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TELLING TALES

A semio/graphy of Birmingham

by

Ann Cullis

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There has been a considerable delay between the time this paper was written and its actual appearance in the Stencilled Paper series. This was due to a number of factors, most notably increasing production problems during changes within the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and, subsequently, in the new Cultural Studies Department. We regret these and the inconvenience this has caused to Ann Cullis.

We would ask readers to take account of this time lag between the time of the writing and the appearance of the paper.

Maureen McNeil for the Stencilled Papers Group
September 1988

Preface

This paper arises out of collective research and discussion during 1983-4 with members of the CCCS Cultural Politics Sub-group. This work was broadly concerned with the relationships between cities, modernism, modernity and cultural-political activity. Whilst this paper is only one version of the issues discussed, I feel that it is fairly representative of the Group's project as a whole and, although individually authored, owes both its form and content to the Group's work.

It is necessary to provide a very brief outline of the type of theoretical/methodological approach used, since it results in a writing-style which is not always familiarly 'academic'. Broadly, it may be characterised as being influenced by post-structuralist and postmodernist textual strategies, in that the text is allowed to remain 'open'; the sources and texts have been juxtaposed and are used not as 'proof' or 'evidence' of an assertion or thesis on my part but as diverse examples of writing on cities. This is perhaps analogous to the use of collage in visual art or montage in film and it is hoped that, like the Neue Sachlichkeit collagists of the 1920s in Germany (John Heartfield, Hannah Hoch), and the Russian avant-garde film-makers of the same period (Sergei Eisenstein), these juxtapostions will produce new meanings and suggested readings which each text in isolation would not do. I have not, therefore, with a few exceptions, made very much use of 'academic' or 'theoretical' texts, and instead have used material from avant-garde art, fiction and travel and guide-books. For the same reason, I have frequently not acknowledged a writer by name in my text. Instead I have footnoted the quotation so that the reader may choose whether to find out the writer's identity whilst reading, or at the end.

I may be challenged that this textual strategy is apolitical or unethical, because it does not present an explicit 'political' ('macropolitical') stance or intervention. To counter this I would say that just because I have not identified a position-from-which-to-speak, this does not mean that post-structuralist/postmodernist approaches are necessarily apolitical (although the possibility is not precluded by any means). On the contrary, I believe that the 'politics' of a piece of writing such as this lies both in its content (its reference to micropolitics of resistance) and in its form (the fact that it is left 'open', with points raised but left to the reader to follow through). This seems to me to be a less monocular and

less author/itarian approach than more 'traditional' academic writing.

The way of writing is not intended to make difficulties for the reader, although s/he is asked to do some 'work' in that s/he is required to ask her/his own questions and draw her/his own conclusions from the texts used. I intend that the paper may be seen as a 'resource', providing a diverse selection of material on a common theme (cities) and at the same time suggesting ways in which a similar method could be carried over to the study of other objects and practices. In this respect it is intended as an introductory piece of work, not a definitive statement on 'how to read cities'. Further aspects of methods are discussed in the Introduction.

The 1983-4 sub-group members were: Carolyn Brown, Erica Carter, Ann Cullis, John Dalton, Michele Fuirer, Michael Green, Liz Greenhalgh, Mari Hammond, David Imrie.

Ann Cullis,
June 1986

Cast into the whirlpool ... one ... can only wonder that the whole crazy fabric still hangs together. (1)

Birmingham - the GREAT MIDLAND METROPOLIS, and an object of such peculiar and varied interest to the intelligent VISITOR, as a comprehensive microcosm of art and mechanical genius - is a parish, market town, and borough, situated nearly in the centre of the kingdom ... (2)

... it is the Mecca of surrounding populous districts, that attracts an increasing number of pilgrims who love life, pleasure, and shopping. (3)

'Forward'. (4)

In the midst of a russet solitude, we came upon a notice board saying, 'This is the City of Birmingham'. There was nothing in sight but hedgerows, glittering fields and the mist of the autumn morning. For a moment I entertained a wild hope that this really was the City of Birmingham, that the town had been pulled down and carted away. Not that Birmingham had ever done anything to me. I had never been there; this was my first visit. I knew very little about it. The little I did know, however, was not in its favour. (...) And now it is the second city in England. By the time I had considered these matters, the fields had gone and we were passing houses and shops and factories. Did all this look like the entrance into the second city in England? It did. It looked a dirty muddle. (5)

...Birmingham has quite a metropolitan air, and on the fine afternoon I first explored them, these streets had quite metropolitan crowds in them too, looking at the windows of the big shops and hurrying in and out of cafes and picture theatres. (6)

Introduction

This paper does not fall within 'urban studies'or 'urban geography' in the sense in which those terms are customarily used. It is rather a provisional exercise in utilising a (sometimes problematic) set of methods, as explained in the Preface, in order to 'read' cities from the point of view of poststructuralism/postmodernism. But in another sense, urban-studying and urban geo/graphy (writing/the terrain/of the city) is exactly what I propose to do: to try and draw together a number of themes and aspects of the city which form, as Engels so accurately said, a 'whole crazy fabric', but also to unravel others which seem solid and stable.

