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Ghent Urban Studies Team, *The Urban Condition: Space, Community, and Self in the Contemporary Metropolis* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999), 448pp., NLG 65.00 (hardback).

To be intrigued by urban detective stories in which the detective ends up confused and nonplussed can be an invaluable way in to a large body of urban imaginings. Equally, though, an interest in such texts as Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Man of the Crowd,’ Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*, the Belgian episode early on in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*, and all of Michael Dibden’s Aurelio Zen novels (but most memorably *Dead Lagoon*) can be a potentially disabling lens upon the city as a social and political topic of investigation. James Donald is clear about his preferences – he opens what is really a collection of essays by acknowledging the attractiveness of the urban explorations offered by a less well-known example of this sub-genre, Hiroshi Teshigahara’s film *The Man without a Map* – but he is in plentiful company in his ambitions also to have a say about community, citizenship and urban planning.

Donald’s is a complex attraction to the imaginings of the city in literature, in film and – more indirectly – in the many terrific photographs which punctuate the book. In a chapter entitled ‘The Citizen and the Man about Town,’ for instance, he explores Habermas’s understanding of the urban citizen. Yet he is happiest with the Man about Town and with associated arguments about the *flâneur*, though is quick to note and criticize the gender bias of that term. (There is a sense to the book that here
is a critic who knows all the theoretical angles, though that can produce a rather self-enclosing dialogue with the many different theoretical voices.) Donald’s view of the city can be described as Romantic not so much because he deals with imaginative representations but because he returns - when there are methodological challenges or the presence of influential critics and theorists crowds in on him – to the importance of a personal response which cannot shake off his experiences of one city, London, even when writing about New York or Berlin. But Habermas and an Aristotelian tradition of thinking about public space do deserve more than the inverted snobbery which wraps up ’The Citizen and the Man about Town’: ’The good citizens and the zealous republicans should leave us flawed men and women about town some space’ (p. 119). The dull earnestness of Habermas would seem to be a better option, for instance, than the nostalgic communitarians whom Donald rightly goes after in a later freewheeling chapter which even takes Raymond Williams and David Harvey to task for their veiled essentialism.

When an occasional unguarded swipe at a Habermas or a Williams does not quite come off this might be taken as a general lesson to those of us who also enjoy analysing representations that we should not make overly strong political claims for what we do. Yet Donald’s ambitions in this direction and his ability to move easily - within a Cultural Studies framework - between different media and some of the best theorising of the city (dating back to Engels) make for an extremely engaging book. *Imagining the Modern City* is at its best in individual essays or sections within essays and less persuasive when the need to pull things together is felt. The Preface and a few of the asides within essays are quite self-indulgent and some readers could well find them somewhat irritating. Readers who do not take to metaphysically inclined writers of detective stories will probably experience most irritation and wonder what
kind of enactable politics can be gleaned from Donald’s work. Yet even for those readers who might well not be reading the book ‘in genre’, as it were, Donald’s wonderfully light touch in a chapter entitled ‘Fog Everywhere’ provides ample compensation as he unerringly selects just the right passages in *Bleak House*, ‘The Dead’ and W.R. Burnett’s *The Asphalt Jungle* to prepare us for a reading of the poetics of more sociological accounts of the city, from Louis Wirth, Robert Park and Georg Simmel onwards. The centre of the book is ‘Light in Dark Spaces, an essay which was the star piece in Chris Jenks’ influential 1995 collection, *Visual Culture*, and whose success possibly encouraged Donald to bring other pieces together. In this essay Donald seems more involved and certainly more original when he can leave the contextual, institutional preamble which he accords ‘Light in Dark Spaces when including it in the present book and can get to the urban spaces *in* various films, from *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* to *Candyman*, and in urban theorists, from Engels, through Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin to Michel de Certeau and Anthony Vidler. It is, incidentally, a relief to find a critic willing to credit the top-down point of view on the metropolis, which is rejected by de Certeau in Foucauldian terms, with both interest and even a democratic potential usually reserved for street-level wanderings. This against-the-grain position seems to be stronger in the first version of the essay than in its present, more extended manifestation.

If *Imagining the City* is brilliant at times but less than the sum of its parts, *The Urban Condition: Space, Community, and Self in the Contemporary Metropolis* is as coherent a collection as one is likely to find on an inter-disciplinary topic. The Ghent Urban Studies Team (GUST) have collectively written Part One – on Theory – and then join with a group of scholars who contribute essays on a wide range of topics in Part Two, entitled Case Studies; for example, Kevin McNamara on CityWalk, a new
kind of mall in Los Angeles; Christophe Den Tandt, who argues for a sub-genre of ‘gender and ethnically focalised crime writing’ (393); or Liam Kennedy who examines the concept of an underclass as it appears in Hoop Dreams, and Alex Kotlowitz’s There Are No Children Here (which is well analysed from a narratological point of view). The essays seem to have been chosen to reflect GUST’s intention to bring together socio-political and cultural approaches to the contemporary city, with the notion of a material city a preoccupation common to essays from either side of the divide. Here, GUST follows Louis Wirth and, indeed, there is an implicit and reaction against the later number-crunching varieties of urban history or its over-concentration upon transportation, elites and sub-groups, and the political history of cities. Thank goodness there is not even a mention of Boss Tweed in New York. There is, though, a perhaps inevitable feeling of arbitrariness about the individual essays and the editors have to work hard to put readers in a position to move from Part One to at least some of the essays in Part Two. That Los Angeles figures over-prominently (in four of the free-standing essays) suggests that the editors tended to be driven by what was being researched rather than commissioning essays on topics which fully live up to the demanding agenda they set in their three chapters on Space, Community and Self. However, these three chapters which, with a General Introduction, make up a collective Part One amount to a determined effort on GUST’s part to assess where we are up to in inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches to the city. This is a very welcome book which can function as a textbook but contains much which goes far beyond what one would expect in a textbook or ‘Reader.’ The Urban Condition is a better book than James Donald’s, though ‘Fog Everywhere’ and ‘Light in Dark Spaces’ would have made it still more memorable.

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