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Corporeality and the Metropolis:

Dissolving the Body in Paul Auster's The New York Trilogy

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Summary

This article deals with the theme of the shattering of the body in the contemporary urban environment as it appears in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*. In the three novels of The Trilogy, the writer deals with the complex interaction between the metropolitan cityscape and the human body: moving through a labyrinthine New York whose dimensions exceed by far the human scale, Auster's heroes experience conditions of depersonalization and assumed absorption by space, which finally *lead them to the extreme state of the dissolution of their bodies*. This transgression of the physical body, that "melting into the walls of the city" (139), is however celebrated by Auster as a form of transgression of logical boundaries, which permits thought to reveal its poetic nature: the heroes may disappear in the end, however they leave behind them a written story – product and witness of their existence of their existence in the postmodern city that escapes all anthropomorphic qualities in order to reveal a more archaic and inspiring imagery.

Introduction

Written between 1981 and 1984, the three books that constitute "The New York Trilogy"[1] evolve to a large extent around the metropolitan environment of New York, a fact that becomes evident in the

title of the Trilogy, as well as the title of the first novel *City of Glass*. But although metropolitan life has been the subject of a big part of modern and postmodern literature, what other writers only give a hint of, Auster uses as its main theme: that is man's absorption by urban space. Throughout the Trilogy, Auster focuses on the complex interaction between the contemporary cityscape and the human body, unfolding the story in parallel to the description of the inextricable, gradually developed relation between subject and space; a relation which for him leads fundamentally to the extreme condition of the dissolution of the body.

An urban trilogy

One of the first admirers of the modern city and famous *flâneur*, Walter Benjamin, wrote in "A Berlin Chronicle": "But the places are countless in the great cities where one stands on the edge of the void" (Benjamin: 3). Auster seems to follow this reflection in the Trilogy, as he reconstructs the experience of living in the city of New York: all of his heroes too often stand on the edge of the urban void, balancing with great difficulty between creation and destruction, sanity and madness, life and death. Taking the detective story as prototype, the writer attempts an investigation within the contemporary urban social reality; "an overwhelming urban reality" as Malcolm Bradbury has written[2], which in the end absorbs the postmodern *flâneur*: Detective Quinn, the hero in *The City of Glass* disappears, Detective Blue kills Black and then disappears in the second novel *Ghosts*, while in the third novel *The Locked Room*, the character of Fanshawe, lost for years, commits suicide after being detected by his best friend.

In all these stories urban space is represented as something 'uncanny', almost criminal. Auster's descriptions of otherwise common everyday spaces transform them into suspicious, 'dark' places. For example he writes:

As he crossed 112th Street, he saw that the Heights Luncheonette was still open and

decided to go in. It was a brightly lit yet dreary place, with a large rack of girlie magazines

on one wall, an area for stationery supplies, another area for newspapers, several tables for

patrons, and a long Formica counter with swivel stools. A tall Puerto Rican man in a white

cardboard chef's hat stood behind the counter (Auster: 43).

Or:

Half an hour later he crossed the street, walked forty paces down the block, and entered

Stillman's hotel. The place stank of cockroach repellant and dead cigarettes. A few of the

tenants, with nowhere to go in the rain, were sitting in the lobby, sprawled out on orange

plastic chairs. The place seemed blank, a hell of stale thoughts (105).

These representations could well refer to the tradition of depicting the criminal side of the

metropolis in the classical American detective novels by Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett.

However, while for those writers criminality derives from the dissolution of the social tissue in a

spread-out postmetropolis[3], for Auster the metropolitan environment itself bears an 'uncanny'

quality: "The paint becomes exhausted, the city encroaches with its soot, the plaster crumbles within"

(125), he writes, and further admits through his character Stillman that "I have come to New York

because it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere the disarray is

universal" (94).