I will be looking at a variety of 'texts' (I use the term very widely): some about Birmingham, some about cities in general; sometimes Birmingham itself in its (literally) concrete reality, sometimes 'texts' within Birmingham, such as buildings or spaces. The intention is to provide the reader with a wide selection of diverse texts and sources which are very obviously contradictory; s/he is invited to assess this diversity, and my own comments are no more than one reading, and therefore a partial one.

I want particularly to explore and deconstruct the overlaps and divergences betweeen Birmingham (a place) and 'Birmingham' (a set of 'imaginary' construtions accumulated into a history that feeds into and produces, I would argue, the present real-ity of Birmingham). These constructions are, of course, produced by individuals and groups within the frameworks of gender, race, class, age, economic status, job status, and so forth: the juxtaposition of the six texts at the beginning should demonstrate some of these differences.

Rather than developing an 'argument' or 'theory' about Birmingham, I hope to use these various and varied texts and textual practices to suggest, tentatively, how a plurality of discontinuous discourses (7) converge upon and disperse from Birmingham/'Birmingham': Victorian ideologies and architectures; cities, spaces and the use of space; 'art' (art galleries, museums, how culture is housed, disseminated and consumed); art practices in public spaces, art in the city, 'signs in the street' (8). Many of the 'texts' and 'textual practices' that I want to look at spread across two, three or all four of these discourses: Birmingham/'Birmingham' is not 'one heavy lump' (9).

Again, it should be obvious that these texts and textual practices, their readings and my readings of them in this particular paper, are over-determined in the ways just outlined (gender, race, class, etc.). It seemed intrusive upon other points that I wished to make to draw attention to these continually, and I have therefore not repeated them throughout except where one such over-determination (for example, gender or race) seemed to assume an importance over the others in a specific instance.

Birmingham, then, has been taken as a concrete starting point, the place where I live and therefore (in)forming my writing. But I have used texts on 'cities' in general too, or on cities other than Birmingham: in order to describe it (sometimes in order to describe what it is not); as a way of de-emphasising its singularity and specificity; as a way of treating it instead as a constructed (built) and 'constructed' (imagined, constituted)

city; as a way of investigating more widely (discursively) what this thing a 'city' is, what is its fascination, why (to refer back to my contradictory opening quotes) it is whirlpool, metropolis and Mecca, but also a 'dirty muddle'.

Above all, I would reiterate that it is hoped that the following will serve as an example of some possible methods and approaches for reading other texts in the same way - that is, using the juxtaposition of diverse sources to produce readings which underline the contradictory elements within a discourse and its discursive effects.

Modern/ist Cities

Marshall Berman's All That is Solid Melts Into Air (1983) is subtitled 'The Experience of Modernity'. He tries, not always successfully it must be admitted, to explore the dialectics, the fraught yet close relationship, between modernity (living in 'the modern world', living now) and modernism (particular textual strategies developed in literature, art, theatre, music from the mid-nineteenth century). Berman can be criticised for not always being very clear about the differences between the two, and for not being sufficiently rigorous and careful in his analyses and definitions of 'modernism' (for which he concentrates almost exclusively on literature), but in some ways this confusion is productive. I think that it is perhaps a mistake to read this book as if he were using either modernity or modernism as a tight, specific category: for Berman, both are much wider, looser, more flexible.

It's debatable, though, whether an acknowledgement and acceptance of this makes the book any easier to deal with. But perhaps it requires a more modernist reading: a reading that is fragmentary, de-centred, across the grain, multi- and a-focal. It seems to me that whatever the utility of the content of All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, it is possibly as (or even more) useful for its form, its structure: for Berman's 'way of seeing', not always for what he sees, and it is this that makes it helpful for thinking about Birmingham.

He identifies four 'distinctively modern concerns': 'a will to change' oneself, the world; 'a terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart'; 'the thrill and dread of a world in which "all that is solid melts into air"', the speed of life, both exciting and terrifying; and 'paradox and contradiction', hunger for novelty and change, yet a repulsion at what that change brings and a longing to hold on to something stable, (Berman,1983, p.13).

The book's underlying theme, and the nexus (point of convergence, point of dispersal) of modernity and modernism, is the city, particularly the uses to be made of urban spaces and city streets. These are themes which I shall take up below.

Not the country ...

Berman's project is implicitly 'against ruralism'.

> I learned that I was living in 'a modern building' and growing up as part of 'a modern family'...
> (Berman, 1983, p.13)

It is urbo-centric in the same way as, inversely, Raymond Williams's The Country and The City (1973), if we read between the lines (as it were) privileges the (his) experience of the country. The country appears as desirable and (for him) a structuring normality, placed in direct opposition to the dark 'other' of the city which (despite the symmetry of the book's title) is dealt with very peremptorily. This dark Other (seductive?) city is, perhaps, precisely the kind of teeming modernist city of which Berman writes. However bizarre it may seem, it is not surprising

to read that Williams's idea of a city is Cambridge. This is as far from the cities of modernist art and literature (European capitals, New York) as the Welsh Marches are: the problem for me in the way in which Williams writes about cities is, therefore, not so much that it is implicitly biassed and partial but that it is incomprehensible to any reader brought up in or near a 'real' city. Birmingham is not a modernist city in Berman's terms either, but that does not invalidate the usefulness of his book for analysing it.

