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The Cultural Texture of the City

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Cities are not empty pages, but narrative spaces in which particular (hi)stories, myths and parables are inscribed. These cultural codings have a cumulative effect in part the result of the process of continuous intertextual cross-reference. The reflections on the cultural texture of cities are intended to make clear that we are dealing with processes of long duration. Like a rhizome, the cultural texture has burrowed deep, and unconsciously guides even those who are determined to radically alter the image of the city.

There are cities which are like a penny dreadful, a dime novel, stained and well-thumbed and with a garish, torn cover, while others are more like an expensive edition of a classic author, leather bound, with thread-stitching and a bookmark. Vienna, for example, this city-as-museum, suggests a book with ornamental design and gilt edging and illustrations by Gustav Klimt. The exemplary representative of the *dime novel* and the *B-movie* among cities is Tangier. Pulp titles like *The City of Sin*, *Tangier Nights* or *Tangier Assignment* and B-Pictures like *White Slavery*, *Tänzerinnen für Tanger* (Dancers for Tangier) or *Mission à Tanger* give some idea of the fantasies associated with the city. White slavers, arms traders, smugglers, agents and dope peddlers are the typical protagonists of these novels and movies. And there's a good reason for that. Out of the special, strategically significant location of the port at the crossroads of Occident and orient, which was acknowledged by its declaration as an international zone in 1924, a status maintained until 1956, there developed that transitory character of the city, that made Tangier a kind of "no man's land". A place, in which, as Paul Bowles wrote, "everyone did as he liked, and the law didn't stop anyone doing it" (Bowles 1990, p. 205), which became a "refuge of non-interference", as William S. Burroughs put it in his manuscript about the International Zone.

"Everything was allowed there," the anthropologist Henk Driessen quotes a Jewish resident of Tangier, "[and] where no one was polyglot unless he spoke at least five languages, where there were as many poets as financiers and one had as much imagination as the other".

So Tangier became not only an intercultural crossroads,

"where the merchants, the fire-eaters, the dealers in precious stones and the bankers are Indian or Pakistani, the second-hand booksellers and the builders are Spanish, the rakes and the bakers come from France, the aristocrats, the spies and the gangsters from the United Kingdom, the writers for the most part from the United States",

according to Daniel Rondeau in *Tanger – récit de voyage* (1987), a centre for the trading of money and gold (everywhere in the town one came upon money changers, as Bowles remembers), a destination for affluent exiles and illegal refugees, but also a screen for the projection of fantasies, which magically attracted marginal characters of every kind. Today Tangier can no longer get rid of its reputation as a mecca for drop-outs, gamblers and enfants terribles, a backdrop for displays of a lascivious and dubious Orientalism, associated with, among others, Barbara Hutton, the Woolworth's heiress. Even very recent documentaries such as Peter Goedel's film *Tanger – Die Legende einer Stadt* (Tangier – the Legend of a City) still stick to the B-movie script and tell stories about black market deals, smuggling trips and corruption, about extravagant parties and states of intoxication, about sex, drugs and death. "The films and novels have turned this town," writes Jean Genet in *The Thief's Journal*, "into a ghastly place, a kind of dive, where the gamblers sell off the secret plans of all the armies of the world." "Tanger mal filmée, Tanger mal écrite", wrote the Moroccan author Talar Ben Jalloun, a city caught in the texture of its narrative.

But what does that mean: caught in the texture of its narrative? It is repeatedly said, and at times in a somewhat self-righteous tone, that we only live in accordance with what the media set in front of us (or more exactly: that everyone else apart from us lives in accordance with what the media set in front of them). In this talk of emulation, there resonates that certainty of a right and false life, which marked Critical Theory. But in a city we never really know, who sets the tone and who is the echo. Has the Culture Industry thesis not by now become part of

the way Los Angeles is experienced? And has it not become part of the local mythology? Are mythologies in fact only really authorised through emulation, by an afterlife, just as these, in turn, lend this life substance, by entering the everyday speech, the *parole* and the habits of the inhabitants? It is to the credit of the French anthropologist and sociologist, Pierre Sansot, who died recently, that in his *Poétique de la ville* he raised questions like this: is it really possible to say that we – as readers, as cinema-goers, as tourists – emulate certain facets of a cityscape or do we in a certain sense in fact realise them? The apparent certainty, that nets are thrown out, which act to structure experience, ignores an important question: who gets caught (up) in them?