That uncanniness of the urban environment is reinforced by the fact that Auster's characters

always feel as if they are lost in their own home city. The apparent 'infiniteness' of the metropolis

renders it into a habitat without a 'somewhere else', a total interior that is experienced in the same

way as the primordial space of the labyrinth[4]. The writer's meticulously precise descriptions of his

characters movement in the city only come to underline the labyrinthine dimensions of New York:

He walked down Broadway to 72nd Street, turned east to Central Park West, and followed it to 59th Street and the status of Columbus. There he turned east once again, moving along Central Park South until Madison Avenue, and then cut right, walking downtown to Grand Central Station. After circling haphazardly for a few blocks, he continued south for a mile, came to the juncture of Broadway and Fifth Avenue at 23rd Street, paused to look at the Flatiron Building, and then shifted course… (127)

In this environment, where the body of the city overflows beyond the horizon forbidding any possibility of a panorama, the characters experience a shattering of their sense of vision and have to rely on other sensory organs, like the ears, the nose, even the skin, in order to orient themselves. Auster writes about his hero Detective Quinn, who likes to call himself "private eye" and tries to keep his eyes open[5] in order to survive in the metropolis, that "He consequently had to remain solely on his own surface, looking outward for sustenance" (75); furthermore, he cannot escape to admit that:

New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind… The world was outside of him, around him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible for him to dwell on any one thing for very long…. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere… New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized he had no intention of leaving it again (4).

For Auster, one's experience of moving through the metropolitan environment is an experience of immersing oneself, of being swallowed up by space. As Edward Soja argues, in the late capitalist city, with its "fragmented and fragmenting, homogeneous and homogenising, divertingly packaged yet curiously incomprehensible, seemingly open in presenting itself to view but constantly pressing to enclose" environment , it seems that "once inside…it becomes daunting to get out again without bureaucratic assistance" (Soja: 21). In this environment, it is also inevitable that one gets confused about his own identity; as the writer goes on:

> And then, most important of all: to remember who I am. To remember who I am supposed
> to be. I do not think this is a game. On the other hand, nothing is clear. For example: who
> are you? And if you think you know, why do you keep lying about it? I have no answer.
> All I can say is this: listen to me. My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name (49).

"Dark" Space

That experience of depersonalization in space was examined by sociologist Roger Caillois in the 1930's; observing the phenomenon of insect mimicry, he identified a homology established between subject and space and named it "legendary psychasthenia": a sort of "temptation by space" according to him, based on a distortion of spatial vision, "on the breaking down of the normal process by which spatial perception situates the subject clearly in space and in opposition to it" (Vidler, 1992: 174). Caillois argued that[6]:

> There can be no doubt that the perception of space is a complex phenomenon: space is
> indissolubly perceived and represented. From this standpoint it is a double dihedral
> changing at every moment in size and position: a dihedral of action whose horizontal plane
> is formed by the ground and the vertical plane by the man himself who walks and who, by

this fact, carries the dihedral along with him; and a dihedral of representation determined by the same horizontal plane as the previous one (but represented and not perceived) intersected vertically at the distance where the object appears. It is with represented space that the drama becomes specific, since the living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally no longer knows where to place itself. (Caillois: 70)

Caillois moreover observed that sufferers from agoraphobia and certain schizophrenics present that same symptom of spatial disorientation: they cannot locate themselves in space and to the question "where are you?" they would reply "I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I am at the spot where I find myself" (72)[7]. For Caillois, this psychopathology is related to the feeling of being "eaten up" by space. He wrote:

> To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of mnjkhis skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself, becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put (72).

Most interestingly, that experience of "dark space", the experience of space lived under conditions of depersonalisation and assumed absorption, is further welcomed by Caillois: he thinks that "While light space is eliminated by the materiality of objects, darkness is "filled", it touches the individual directly…and even passes through him", and that "permeability of the ego", as he calls it, for darkness "is something positive" (72).

Similarly, Auster's hero Quinn, who "tended to feel out of place in his own skin" (10) and experienced a sense of being lost in the city, however welcomed that feeling as:

> ….by giving himself up to the movement of the streets, he was able to escape the obligation to think, and this, more than anything else, brought him a measure of peace, a salutary emptiness within (4).