Jane Jacobs, on the other hand, writing The Death and Life of Great American Cities in Greenwich Village, New York in 1961 said:

> ... to be frank, I like dense cities best and care about them most.
> (Jacobs, 1964, p.26)

Jacobs, like Berman, is pro-city; unlike him, her anti-pastoralism is very explicit and vocal. She writes disparagingly of 'grass fetishes' (Jacobs, 1964, p.101) (a clever and accurate use of the term to describe the 'fetishization' of Open Space as the answer to all 'urban problems') - 'There are dangers in sentimentalizing nature. Most sentimental ideas imply, at bottom, a deep if unacknowledged disrespect.' (Jacobs, 1964, p.458) and - correctly, I think - stresses her own enjoyment of living in a big city, both as a visual (aesthetic) and as a social experience, her excitement and pleasure in day-to-day urban life, her fascination with

> ... the seemingly mysterious and perverse behaviour of cities ...
> (Jacobs, 1964, p.23).
>
> We are bemused by the sound of symbols (Jacobs, p.87).

It seems to me that there is an important connection between Marshall Berman and Jane Jacobs (and although Berman cites Jacobs favourably he fails to make this connection himself, or does not see it): both read cities, as opposed to writing about them. Both treat the city as a text; indeed, as a modernist text that is confusing, unpredictable, sometimes ugly, sometimes exquisitely pleasurable.

Berman's reading of cities, which I think that Jacobs also uses, results from a mixing of three strands: reading texts (art, literature, etc.); reading spaces, environments, buildings; and reading people/lived cultural practices - what Berman calls 'the signs in the street' and what Jacobs calls the 'intricate ballet' (Jacobs, 1964, p.60-5) of the sidewalks. Drawing these three strands together results in a reading of the city itself as a text, rather than solely as the con/text, the background, of activity (although of course it is that too). The inter-dependence of this articulation of text with text is useful, I think, for thinking about how a city, Birmingham, produces itself/is produced as 'Birmingham': a 'text' with many significations and unexpected connections, a complex of 'signs'.

What Berman and Jacobs are against is any sort of totalising operation, any interpretation of cities that is premissed on coherence; they work rather from the assumption that cities are plural, unknown, open (10).

> ... the city has not remained one thing ... (11)

Cartography or topography?

In 1981 Dick Hebdige took up, as so many have done before and since, the tiresome cultural studies metaphor of 'mapping the field', but translated into 'cartography' (as other writers have done) (12). In Hebdige's essay, however,it still means the same thing: an exploration of available material, then tying it together into a semi-unified field, perhaps inserted into other already-mapped terrain, and/or to be used for the next expedition. (I point out, in passing, the relation of these cartographical metaphors to wide open spaces, open country, rolling plains criss-crossed by tracks and so on and so forth. They do not refer to a city-dwellers's conception of 'map': the diagrammatic A to Z of featureless streets).

Whatever the uses of field-mapping (and there are some: consolidation and affirmation before more productive, 'cutting-up' operations), it is founded upon the notion that the field is there to be mapped: grass, stones, mud, litter - a visible, apprehensible, comprehensible totality that has only to be dis/covered and divided up into a neat grid. It's possible, indeed helpful, to do this in some instances (although I would not have thought that Hebdige's example of 'taste' was one of them), but in most cases I would feel very wary of positing such a totality; for the articulation of cities, modernity and modernism - tracing the city as open, disparate text(s) - cartography in this restricted sense is definitely undesirable. A more useful method of analysis is 'topography' (even though 'cartography' can imply a fictionalising of the terrain, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983) do, which is more fruitful).

Topo/graphy - the art of de/scribing (writing-down) a particular place - seems to me a good deal more suitable as a methodology for investigating Birmingham/'Birmingham'. De/scription - the writing-down - can and should be non-totalising, non-evaluative, yet it will still take into account the cultural and social framing of the de/scriber, why and how she de/scribes what she does (in the present instance, city-bred/white/middle-class/female - probably in that order of signifiance).

I would suggest that the city in Bachelard's The Poetics of Space is a structuring absence. It is disavowed, skirted around; it is present, very present, by virtue of its not-being-there. Robert Herbert (1970) demonstrates similarly that the absence of representations of the city in late nineteenth century French avant-garde painting only serve to indicate its centrality at that period. He refers particularly to paintings such as Gustave Courbet's The Stonebreakers (1849), a 'rural' subject, yet the stone-breakers are working in the Fontainebleau quarries where stone was cut for the boulevards of Haussmann's newly-rebuilt Paris (the Paris of Baudelaire (13)). A celebration and 'over-representation' of the rural 'speaks' the urban in its disavowal of it, and speaks volumes (14).

Women and city spaces

Cities are not, of course, exclusively buildings: there are spaces in the city, most of which have prescribed uses (streets, pavements, parks). But there are other spaces too, which cannot be named, that are just 'where-buildings-aren't' - empty, perhaps transitory, unofficial, often

small, possibly half-hidden. These spaces can be (and are) used for many different purposes. Jane Jacobs talks about these everyday lived practices well, the 'oppositions' made by city dwellers against the planned grid (literally, in the case of New York, and metaphorically) of the city (15).