Back to our typology: There are cities which seem like account books, defined by the logic of “profit and loss”, sober, practical, predictable, calculating even in their eruptions, but always keen on the double bookkeeping, which leaves a way out. Others again appear “brash”, as if one were reading the city stories of Armistead Maupin, or remind one of science fiction, curiously unplaced and hyperreal, as if they had been thought up by Baudrillard. Brasilia is no doubt an exemplary and early architectural case in point, Los Angeles with its cinetexture, from *Blade Runner* to *Demolition Man* another. There are also cities which are reminiscent of the sentimentalities of a regional novel, simultaneously rooted and with a hidden side, at once “*heimelig*” (homely), *anheimelnd* (familiar) and *un-heimlich* (uncanny – literally *unhome-ly*).

These ‘scripts’ cannot be changed at will, because they are spatially grounded, albeit in an imaginary way. Neither genres nor authors nor their protagonists are accidental. About one city mainly thrillers are written, about the second science fiction, about the third love stories. Cities have their writers as writers have their cities: Paul Auster and New York (or rather Brooklyn); James Ellroy and Los Angeles; Armistead Maupin and San Francisco. The female clerical worker stands for one city, the merchant and consul (or the financier) for another: “Boston may have its Sister Carries and Chicago its George Apleys, but they are implausible characters” (i.e. implausible in those cities), writes the sociologist Gerald Suttles in his reflections on the cumulative texture of local urban culture. Authors have to make the relationship of location and plot plausible, even where it’s now only a matter of virtual worlds. In our languages we have a very vivid expression to describe a possible discrepancy, one that alludes directly to place: something – the protagonist, the plot, the scenery – is obviously *out of place*, *etwas ist deplaziert*, *quelque chose est déplacée*, *något är inte på sin plats*. Thus the plausibility of a literary figure becomes a *cultural indicator*, an indicator for what is imaginable and above all what is unimaginable with respect to a particular city. That’s reminiscent of the indices paradigm associated with Holmes, Freud, Morelli and Ginzburg. Franz Biberkopf, the central character of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is not easily imaginable in Munich, even if it was a film-maker from Munich, admittedly a somewhat eccentric one, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who turned the novel into a thirteen part TV series. (And Biberkopf is still a conceivable character in the actual Berlin).

The criterion of plausibility, i.e. of the conceivability and credibility of “characters” – so that something “is clear”, “reasonable”, and that without mediation – is fundamental to the semantics and syntax of cultural coding, which adheres to latent structures of meaning. Without necessarily being able to articulate it without hesitation, we all know intuitively, if something is not right. It is, following Michael Polyani, tacit knowledge we are speaking about. In the end nothing is more characteristic of a particular city than what is not evident, what is taken to be impossible, what seems to be unthinkable.

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To show that urban texts do indeed form a texture in which the city is truly enmeshed has been the contribution of Gerald D. Suttles, one of the few urban researchers to pursue the symbolic-representational approach initiated by Richard Wohl and Anselm Strauss. This neglected method raised the question of the evocative and expressive qualities of a city which give it meaning. For Wohl and Strauss it is not only the key symbols, landmarks and emblems which help to formulate the uniqueness of a city but a whole “vocabulary” from anecdote to urban legend.

