

Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City, Ben Highmore, 2005, 192 pages, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, £26.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780333929346.

Urban studies is a concept that is both identifiable as an academic discourse, and a technology that is effected by and effects the constitution of what it means to be a city. As cities morph, grow, shrink, adapt, contort and transmogrify, studying them becomes somewhat of a nihilistic endeavour as they are changing in response to the ways in which they are studied. As such, the discipline itself is amorphous and heterogeneous – it is not the sole purview of geographers or sociologists as perhaps it once was. It cuts across archaic institutional disciplines, brings in artists and activists, dominates via technocrats and economists and extends to include citizens from the past, present and future. ‘Urban Studies’ as a label is becoming more and more drenched in futility.

Such futility can be overcome through recognition that to study the urban, is *to be* urban. There is very little use in extricating academic or analytical discourse as being somehow ‘outside’ the purview of the urbanisation process. And it is to this inextricability that *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City* by Ben Highmore speaks. Taking a cultural analysis approach, Highmore has weaved together a disparate set of contrasting and thematically diverse texts (from Edgar Allan Poe’s *Man of the Crowd* to the Wachowskis’ *The Matrix*) to attempt to collide the metaphorical and actual city. Moreover, he does this through a privileging of the analysis of modernity, and the movement involved in the pace of change. By utilising most readily the Lefebvrian concept of rhythmanalysis Highmore has created a text that analyses, describes, but ultimately becomes part of the ontological disposition of the urban. Through the analysis of cultural texts, he has attempted to epistemologically bring together representations and metaphors of the city with the actualities of them in a ‘realist’ approach. Indeed he argues at the outset that; “to privilege the metaphors of the city is not to leave the city behind” (p. 5), suggesting that the analytical technology of metaphor (such as the city as a body or a living organism) does not cleave the city from the analysis of it; if anything it further entangles them. This ontological spur runs throughout the book, and can perhaps be best summarised thusly;

“This book argues that the figuration of the urban... not only accounts for a variety of representations of city life, but is also a crucial aspect of the material experience of the urban – its actuality”
(p. 5-6)

The text of Highmore’s book is very much driven by exploring the material-representation nexus of cities through these cultural texts. The subject of chapter two is Poe’s *Man of the Crowd*. Such a text has been utilised prominently in urban theoretical discussions (I myself have used it in my own work) and it is difficult to bring any further insights into such a well-trodden and quintessential urban text. Highmore however manages to wring out yet more conceptual ideation by suggesting that the story actually can be seen to “threaten the very premise of *studying* the urban” (p. 31,

original emphasis). Given that the book was published nearly a decade ago, such a premise still remains somewhat isolated in terms of its interpretation of Poe's seminal work, and such a positionality is testament to the ways in which Highmore has teased out further complexities of the work. The illegibility of the city is something that is articulated broadly among contemporary urban geographers, cultural theorists, and sociologists. It would therefore appear that Highmore is speaking to the converted. However, to ground this in the empirics of the intense textual analysis of Poe's work gives the trope fresh impetus, and something that belies its relative anachronism.

The next chapter is cast from a similar mould. Using tried and tested thematic tools (such as the arcades, the spectacle of the shopping centre and Walter Benjamin's work in analysing it), Highmore spins out fascinating new insights into the nature of modernity and the contemporary cityscape. His prose on historical analysis of the female shoplifter as imbued with a 'savage impulse' to consume in the face of the overwhelming urban and consumerist spectacle is particularly acute. Littered with figures and lengthy quotes from historic sources, Highmore crafts a text that is informative, intelligent and insightful in equal measure.

Chapters four and six use films, *The Battle of Algiers* and *The Matrix*, respectively, to evocatively posit that movement, metaphor, modernity and the metropolis are inherent and irrevocably enmeshed. For me, chapter six is by far the most intriguing of the book, not least because the subject matter is one that is contemporary. Highmore argues that *The Matrix* is a film that shifts the urban metaphorical tradition from the body as *organised*, in that the city has a heart, veins and arteries, to one that is *nervous*, in that it is based on the system of synapsis, nerves and receptors.

"The Matrix consistently juxtaposes two network systems: the now-defunct sewerage system of a derelict city that is used... as a labyrinthine road system; and the network of the Matrix itself, which generates a virtual worldscape. On the one hand, a system belonging to a cardiovascular and alimentary imaginary, on the other, a world wide web-like system that belongs to a neural imaginary"
(p. 133)

This shift from one metaphor to the other is predicated upon a reading of the flow and rhythm of the city in the film which Highmore argues contributes more to reimagining the city around us than it does to the deconstruction of the film itself.

The intervening chapter five inspects detective fiction as a means to 'map' the current thinking of cities away from centralised normalising forces towards more minoritarian thinking. Echoing a Deleuzian ontology, this chapter again uses flow and Lefebvre's ideas of rhythmanalysis to explore the ways in which modern mobility is "always truncated, always limited" (p. 115), something which helps to critique to capitalistic festhisation of frictionless urban flow.

The book's thematic undertakings are varied, but are weaved together through the aforementioned use of rhythmanalysis, which Highmore argues is "concerned with

the historical rhythms of urban modernity as they are materialised in cultural texts” (p. 150). The specific utilisation of this idea can be considered problematic given the ways in which it necessitates a reduction in contextualisation and representation. It is, as Highmore admits, too rooted in the ‘observational’ and the ‘phenomenological present.’ However, in critiquing Jameson’s view of postmodernity, Highmore argues that by using rhythm analysis, the ‘social constructionism’ that has reduced urban life to a linear trajectory of constant acceleration can be admonished in favour of ebb, flow, friction and traction.

The book itself largely succeeds in convincing the reader of this fact. The writing style obfuscates this somewhat, and the book’s structure lends itself to a text that can be read in parts as much as it can as a whole, rendering it a worthwhile text for thematically concise audiences (such as film studies or literary scholars) as well as the more urban purists among us. However, given the fact that solid conceptual argument of the inextricability of studying and contributing to the urban is an entirely valid one, the book deserves to be lauded as making more than a telling contribution to the urban studies literature (whatever *that* is).

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