> Space in itself has no meaning because it is socially constructed - a similar spatial form may have very different social meanings (16).

--different social meanings for different social groups.

> A young lady can now also walk by herself in the Park for the purpose of joining her friends and acquaintances, both in the morning and in the afternoon, but she should not sit alone. Again, young ladies may walk alone in the fashionable streets, but they should not loiter when alone at shop-windows as they pass, but walk at a quick pace from shop to shop, or from street to street (17).

> It is argued, in these days of woman's emancipation, that no possible harm or annoyance can arise from the fact of a lady riding unattended, beyond the always possible chance of an accident (18).

What sort of accidents are these that are forever lying hidden, waiting to trap her? Little accidents befall the woman who ventures out alone in the city. Angela McRobbie (1984b) has written about how young women 'out on the town' in groups (alone? Unthinkable ...) are 'met', chauffeured, by fathers and brothers, protected by 'their' man from the terrors of this night, from 'other' men. Protected, yes, but also prohibited, prevented from using the city and its spaces as they want, despite the risks; and the protection, however well-meaning and gallant, does not alter at all the social, political and sexual relations of the city streets and subways that make them dangerous for women. McRobbie calls, rightly, for a more extensive use of the city by women, an assertion of the rights of politics and pleasure (which - only heterosexual? - men have always had), even though there is always the possible chance of an accident ...

> Punk was and continues to be important in this respect. It really encourged girls to stride across the city with an air of conquest and fearlessness (19).

'Women's rights' can mean being able to make a spectacle of yourself: looking at yourself, wanting others to look at you, watching them look at you, without fear and guilt. The same applies to pretty boys, queens, anyone who subverts by her/his/its dress and style (20).

Remember, too, Lucy Snowe exploring Brussels at night, 'flaneuring', able to do so only because she is high on opium administered as a sleeping-draught and is disguised by an enveloping shawl and hat. Her wonder and excitement at being alone in the city after dark for the first time send a thrill down the spine:

> To be still was not in my power, nor quietly to observe. I took a revel of the scene; I drank the elastic night-air - the swell of

> sound, the dubious light, now flashing, now fading (Bronte p.351) (21).

These are all proscribed uses of city space, especially for women. City space is not 'free', even though it might appear so (after all, people wouldn't have to make such an issue about 'taking it to the streets' if they were theirs already).

Chamberlain Square

There is a space in the centre of Birmingham called Chamberlain Square (named after Joseph Chamberlain, member of the City Council and 'founder' of the 'new' - i.e. late nineteenth century - Birmingham). Its boundaries are somewhat amorphous. The main buildings surrounding it are the public library, the City Museum and Art Gallery and the Town Hall, and these delineate a space in the middle which is dominated by an elaborate circular stone fountain. Framing the fountain, if one looks at it from the corner of Victoria Square and Chamberlain Square, is a semicircle of shallow stone steps which, due to the irregularities of the site, slide into nothing at the right-hand end but number about twenty at the left. Overlooking all are statues of James Watt and Joseph Priestley.

> If there is any better view in Birmingham than this, I never saw it. For a moment, as you stand there, you believe that at last you have found an English provincial city that has the air and dignity that a great city should have, that at last you have escaped from the sad dingy muddle of factories and dormitories that have been allowed to pass for cities in this island, that at last a few citizens who have eyes to see and minds to plan have set to work to bring comeliness into the stony hotch-potch, that Birmingham has had the sense to design itself as well as its screws, steam cocks, and pressure gauges. This is an illusion, and the only way in which to keep it would be to hurry away from that corner in a closed vehicle and see no more of Birmingham (22).

What are we to make of this space? How are we to 'read' it? How is it 'meant' to be read? Because what a city space prescribes as its use is not necessarily how it's used. Chamberlain Square seems to signal an amphitheatre: an ordered gathering, all met together at the same time for the same purpose. Scarce need to say that this is not how it's used in practice - artists (sketching, performing), breakdancers, teams of 'double dutch' skipping girls, office workers (mainly women) eating sandwiches at lunchtime, tramps dossing (especially on the library end of the steps), kids jumping in the fountain, roller-skaters ...

> In an afternoon of dazzling sunsight in the thronged streets, I saw at first no individuals but a composite monster, its unfeeling surfaces matted with dust: a mass of necks, limbs without extremities, trunks without heads; unformed stirrings and shovings spilling across the streets it had managed to get itself provided with. (23)

Chamberlain Square seems to have been adopted as a neutral, and therefore polyvalent, space. The stretch from the corner of Victoria Square to the

Museum and Art Gallery steps is perhaps a more specifically 'political' space - Birmingham's version of Speaker's Corner? Political statements here sometimes take a very particular form: the written, not spoken, word, a politics that must be read, carefully. A row of A1-size billboards propped against the wall, often with no visible author yet with an author/ity. Sometimes the protester is there too; she (and it is often a woman - why?) might merely watch, observe people reading or not reading, a silent surveillance of their a-politics; or she might be very vocal, call out, speak alongside the written text, perform a para-text that emphasises and elaborates upon the written words.