In an essay with the programmatic title “The Cumulative Texture of Local Urban Culture” (1984), Suttles rejects an urban sociology that looks at city life exclusively in terms of the economic end points of production and consumption and sees local culture merely as the source of minor deviations, an element in economic retardation or simply a set of exogenous factors. The biography of a city cannot be adequately understood if reliance is placed exclusively on economic explanatory models; to achieve a “thick description” of the specificity of a city it is necessary to take into account the cumulative texture of the local culture as expressed in images, typifications and collective representations. What makes Suttles’s essay a seminal text, even today, is less that it points to a research deficit (which is by now a somewhat banal conclusion), but rather the wealth of material that he suggests to the researcher (from cemeteries to telephone books) and the specific logic by which, in his view, the pattern is woven into a fabric. According to him, research will usually yield three interrelated series of collective representations: first the founding or discovering figures of the place; second the economic and political elites which, “by hook or crook”, have contributed to its ‘spirit’; and thirdly material artefacts (such as monuments) and immaterial ones (such as sayings, songs and stories), which express its “character” (Suttles 1984, p. 288). Though there may be a certain US bias in the choice of important items, the list nonetheless gives us an idea of what we should be looking for. There are places, for example cemeteries, in which significant elements of the local culture are condensed: A simple comparison of Vienna’s Central Cemetery (Zentralfriedhof) with Père Lachaise in Paris, and of the myths associated with them, would tell us a great deal about the particular character of these two cities. Suttles sees the representations as directly linked to distinct economic regimes. In his examples these are the merchant families of Boston, the financial empires of New York, the joint-stock companies of Chicago, the “dream factories” of Los Angeles, and the oil companies and space exploration enterprises of Houston. The relationship is especially clear in popular “characterology”: “Proper Bostonian”, “New York’s city slicker”, “Chicago’s hog butchers”, “Los Angeles’ stars” and “Houston’s wildcatters” (Suttles 1984, p. 291). To Suttles local cultural representations display a remarkable durability. Their number certainly increases over time, but they do not fundamentally change. That is what is meant by the cumulative nature of local culture which is, not least, the result of a process of continuous intertextual cross-reference.

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Let me give you another example. In his great study of Los Angeles, *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis investigated, among other things, the part which succeeding generations of intellectuals have played in the construction and deconstruction of the mythography of the “world capital of the culture industry”. The cornerstones of the cultural production which became a material force in the development of the city, the master dialectic of “sunshine or noir”, were constituted on the one hand by the literary invention of southern California as Mediterranean idyll by the “Arroyo Circle” – a literary invention, which stimulated the huge property speculations of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries – and, on the other hand, by the anti-myth of noir, extending from Raymond Chandler to James Ellroy. In Ellroy’s quite manic novels all the horror that lurks behind the sets of the LA myth is on show. And so the mythography in

