

The Literary London Journal



Review

Laura Colombino, *Spatial Politics in Contemporary London Literature: Writing Architecture and the Body*, Hardback, 200 pages, London: Routledge, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-415-62480-0 £80.

Reviewed by

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<1>In *Spatial Politics in Contemporary London Literature* Laura Colombino explores interactions and intersections between urban space(s) and the body in London-based works by J. G. Ballard, Peter Ackroyd, Geoff Dyer, Michael Bracewell, Michael Moorcock, Iain Sinclair, Geoff Ryman, Tom McCarthy and Zadie Smith. The goal that this ambitious and insightful study sets itself is that of 'map[ping] the relationship of body, architecture and spatial politics in contemporary creative prose on the city' (i).

<2>While it might be said that Colombino's selection of authors and texts isn't particularly adventurous – many of the above-named are now well established as the 'usual suspects' of contemporary literary London studies – her methodological approach certainly *is* adventurous. In recent times it has become almost compulsory for book-length analyses of contemporary literature to claim – often rather dubiously – to be 'interdisciplinary' in scope and/or approach, but there is a genuine and highly engaging interdisciplinarity to this study, which – while primarily a work of literary criticism – variously takes in and engages with architectural theory, urban studies, psychogeography, anthropology, sociology and – that most abstract of spaces – 'theory' in its broadest sense. The result is a unique and insightful monograph which succeeds in offering fresh perspectives not only on a selection of postwar British writers (the majority of whom have, as above, already been worked on extensively) but also, even more impressively, on conceptions of space, the body and contemporary literature more broadly.

<3>Colombino identifies the work of Ballard and Sinclair as being of particular importance and, accordingly, devotes whole chapters to each (both are also discussed in other, more comparative chapters). Ballard, it is claimed, was 'the initiator of the interest in the relationship between architecture and the body in contemporary British

literature' (5). This is perhaps rather overstated, but if Colombino's opening chapter doesn't quite succeed in fully substantiating this claim, it does succeed in offering a highly original perspective on one of the central figures of postwar British literature (a writer whose death in 2009 only further intensified critical interest in his work). Colombino successfully establishes Ballard as a (if not *the*) foundational figure in her field of enquiry and, having identified the key themes and concerns of his urban fiction, then goes on to trace their development in the work of later British writers. There is a sense in which Ballard is at the centre of Colombino's whole study, which should be considered required reading for scholars of his writing.

<4>In the first section of her second chapter Colombino explores responses to Thatcherite ideology and 1980s urban decay in Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*, Dyer's *The Colour of Memory* and Bracewell's *Missing Margate*, arguing persuasively that what the three have in common is 'the subject's anxiety over and desire for bodily undoing into the physical entity of the city as a way of repossessing, on a mystic or surreal plane, an urban landscape from which the self has been estranged' (67). She then moves on to a discussion of trauma and ruin(s) in Moorcock and Sinclair, arguing that in the work of both 'the present is an orphan of the past: an abandoned, gutted house, like the ones emerging from the Blitz, and a scar left on the body of the city' (87). This lays the groundwork for the full chapter on Sinclair, which focuses in particular on his treatment of architecture and trauma. Sinclair is another writer who has already received a great deal of critical attention but Colombino does much more than simply survey the existing body of literary criticism on his fiction. Again, her unique methodological approach allows her to provide insightful new readings, suggesting that in Sinclair's fiction 'spatial displacement is closely associated with the transformation of politics into a highly individual, psychophysical experience, where the anonymous, dispersed and unreadable energies of the city impinge on and traverse the stalker's body with traumatic effects' (101).

<5>In her final chapter Colombino returns to Ballard, discussing the representation of abstract spaces in his novels *Concrete Island* and *Millennium People* and in Ryman's 'early Internet novel' 253. 'If Sinclair's works visualize London as a text perpetually enriched whose meanings are enlarged by recollection and positively expanded by creativeness', she argues, 'Ryman and Ballard's novels conceive the capital as a claustrophobic site of entrapment: the traffic island where the victim of a car accident is marooned for an indefinite time; the underground train bound to crash; gated communities and terrorist targets' (133). Colombino then considers two post-millennial texts, McCarthy's *Remainder* and Smith's *White Teeth*, each of which, she suggests, are 'dismissive of the essentialist tendencies prominent in Moorcock, Sinclair and Ackroyd' and in each of which a 'dismissal [...] of the territorial concerns so widespread in contemporary London literature leave both writers to cope with an almost evacuated urban scene, virtually deprived of historical density and resonance' (133). The term 'contemporary' is particularly slippery here, and it is a little unclear whether Colombino considers *Remainder* and *White Teeth* to be illustrative of more widespread tendencies in literature about London since the millennium (that is, as texts which typify a more general reaction against essentialist notions of territoriality and authenticity in twenty-first century literature about the city), or whether she considers them to be works that are of interest because they are unique or ground-breaking in this very regard; that are, as such, at the very forefront of developments in London-based literature. Still, her analyses of both are extremely strong, and one of the main connections that emerges

between the two novels is the ways in which they attempt to re-think the nature of connectedness itself.

<6>*Spatial Politics in Contemporary London Literature* succeeds in *beginning* to 'map the relationship of body, architecture and spatial politics in contemporary creative prose on the city' even if, inevitably, it leaves much of this mapping still to be done. The only way in which with this excellent monograph disappoints is that, somewhat ironically for a study so concerned with bodies, its sense of the body of *literature* on which it focuses is not always clear. Colombino states that she 'concentrate[s] specifically on some significant and illustrative authors and texts' in order to investigate 'the fiction in which London provides not a residual interest but a strong psychic-phenomenological grounding and where the awareness of the physical reality of buildings and landscape conditions shape the concept of the subject traversing the city' (4). One certainly gets the sense that all of the authors and texts analysed are 'significant', but not that they are necessarily 'illustrative' (nor indeed, if they are, of what). This is symptomatic of the fact that, for all the impressive breadth of her conceptual framework (and it is very impressive indeed), Colombino's textual selection is rather too narrow. One wonders in particular why she decided to restrict herself solely to British writers. Sam Selvon's London novels, for instance, written in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, are very clearly texts in which 'the awareness of the physical reality of buildings and landscape conditions shape the concept of the [migrant] subject traversing the city', and it would have been interesting to see them compared to Ballard's work of the same period. Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* is a text which, frankly, just cries out to be included here; while it has of course already been written on extensively, its obsession with the metamorphoses both of London's spaces and of the human body – metamorphoses which are key to the novels politics as well as to its aesthetic – makes it one of a number of conspicuous absences here. The 'map' that Colombino has started to draw is, undoubtedly, far more international than this volume suggests. Still, the very fact that the experience of reading this account of a relatively small selection of works by British authors makes one think of any number of other postwar texts about London – and wish that space had been made for them in this study of space – is itself a testimony to the originality and the distinction of Colombino's book. *Spatial Politics in Contemporary London Literature* is not only an intriguing reflection on the nature of space and spaces in contemporary literature, but a study which succeeds in opening up new spaces in contemporary literary studies.

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