Chamberlain Square as a site of poliical struggle? A battlefield with words? Inverting and bending intended uses? (approaching quite nearly the intended use of an amphitheatre, but with a transitory audience). This is the only space in Birmingham suitable for large gatherings of people wishing to make a political statement, hold meetings or assemble for demonstrations. But it is enclosed,awkwardly shaped and located, and has become the customary place for any 'deviant' group to use: political parties, Greenham Common women, religious fundamentalists, street artists - all are ignored, passed over and through as background colour (if that). Anything happening there is thus rendered virtually powrless, even though its site (near the seat of civic authority, the Council Chambers) might seem ideal.

History-story-fiction-narrative

Birmingham, as the name 'Chamberlain Square' perhaps hints, is steeped in history; but the 'history of Birmingham' only starts, only has relevance and resonance, from the mid-nineteenth century, the era of Joseph Chamberlain and of the re-building of the four main streets in the city, Birmingham's clogged arteries:

Corporation Street,
New Street,
Broad Street,
High Street.

Corporation Street refers to Chamberlain's corporation in the late-nineteenth century, and a triad of 'New! Broad! High!' is a blatant self-advertisement for Improved Birmingham: names that individually are commonplace and hardly noticed but which, tied together in one place, one space, are weighed down by the richness of their connotations.

Together they speak a hi/story of Birminghamn that completely frames its present. I'd suggest that Birmingham constructs itself and is constructed by this history, that it weaves a Victorian past and consolidation together with a twentieth century development in order (as it were) to narrate itself as 'Birmingham', Second City, Heart of the Midlands. The story in hi/story, the imaginary, the exaggerated and embroidered, the constructed, the orchestrated: A Tale of One City: The New Birmingham by Thomas Anderton, published in 1900, which was the source for one of the quotes at the beginning of this paper, indicates perfectly this idea of fiction (a tale) but also that 'Birmingham' holds a plurality of reading - it is a tale, not the tale - an infinitely fluid narrative that can be read in

different ways, a licentious interpretation of 'facts' (topography), never subject to closure.

So what is the difference between Birmingham and 'Birmingham'? Birmingham is a 'concrete' 'reality' (described best, I think, by Roy Fisher in City), a 'reality' which can consist of gazing ecstatically at neon signs at eleven at night after seeing the film Liquid Sky or of walking back through town after seeing another film, Koyaanisqatsi, at five o'clock on a cold dark winter evening and getting excited by a flashing chip shop sign ('but this is not the same as New York, is it?'); but which can also consist of trying to get a drink at seven o'clock on a Saturday night, everywhere in town either being closed or refusing us entrance ('and this is the city they're trying to "sell" as a great place for a night out?!'); and the thrill (every time) of seeing the Rotunda with its flashing Coca-Cola sign as the London train comes into New Street station, or the sweep of the Aston Expressway (Spaghetti Junction) as the bus comes into town, or the dirty underside of the city as the local train from Stratford pulls into Moor Street station.

'Birmingham', on the other hand, is that version of itself which it produces, speaks, which we, the citizens (and it) imagine it to be; but 'Birmingham' is also a sign which, while it denotes that concrete reality of a daily and nightly 'experience' of it, brings with it a confusingly large number of connotations in relation to the Midlands, to Great Britain, to Europe; to 'history', to entrepreneurial endeavour and nineteenth-century industrialism, to the materialist Money-Work ethic of the '50s and '60s in Birmingham, to 'art' and 'culture'. It must be stressed that the denotations are always-already at the level of the connotative, always-already inserted into and produced by discourse(s) and discursive practices - the city 'now' cannot be read separately from the city 'then' (its history).

'Birmingham', then, is both narrative and narrator, spoken and speaking; telling a story about itself at the same time as the story tells the teller/speaks the speaker, assuming a referent while constituting one.

> Narrative, as the process through which the articulation of subject and history is elaborated in the text as well as in relation to the text, is thus unavoidable if one point of the discourse is precisely to trace the existence of the political within specific histories. (24)

Paul Willemen here knits together in a very suggestive way a set of discourses - history, geography, narrative, representation, 'des histoires' - that can be used to 'imagine', represent, construct, 'Birmingham'. Such discursive fluidity and flexibility (25) allows for Birmingham-as-sign to dissolve, mutate, remain an open text, use its history in its present.

An architectural constuction

It is, perhaps, less than the sum of its parts: the city which was the great hope of post-war Britain until the money ran out, leaving some of the new buildings (for example, in Paradise Circus) hanging, literally, in mid-air, half-started. An unfinished city that hasn't quite 'made it' (but

then, where has?), which is trying to pick itself up again. But the exciting tower block and skyscraper skyline disappears suddenly as soon as you enter the city itself. No, it's not New York; not modernist; in places hardly even 'modern', with that muddled mass of history interspersed with the late fifties concrete and damp, rank subways.

These visible signifiers within the discourse of history and narrative ('Birmingham') literally frame a lived experience of Birmingham. One of the most important, I'd suggest, is its architecture, its buildings. Mick Eaton, in a linked series of work, has untangled the relationships between a number of discourses in nineteenth century Britain, centring on Victorian architecture; monarchy; imperialism, racism and colonialism; death; mercantile capitalism; sexuality and masculinity. All these forms of power are more or less visible in a nineteenth century city such as Birmingham, mediated through its buildings or, rather, through their vocabulary or code, architecture.