the sense of anti-mythology is continued by Mike Davis' critical study and this in turn has been made use in literature, in T.C. Boyle's novel *The Tortilla Curtain*, set in the gated community of "Arroyo Blanco Estates". In 1997 the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek, Denmark, adopted Mike Davis' leitmotif – "sunshine & noir" – as the title of an exhibition of art in Los Angeles 1960-1997, which was subsequently shown in London and Los Angeles and elsewhere. This year the Centre Pompidou followed with the exhibition "Los Angeles 1955-1985" which, apart from works by Ed Ruscha, Edward Kienholz, John Baldessari and others, also mounted a film programme including Polanski's *Chinatown*, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and the experimental films of Kenneth Anger. Anger himself made a considerable contribution to the dystopian view of Los Angeles with his chronicle of scandal "Hollywood Babylon". By turning our attention to a specific city we continue – while adhering to the criterion of plausibility – writing its (hi)story and its stories. The role of the culture industry in the formation of the city of Los Angeles and its inhabitants is evident, not least, in the importance of design, backdrop and make-up in the economy and culture of the place. The clearest example is the cosmetics industry, and the part played by Max Factor, at first wig-maker to the stars. He then went on to sell make-up and dominated the market worldwide. But because subsequently in colour films the make-up reflected surrounding colours, he developed a new kind of cosmetic: the product was now applied with a little sponge. Among his further Hollywood products were eye shadow and eyebrow pencils, "lip gloss" and water-resistant make-up. Harvey Molotch, to whom I owe this example, talked of the Design Economy of LA, with synergy effects linking the most diverse kinds of companies (particularly conspicuous in the merchandising of Blockbuster, where the product spectrum extends from toys to clothes and bed linen), population and professional groups (set designers work in industrial design, costume designers also work in fashion, script writers work in advertising) and symbolic systems. All forms of creativity overlap in this city, which is not only the centre of the film industry in the United States, but also of the fashion and toy industries, of cosmetics and design, where "the fine arts and the popular, kitsch and extravagance, graffiti on road signs and haute cuisine" exist side by side. Of considerable importance here are the numerous colleges and universities, such as the Art Institute of Los Angeles, which offers a degree in culinary arts, including an introduction to "Theory and Practice of Hospitality" or the California Institute of the Arts, founded by Walt Disney, which not only offers degrees in art, film, video, music and dance but also in critical studies. The latter includes courses in "Buying and Selling the Fantasy of LA" (and one of the questions it investigates is "How did LA become the capital of the social imaginary?") and the "History of Simulation". No wonder that, according to one joke, Jean Baudrillard, that shrill Adorno, is the favourite philosopher of the real estate business of this city of illusions. If, with reference to Tangier, we said, that the city is caught in its mythology, then we can agree with Emilio Spadola, that "the whole city is a movie". If we needed further proof, it was provided by a film from 2003, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, a portrait of the movie capital by Thom Anderson, who teaches at the California Institute of the Arts. It is composed of extracts from more than 200 films from the 1930's to the end of the century. Even the title of the film is a quotation: *Los Angeles Plays Itself* was the name of gay porn flick.

Let's sum up

Cities are not empty pages, but narrative spaces in which particular (hi)stories, myths and parables are inscribed. Public and private institutions – from libraries to museums to sports stadiums – have served as surfaces for inscriptions, just as have the streets, squares and parks whose names shape the collective memory of the city (the French anthropologist Marc Augé has given a nice account of this in relation to the names of the Paris métro stations). As far as the imaginary is concerned, it makes a considerable difference, whether the streets of a city

centre are named after scholars and scientists or after film stars as in Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, no doubt to Baudrillard's delight, even film sets have become historic landmarks. We find parts of these stories again in local history, as in the anniversary volumes of companies and associations. Not least, however, we encounter them in what, analogous to folklore, we may describe as citylore, in the stories about founding fathers, in popular characterology and finally in anecdotes, proverbs and sayings. These cultural codings have a cumulative effect, in part the result of the process of continuous intertextual cross-reference. Those who want to distance themselves from what are seen as clichés involuntarily reinforce them through repetition, even if in a critical context. A very typical recent example was the exhibition "Alt-Wien. Die Stadt, die niemals war" (Old Vienna. The city that never was), mounted in 2004/2005, which set itself the task of deconstructing the myth of "Old Vienna". For visitors, however, its greatest attraction was precisely the presentation of this city that never was through cultural products – literature, music, art, film. The exhibition was a huge success. Thus even the voice of a critical discourse, contributes to keeping the criticised discourse ("Old Vienna") alive and hence powerful.

Urban renewal today, in the era of global city competition, means, not least, designing and conveying a different picture of a city. That's what the boom in imagineers is based on, who promise to make a city distinct, in short: unique. In realising this promise, however, they run the risk of rubbing away existing differences in favour of global city imaginations: "the event city" inter alia. My reflections on the cultural texture of cities are intended to make clear that we are dealing with processes of long duration, involving a variety of media influences that are part of an intertextual referential network. The cultural texture, like a rhizome, has burrowed deep, and unconsciously guides even those who are determined to radically alter the image.

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