Further on Auster adds:

> Quinn was used to wandering. His excursions through the city had taught him to understand the connectedness of inner and outer. Using aimless motion as a technique of reversal, on his best days he could bring the outside in and thus usurp the sovereignty of inwardness. By flooding himself with externals, by drowning himself out of himself, he had managed to exert some small degree of control over his fits of despair. Wandering, therefore, was a kind of mindlessness (74).

Body-City

A similar kind of relation between the body and the city is also celebrated by Elizabeth Grosz. In her essay "Bodies-Cities", Grosz argues that there is "a constitutive and mutually defining relation between bodies and cities" (Grosz, 1995: 104), which is however neither causal nor representational; as "causal" she acknowledges that model of thought which sees the city as "a reflection, projection, or product of bodies" (105), and by "representational" she names another popular model of thought which proposes "a kind of parallelism or isomorphism between the body and the city" (107). She further on rejects both the (first) view of a *de facto* or purely external relation between the body and the city, and the (second) view that proposes "a mirroring of nature in artifice" (108).

For Grosz, an appropriate model of the relations between bodies and cities sees them "not as megalithic total entities, distinct identities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub-or microgroupings" (108). She further argues that she does not suggest a holistic view that puts emphasis on an "ecological balance" between the body and the city, but that she rather proposes "a fundamentally dis-unified series of systems and interconnections, a series of disparate flows, events or entities, and spaces, brought together or drawn apart in more or less temporary alignments" (108).

Accordingly, Auster's New Yorkers experience the city in a state of melting-in, of becoming part of it, creating new complex links between the urban environment and their bodies. In that way, the rhythm of Detective Quinn's body is affected by the busy signal of a telephone line, which becomes "a counterpoint to his steps, a metronome beating steadily inside the random noises of the city" (127), the noise of a train pulling into the station, "a random, hectic din that seemed to join with his pulse, pumping his blood in raucous spurts" (66), or the bells of the nearby church, which set the timetable of his sleep:

> Towards the end, he had begun to manage the fifteen-minute nap with a fair amount of success. He was helped in his efforts by a nearby church, whose bells rang every fifteen minutes – one stroke on the quarter-hour, two strokes on the half-hour, three strokes on the three-quarter-hour, and four strokes on the hour, followed by the appropriate number of strokes for the hour itself. Quinn lived by the rhythm of that clock, and eventually he had trouble distinguishing it from his own pulse (138).

The rhythm of the city is in turn set by the beggars and performers, "the vagabond population" of the city:

The man, for example, who goes everywhere with a set of drumsticks, pounding the

pavement with them in a reckless, nonsensical rhythm, stooped over awkwardly as he

advances along the street, beating and beating away at the cement. Perhaps he thinks he is

doing important work. Perhaps, if he did not do what he did, the city would fall apart

(130).

It seems therefore that living in the postmodern city requires that certain permeability of

the self and the body in turn, which proves a multiple-way relationship between them. As Grosz

points out[8], "the form, structure, and norms of the city seep into and effect all the other elements that

go into the constitution of corporeality and/as subjectivity. It effects the way the subject sees

others…as well as the subject's understanding of, alignment with, and positioning in space" (108-

109).

Dissolving the Body

Consequently, it appears so far that there has been a new understanding of the relation between space

and the body in modern and postmodern discourse: with space being considered no more just as a

'container' of action[9], but rather as a 'reality' fundamentally linked in a variety of ways with human

culture, domains like the organic space of the body and the social space in which that body lives and

works, clearly distinguished until the 19th century, can no longer be identified as separate[10]. Auster is

positioned in that theoretical framework since he represents life in the post-metropolis as a spatiality

fundamentally linked with the embodied subject.

