed. The modern character is formed in the encounter with the overwhelming diversity of experiences, differentiation, and mediated (i.e. money) economic exchange found in the city. Secondly, Pile draws upon Benjamin's characterisation of modern life as a phantasmagoria, a ghost like panoply of novel experiences, events, styles, spectacles, which at the same time conceal their own production. Thus, the city expresses and conceals desires. Turning to Freud and psychoanalysis, Pile explores how dream analysis can unravel the 'dream-work' in the production of the phantasmagorias of city life. He suggests that much in the same way that the psychoanalyst has to *decode* latent meanings of dreams through their manifest content and read beyond the surface, so too must the urban theorist. In so doing, the analyst examines the way that latent content, unconscious desires and wishes are transformed and produced via dream-work into manifest content.

Clearly, dreams play a pivotal and manifold role in Pile's argument, which perhaps is too much weight for any one concept to bear. The author argues that dreams are found in the city, in the dreams of its inhabitants as expressed in advertising slogans, graffiti, books, etc. Cities are found in dreams. Also, dreams can be used rhetorically in politics. Most importantly, dreams provide a framework to interpret city life and its phantasmagorias.

Having set a theoretical compass, the book delves into a series of illustrative interpretations of phantasmagorias. The case studies are interesting and at times thought provoking, encompassing explorations of voodoo in New York and New Orleans, of which Pile is very knowledgeable. He treats sensitively New Orleans' Creole racial and cultural history, and its ambivalent position in the American imagination. There is deft deployment of historical sources, secondary works, ethnographic reportage, and photographs which I feel are often under-interpreted in this book. Pile uses evocative titles for his sections and one perhaps would have expected a reference to Paul Gilroy in a section entitled 'Syncretic Cities: New Orleans and the Voodoo Atlantic'. Pile's discussion of vampires in Singapore is genuinely informative; the author has an eye for marginalia, the peripheral, and an ear for a good story. He shows ingenuity in following the circulation between these different cities of magical motifs. He suggests that 'the modern city...provides fertile ground for magical beliefs and practices' (p.72).

However, as a whole, these empirical chapters are not well integrated with each other and are relatively self-contained, indicating the fact that some of these chapters have been published previously as papers. Consequently, the book overall has a somewhat disjointed feel. There is a more problematic aspect to this book, which is the structure of its arguments; the reasoning throughout the book is analogical, thus, we are told that dream-work is like emotional work, like blood-work, like grief-work, etc., with each new neologism, its relation to the original correspondence between dream-work and dream analysis becomes more tenuous. The author is aware that analogies are not always transparent or obvious, when he notes, 'the agencies of the mind cannot be directly correlated with those of the social' (p.58). Given that the term 'dream' itself, as suggested earlier, has different uses for the author, there does seem to be an element of wilful ambiguity at work here, and the concept could have benefited from a more rigorous explication.

Pile argues that his approach 'discloses the significance of dreams, magic, vampires and ghosts for the emotional work of city life...[which] reveal aspects of the lived experience of cities, of urban social processes, and also of the spatial and temporal constitution of city life' (p.3). I do not find this compelling, Pile does not offer the reader much justification for his theoretical formulations, perhaps this is intentional given the subject matter.

Early on in the book the author asserts that he would not be 'Specifying "The Real"' (p. 2); consequently, there is a lacunae at the heart of this work, which is that whilst the reader's ideas of what is 'real' about cities maybe expanded, this book fails to engage with what some of those existing intuitions regarding the 'reality' of cities might be, what is it for something to be *real* in and of the city. This is a shame.

Nonetheless, this is a book with an interesting thesis, and welcome contribution to the literature. Pile has opened up a productive theoretical and empirical space for further study and exploration.

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