What do these buildings say about Birmingham? - buildings like the City Museum and Art Gallery, the Town Hall, the Council House. They are all in the city centre, all 'public' or 'civic' buildings. What do those terms mean? The 'public building', the 'civic building', the 'civic authority': these lead to questions about the differences between 'public' and 'private' (are they so distinct?), the meanings of 'citizen' and 'citizenship' (how do these relate to 'Britishness', patriotism, the National-State?), the subtleties of distinction between 'town' and 'city' (what are the inferences of pride and power within the word 'city' which 'town' fails to evoke?).

> the willingness to express hopes and fears in buildings ... (26)

It seems to me that city architecture in the late nineteenth century predominantly signified 'civic pride', and that in the 1980s these Victorian ideals are embraced as still relevant: that although Birmingham is changed, New!, different, it is still the same, old familiar - all at once. A continuity is constructed, through the vocabulary of architecture and the discourse of history, between then and now, them and us, so that both Birmingham and its citizens are the 'same'. (And surely 1950s and 1960s buildings such as the Bull Ring Shopping Centre, the Rotunda and the Repertory Theatre were attempts to connote exactly the same qualities and values as their Victorian counterparts, although not necessarily successfully, because the materials used now look drab and tatty.)

Citizens and crowds: the right to occupy space

> We no longer feel ourselves to be the men of the cathedrals, the palaces and the podiums. We are the men of the great hotels, the railway stations, the immense streets, colossal ports, covered markets, luminous arcades, straight roads and beneficial demolitions.
>
> ... the street will no longer lie like a doormat at ground level, but will plunge many storeys down into the earth, embracing the

> metropolitan traffic, and will be linked up for necessary interconnections by metal gangways and swift-moving pavements.
>
> Let us make an end of monumental, funereal and commemorative architecture. Let us overturn monuments, pavements, arcades and flights of steps; let us sink the streets and squares; let us raise the level of the city. (27)

Or ...?

> In this city the governing authority is limited and mean; so limited that it can do no more than preserve a superficial order. It supplies fuel, water and power. It removes a fair proportion of the refuse, cleans the streets after a fashion, and discourages fighting. With these things, and a few more of the same sort, it is content. This could never be a capital city for all its size. There is no mind in it, no regard. The sensitive, the tasteful, the fashionable, the intolerant and powerful, have not moved through it as they have moved through London, evaluating it, altering it deliberately, setting in motion wars of feeling about it. Most of it has never been seen. (28)

The Italian Futurists, excited to ecstasy by their vision of the Futurist city and the modernity of urban life, are exhilarating and rousing still. Theirs is a modern, a modernist, city - but it does not seem a real one. I think that one of the reasons for this is the absence of people in their evocations of the city, with the glorious exceptions of themselves. As I suggested in my brief discussion of the 'political' space of Chamberlain Square, it is people who structure the meaning of space and places:

> Later, as the air cooled, flowing loosely about the buildings that stood starkly among the declining rays, the creature began to divide and multiply. At crossings I could see people made of straws, rags, cartons, the stuffing of burst cushions, kitchen refuse. Outside the Grand Hotel, a long-boned carrot haired girl with glasses, loping along, and with strips of bright colour, rich, silky green and blue, in her soft clothes. For a person made of such scraps she was beautiful. (29)
>
> It was not quite eleven o'clock, however, and the look of these Birmingham main streets was very queer, for they were all blazing with light and yet almost empty. Victoria Square was like another Place de la Concorde. Never have I seen such brilliant illumination in a provincial city. ... the crowd had gone home to bed; and central Birmingham emptily sparkled and shone as if it expected the arrival of a new and more nocturnal set of citizens. No doubt they are already on their way. (30)

It is people, individuals and crowds, who, often by the mis-use or ab-use of a space, invest it with new meaning.

This usage and ab/usage can often take the form of a 'non-legitimated' group or groups appropriating a space alongside, parallel to, its legitmate(d) use: not 'taking over', necessarily, but being a 'disruptive'

presence that can threaten its legitimated users. One example of this is young people 'hanging around' 'doing nothing' in the Bull Ring Shopping Centre. Another is the (mis/ab)use of the Museum and Art Gallery by children and teenagers.

Although the two spaces - shopping centre and museum and art gallery - appear to be very unalike, I think that there is a similarity: both situations involve the presentation of unattainable goods, consumption with the gaze, consumption without buying (31). School children and young people on the dole cannot afford to buy the things displayed so invitingly behind the glass of the shop window, and items in museum showcases are just as forbidden. Both present the object as spectacle alone; it has no exchange value for these groups. Saturday is whiled away 'window shopping', perhaps trying-on clothes but never buying; everyone knows that the objects in the museum are not for sale, only to be looked at, but the window of the big store is just as inaccessible if you have no hope of ever buying anything, and just as tantalizing.