Initially, he recreates the body not as the classical, 'cosmological' body, replica and double

of the universe, but rather as the 'grotesque' body, which is open in all directions, expanding and

disintegrating spatially[11]. Instead of "the Cartesian subject, the Enlightenment individual, the

autonomous ego of psychoanalysis", all closed 'circles' separated clearly from their environment

(Kirby: 45), in the Trilogy we are presented with a corporeality irretrievably engaged with space. That body does not carry within it the binary opposition between mind and the senses; Auster's heroes feel 'lost' in the city since they are unable to 'master' their environment in the way the Enlightenment man is supposed to: through an objective representation of it created to be apprehended visually. Although the New York detective would like to be:

> …one who looks, who listens, who moves through the morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them…. Private eye… the eye of the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him (9-10),

he cannot avoid to:

> …giv[e] himself up to the movement of the streets…to escape the obligation to think…Motion was of the essence, the act of putting one foot in front of the other and allowing himself to follow the drift of his own body (4)

That is a corporeality that "thinks" in the Nietzschean sense[12]: a subject whose knowledge comes from a material position, a position closely intertwined with the experience of space.

Further on, that embodied relation between subject and space becomes Auster's main preoccupation and is illustrated as a very intense situation: his heroes experience a "melting into the walls of the city" (139), a self-dissolution into the urban environment ("The old man had become part of the city… a speck, a punctuation mark, a brick in an endless wall of bricks" (109) as "the boundaries between self and environment, like those between past and present … become uncertain and unreliable" (Donald: 194). Such disorientation produces first a retreat into an 'interiority' – both mental and physical: Quinn takes shelter in the urban environment, settling in "a narrow alleyway"

(134), Blue retreats into a small flat watching Black, and Fanshawe inhabits "the locked room"[13] in a nineteenth-century dilapidated house. However, that retreat does not prevent the distinction between 'inside' and 'outside', between 'I' and 'the world' to grow weaker; it is rather the proceedings that lead finally to the abolition of the body:

> Remarkable as it seems, no one ever noticed Quinn. It was as though he had melted into the walls of the city (139)

The 'detective' then always disappears, evaporates. Nevertheless, that transformation from 'being' to 'non-being' is celebrated by Auster as a transgression of Cartesian space and a production of a new imaginary: transgressing the body, as cultural, mental, or even physical entity, Quinn, Black and Fanshawe transgress logical linearity, not to end up in madness or death, but to permit their thought to "go fugitive" after an "epistemological breakage" (Mazzoleni: 300) in order to create; in order to fill in with stories the red notebook that will lie on the floor in "a small room…impeccably clean… at the back" (158) after they are gone.

Finally, Auster allows for his heroes' transgression of the body by recreating New York as the ultra-city, which escapes the anthropomorphic qualities of the traditional city in order to reveal a more archaic imagery. According to Donatella Mazzoleni, the urban experiences of de-personalisation and absorption reproduce archetypal images of "pre-separation, of prevarication, but also of the increasing nutrition of the I" that evoke "the fantasy of the mother's womb and of the primordial *thalassa.*" (298); moreover, they activate 'memories' of pre-individual, pre-mental levels of life, that precede birth or the origin of our species – "they are what links us unconsciously with insects" (300) – as we have seen. Auster's metropolis reproduces that primal imagery enabling at last thought to find once again its mythopoetic nature. In that sense, Auster's New York could be compared to the Foucauldian heterotopia[14]: that 'other' space, "a sort of counter-arrangement, of effectively realised utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can

be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned (Foucault: 352). Those places, "scripted as spaces of both repugnance and fascination" (Genocchio: 38), apart from functioning as powerful sites of the imaginary, they can also work like 'mirrors', which can help one reconstitute himself[15]; and that is what happens to Auster's detective, which in the end is no one else after but himself, as the city reveals to him what the first *flâneur*, Baudelaire, had discovered: "It seems to me that I will always be happy in the place where I am not. Or, more bluntly: wherever I am not is the place where I am myself. Or else, taking the bull by the horns: anywhere out of the world" (132).

