

# *The Literary London Journal*

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**Ulrich Kinzel (ed.), *London: Urban Space and Cultural Experience*, paperback, 222 pages, 21 b/w illustrations, Wuerzburg: Koenigshausen & Neumann, 2010. ISSN: 0024-4643, € 9.50.**

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*The Literary London Journal*, Volume 11 Number 1 (Spring 2014)

*London: Urban Space and Cultural Experience* is a collection of essays, which was published by Ulrich Kinzel as a thematic issue of the German quarterly *Iwu* (*Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*). The editor takes the postmodernist questioning of coherence and stability of urban space as a starting point to bring together contributions which investigate the phenomenon of space from different angles and disciplines. Most of the articles stem from literary and cultural studies, but the collection is further enriched by contributions from history and human geography. Thus *London: Urban Space and Cultural Experience* widens the outlook on representations of urban space within various contexts and from the viewpoints of different fields of research and can therefore provide an interdisciplinary perspective on urban spatial dynamics. This thematic issue of the *Iwu* contains eight essays, all of which tackle questions of urbanity and spatial relations in different contexts; in addition, the collection contains four book reviews on relevant publications from the fields of London studies and urban and spatial theory. All of the contributions, except for Doreen Massey's 2006 article, are published here for the first time.

The articles focus on London's situatedness at the border between the fictional and the daily experience of the city through its historic layers and semantic attributions reflected in urban discourses. As Kinzel foregrounds in his introduction, the notion of spatial coherence and stability is refuted, as the contributors of the volume as a whole argue for dynamic approaches when analysing urban space in general and London in particular. The time span covered by the contributions ranges

from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century to recent representations of London in historical studies, literature, visual arts, film and human geographies.

Jerry White's contribution provides a historian's perspective on urbanity: his essay explores the crucial impact of the rivalry between Westminster and the City of London on the city's cultural representations from the 1720s to the 1770s. White links urban dynamics to various articulations of metropolitan space by showing how the conflict plays out in a variety of ways ranging from theatrical performances to bridge building. The remodelling of city space is not only connected to cultural investigations into the rivalry but also to social dynamics and discourses that shape the constitution of urban space.

The perception of London as successor of Rome in various artistic representations of the city lies at the centre of Christoph Heyl's contribution. Heyl analyses visual and literary representations dating from 1666 to 1941 and convincingly relates neo-classicist architecture to adaptations of a classical form of narration such as the equation of London/Edinburgh to Rome/Athens and the ruin motif in the context of the decaying empire.

Matthew Ingleby focuses on the ambivalent semantics of the building plot, which he retraces in different Victorian novels by writers such as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins and Richard Marsh. Ingleby describes the building plot as polyvalent structure, which is at the same time pointing to a newer, and therefore less comprehensible, future city which implies chaos, danger and violence. Authors discussed in this article investigate the uncontrolled growth of the urban sprawl, which is linked to a destabilisation of urban space on its peripheral edges.

The crucial importance of spatial semantics in Charles Williams's poetic work – London as poetic and theological location – is foregrounded in Bradley Well's article. Unlike dystopian visions of urbanity, Williams's cityscapes picture London as New Byzantium, the new heart of Christendom. As urbanity demands constant choices, the very act of choosing entails freedom. The city thus forms an opposition to the bleak urban visions of Williams's contemporaries. In London the divine and the secular city merge, thus manifesting the divine within the material environment.

Focusing on Edgar Wallace's crime novels and the German movie adaption dating from the 1960s, Christian Huck outlines the strong intertwining of text and topography from the viewpoint of media studies. The interaction of text and visual adaptation re-shapes spatial semantics, at times even inverting London's semantic location through the narration's strategies of representation. Huck outlines Wallace's spatial semantics, which differ considerably from contemporary notions as places, such as the East End that are associated with crime at that time, appear to be more or less absent from Wallace's London. The movie adaption, in contrast, discards space as a valid category in favour of stock characters, and thus deconstructs the close connection of London to the text.

In his analysis of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, Ulrich Kinzel analyses reformulations of the relationship of artistic representation to reality for which the movie strives. Kinzel asks how Antonioni's work is able to fashion and use the interconnection of abstract form and urban space to re-create the experience of

London in the early 1960s. Multiple transitory processes come into view as the film explores the dynamics of urban space and social change.

Holly Prescott's reading of Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* and Conrad Williams's *London Revenant* highlights the intertwining of narrative form and space. Prescott argues that in these contemporary descent novels space is neither setting nor metaphor but actually an active agent within the narrative process. As such the city is of vital importance to the development of the protagonists. Thus, subterranean London questions both spatial coherence and a coherent construction of self. Linearity is rejected, and the characters are forced to position themselves with regard to the bispatiality of the above and the below and, consequently, to rethink both spatial experience and notions of identity.

In her contribution Doreen Massey questions public affirmations and celebrations of London's ethnic and cultural diversity in the aftermath of the 2005 bombings. As important as a public recognition of the hybrid constitution of the city may seem, Massey points out the interconnections between urban space, capitalist mobility and space formation. As identity today is understood as relational, Massey argues for an understanding of London that also takes its relational and dynamic character into account.

*London: Urban Space and Cultural Experience* brings together interesting and ambitious discussions of space and its various representations, predominantly from the viewpoint of the humanities. While providing specific analyses in its different chapters, this collection of essays furthers and intensifies academic discourses on urbanity and metropolitan space. By highlighting postmodernist and relational approaches to space, *London: Urban Space and Cultural Experience* provides an important contribution to academic research into the phenomenon of space, its experience and representations as well as possible applications of contemporary spatial theory to cultural and literary studies.

### **To Cite This Article:**

Martin Kindermann, 'Review of Ulrich Kinzel (ed.), *London: Urban Space and Cultural Experience*.' *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 11, Number 1 (Spring 2014): 84–86. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2014/kindermann.pdf>.