> Any store in a modern town, with its elegant windows all displaying useful and pleasing objects, is much more aesthetically enjoyable than all those passeist exhibitions which have been so lauded everywhere. (...) The windows of a perfumer's shop, with little boxes and packets, bottles and futur-colour triplicate phials, reflected in the extremely elegant mirrors. The clever and gay modelling of ladies' dancing-shoes, the bizarre ingenuity of multi-coloured parasols. Furs, travelling bags, china - these things are all a much more rewarding sight than the grimy little pictures nailed on the grey wall of the passeist painter's studio. (32)
>
> I am for an art that is political-erotical-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum.
>
> I am for the art of bright blue factory columns and blinking biscuit signs. (33)

But what makes these 'other' groups go to the Museum and Art Gallery? What do they do there? What <u>should</u> they be doing there?

> I entered the Corporation Art Gallery and Museum, of which I had heard a good deal.(34)
>
> ... museums betray, in the smallest details of their morphology and their oganization, their true function which is to strengthen the feeling of belonging in some and the feeling of exclusion in others. Everything, in these civic temples in which bourgeois society deposits its most sacred possessions, (...) combines to indicate that the world of art is as contrary to the world of everyday life as the sacred is to the profane: the prohibition to touch objects, the religious silence (...), the puritan asceticism of the facilities, (...) the grandiose solemnity of the decoration and decorum, colonnades, vast galleries, decorated ceiling, monumental staircases, both outside and inside ... (35)

This is a depressingly and uncannily accurate description of Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, and of many others. Yet there are people using the gallery who are running about, talking or whispering loudly, touching things, staring over-long at exhibits (the average for habitual gallery-goers is 3-5 seconds per item, pausing at measured intervals), lying on benches, eating, watching and making remarks about other users, goading the commissionnaire - the list is endless. This is not the legitimate use of the gallery, but it most certainly is one use, and a productive, pleasurable one.

> ... the best of them [the watercolours collection] would make a man shout for pleasure if he were not in a picture gallery, which I take to be a place where we never raise our voices. It is the great weakness of visual art that it must be largely sought for in these inhuman institutions, where you cannot lounge and smoke and argue, and where you unconsciously begin to tiptoe until very soon your feet and legs ache. (36)

So, although Bourdieu is correct to stress the bogus nature of 'free entrance' to the gallery -

> ... free entrance is ... reserved for those who, endowed with the ability to appropriate the works, have the privilege of using this freedom and who find themselves consequently legitimized in their privilege ... (37)

(that is, those in possession of cultural and symbolic capital, the cultural competence of the 'aesthetic disposition') - he fails to realise or to acknowledge that, far from being cowed by the exterior 'temple' of culture and excluded from the consumption of the culture within it, swarms of the dispossessed converge upon those very sacred temples and consume it eagerly. But in the 'wrong way'.

What is the fascination of this culture that is 'other', the property of a class with 'high' cultural (and economic) capital? Why do these 'un-expected' groups use the Museum and Art Gallery so much? It must, on one level, be connected with the continual message that 'Art and Culture are Good For You' which is propagated by television, radio and newspapers (Good For You because it confirms 'you' in your dominant, legitimated culture and/or 'you' in your subordinate, illegitimate one). It's also, I think, to do with the 'message' of the 'civic temple': namely, that it is civic, it is for 'the people', the great unwashed public. Culture knows no class barriers, it is for everyone (isn't it?).

> ... all the young people promenade up and down the galleries, not looking at pictures but at one another. Apollo has to serve Venus. But what of it? The boys and girls have to begin mating somewhere, and they could obvioiusly begin their acquaintance in much worse places. And you never know. Venus may be a strict task-mistress, but no doubt Apollo is allowed a word now and then. A picture will occasionally catch an eye, then hold it; and so the old leaven of art will start working. (38)

School children and unemployed young people know, quite rightly, that the

Museum and Art Gallery is 'open to the public'. Whatever significations the Victorian temple-building itself might present about its contents and about the consumption of art and culture which it frames - awe-inspiring? intimidating? impressive? monumental? moribund? uplifting? - these are, I would propose, significations constructed by and from a class in possession of cultural capital and symbolic wealth. It is only the culturally competent class or class-fraction who can make the connection 'classical architecture = classical values = spiritually uplifting', since that connotation of the building is the result of possessing knowledge about the 'classical', about 'architecture', and so forth. For the classes and class fractions lacking in or denied those cultural capitals, such connotations are not so much meaningless as irrelevant, not an issue, not noticed.

The ab/mis-use of the space of the Museum and Art Gallery is only an issue for the threatened but 'legitimate' users. For the kids playing around the showcases this is incomprehensible: the notice says 'open to the public' and they are claiming their civic right to use the place.(39)

> Museums: cemeteries ... Museums: public dormitories ... Museums: absurd abattoirs ... (40)

Public art?

> I am for the blinking arts, lighting up the night.
>
> I am for the art of worn marble and smashed slate. (...)
> I am for the art of slag and black coal. I am for the art of dead birds.
> I am for the art of scratchings in the asphalt, daubing at the walls. I am for the art of bending and kicking metal and breaking glass, and pulling at things to make them fall down.
>
> I am for an artist who vanishes, turning up in a white cap painting signs or hallways. (41)

I have just looked at the functioning and consumption of high art in a city in a particular space and place, and at the ways in which people make use of space. I do not want to seem to be suggesting that 'the city is a work of art', or that its activities and objects and people are art objects and artists.