Notes

[1] Entitled *City of Glass*, *Ghosts, The Locked Room.*

[2] In *The Modern American Novel* (Bradbury: 266), 258

[3] For more on Chandler's representation of Los Angeles see Vidler (2000: 128-129)

[4] Which Nietszche had so accurately identified with modern space. In his essay "Daybreak" (1881), comparing the classical Greek culture with his contemporary one, he wrote on architecture: "If we desired and dared an architecture corresponding to the nature of our soul (we are too cowardly for it!) – our model would have to be the labyrinth!" Quoted in Vidler (1999: 53)

[5] "If all this is really happening", he said, "then I must keep my eyes open" (15)

[6] In his essay "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia", which was first published in *Le Mythe et l' homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), and in a shortened version in *Minotaure* a year before. The English translation of "Mimicry and legendary psychasthenia" can be found in A. Michelson, R. Krauss, D. Crimp and J. Copjec (eds.) *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986*, 1987, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press: translation dated 1984, 58-74

[7] It is interesting to know that later Lacan drew heavily on Caillois' work in setting up his theory of the "mirror stage". For more information see Pile (124)

[8] Grosz sees the condition of permeability as a positive element also in her essay "Women, *Chora*, Dwelling". In this paper, she describes the Platonic concept of *chora* as a purely permeable entity, whose capacity lies on taking on, nurturing and bringing into existence any other kind of being. Counterposing to Plato's and Derrida's readings of the term – which produce "a disembodied femininity as the ground for the production of a (conceptual and social) universe"

(1995: 48), Grosz draws on Luce Irigaray's ideas on space and spatiality in order to suggest a new kind of 'dwelling', which lies "between the intelligible and the sensible" (49)

[9] As K. Kirby has argued, "the development of Enlightenment individualism was inextricably tied to a specific concept of space", which saw the subject and spatiality completely divided; that kind of space works as a "vacuum in which objects appear within their own bubbles" (45)

[10] For more information on the history of space in the 20th century and contemporary discourse on spatiality see Vidler (1992: 2000)

[11] D. Mazzoleni distinguishes between the "cosmological" body, produced by classical culture, and its 'other' image, the "grotesque" body. She further argues that the "cosmological" body "generates its own possibility of producing architecture", while the "grotesque" body appears somehow as the opposite of architecture: "The immeasurable empowerment enables the grotesque body to avoid (as it cannot contain and so cannot metabolise) every type of catastrophe –death perhaps above all – no longer by producing a substitute for itself (the Double), but through gigantic organic manifestations occupying *the whole of* space. Within the 'culture of cities', the grotesque body appears somehow as the opposite of architecture; that is, essentially something born out of the representation of the communicative relationship between an inside and an outside, in the body and beyond the body, and as a production of Doubles of and separate from the body." (1993: 296) For more on the grotesque body see P. Stallybrass & A. White *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*.

[12] I quote Grosz on Nietzsche: "Nietzsche regarded knowledge as an unrecognized product of bodies and as an instrument that bodies can utilize in order to act, to expand one's capacities. Just as all morality, virtue, and justice are for him passions and bodily states misconstrued as divinely ordained or intellectually formulated moral laws, he also believed knowledges, truths, and sciences to be the results of the knower's corporeality and material position" (1993: 203)

[13] That is also the title of the third book of the Trilogy.

[14] The term "heterotopia" is a theoretical invention of Michel Foucault that firstly appeared in the text of a lecture which he had presented in 1967. However, this lecture was never edited for publication and it only appeared again in late 1984 in the French journal *Architecture-Mouvement-Continuité* under the title "Des Espaces Autres"; subsequently, it was published in English as "Of Other Spaces". I found the text in N. Leach *Rethinking Architecture. A reader in cultural theory*, 350-356.

[15] Foucault has argued that a heterotopia can act as a 'mirror', which helps one 'see' oneself: "…from the depths of that virtual space which is on the other side of the mirror, I turn back on myself, beginning to turn my eyes on myself and reconstitute myself where I am in reality." (Foucault: 52). Edward Soja has also observed that, unlike utopia, "a placeless, virtual, unreal place in which I see myself where I am not, over there where I am absent", heterotopia is "a real,

counteracting space in which I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there, a realisation that makes me come back toward myself, to reconstitute myself there where I am" (14)

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