> When we deal with cities we are dealing with life at its most complex and intense. Because this is so, there is a basic aesthetic limitation on what can be done with cities: a city cannot be a work of art.(42)

What I would want to suggest is that many of these objects and spaces, activities and people, can (potentially) be 'read' as 'public art', as 'performance', as a creative and productive use of materials available. Making art, as Claes Oldenburg (1967) implies, does not always need special tools or qualifications: it can be adapted and adopted.

Skipping girls and breakdancers, bag ladies and tramps, demonstrations and rallies, kids with ghetto-blasters (playing funk/scratch, sparse music from

and about the city life) and newspaper sellers,traffic lights and muzak coming from shop doorways, the smell of hot dogs and exhaust fumes, the specialness of girls out on the town on a warm summer night - all combine into a sort of Futurist synaesthesia.

But it is not just a whirling background to daily and nightly city life; sometimes some of these things become more visible, more audible. Effects and politics, political effects, effective politics. The demonstration or march may be just a neutralised spectacle for the majority who are uninvolved, rather than a political statement. However, the black kid with his or her ghetto-blaster (for example) cannot, I would argue, be neutralised in the same way because s/he is, perhaps, what Berman terms a 'sign in the street'. As a sign, s/he is a potentially more 'outspoken' way of speaking a politics (and therefore of speaking 'Birmingham') because s/he is not 'political' in a traditional sense in the way that a demonstration is, but rather is a micropolitics of daily resistance. These signs in the street form and are formed by the city, both at the imaginary ('Birmingham') and at the day-to-day, topographical (Birmingham) level. They form and are formed by a continuous narrative (hi/story): the story of Birmingham, how Birmingham speaks, how it is spoken, how it can change itself.

Notes

1. Engels, 1969, p.58.

2. Anon, 1851, p.1.

3. Anderton, 1900, p.2.

4. City of Birmingham motto.

5. Priestley, 1977, pp.78-9.

6. Ibid, p.84.

7. I am using the term 'discourse' as developed by Michel Foucault throughout his work. See especially 'The Order of Discourse', inaugural lecture at the College de France, December 2nd, 1970, first published Editions Gallimard, Paris 1971, and translated in Young, 1981.

8. The term used by Marshall Berman, 1983 for those moments and actions of resistance which are negotiated between structures (whether architectural, political, ideological).

9. Marriott, 1969, p.92 (referring to Birmingham's Bull Ring Shopping Centre).

10. Foucault continually emphasises the openness and plurality of all discourses and texts, thus allowing resistant moves on the part of the active subjects which structure/are structured by that discourse; cf. The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1: An Introduction (1978) for the related concept of 'reverse discourse'.

11. Bradbury, 1976, p.97.

12. Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'Rhizome' in On the Line, 1983.

13. Cf. Benjamin 1983.

14. See also Higson 1984 for a discussion of the role of landscape and townscape in film narrative; cf. Willemen 1984.

15. Although Birmingham is far from being a grid-layout (it is a warren), its plan is rigid and prescriptive nevertheless. It is only possible to move in certain directions in the town centre because of the encircling ringroads.

16. Castells, 1978, p.181.

17. Anon. (A Member of the Aristocracy), 1901, p.189.

18. Ibid. p.195.

19. McRobbie, 1984a, p.132.

20. Cf. Hebdige 1984, on nightclubs.

21. Cf. my article 'Going Public: Women using city spaces' Feminist Art News vol. 2, no. 3, 1985.

22. Priestley, 1977, p.80.

23. Fisher, 1961, (unpaginated).

24. Willemen, 1984, p.68

25. Cf. Foucault, 1978; Deleuze and Guattari 1983.

26. Briggs, 1981, p.31.

27. Sant'Elia in Apollonio, 1973, p.170, p.170, p.171.

28. Fisher 1961.

29. Ibid.

30. Priestley, 1977 ,pp.87-8.

31. Cf. Benjamin (1983), especially 'The Flaneur', for descriptions of the Parisian arcades in the late nineteenth century.

32. Balla in Apollonio, 1973, p.219.

33. Oldenburg, 1967,- brief excerpts from the long notes/statement/manifesto/poem (all those things) written for the catalogue of "Environments; Situations; Spaces", a group exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, summer 1961 (contemperaneous, then, with Roy Fisher's City). Elsewhere, Oldenburg has drawn a comparison between shops and supermarkets and museums.

34. Priestley, 1977, p.80.

35. Bourdieu, 1968, pp.610-11

36. Priestley, 1977, p.82.

37. Bourdieu, 1968, p.611.

38. Priestly, 1977, p.83.

39. See also other work by Bourdieu, passim, especially 'The Aristocracy of Culture' and 'The Production of Belief', both in Media, Culture and Society vol. 2, no.3, July 1980. cf. also John Berger Ways of Seeing (1972), essay 1, which uses data compiled by Bourdieu and Alain Darbel for L'Amour de l'Art (Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1969).

40. Marinetti in Appollonio, 1973, p.22.

41. Oldenburg, 1967 (unpaginated).

41. Jacobs, 1964, p.386, emphasis JJ.

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