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**Nora Pleßke, *The Intelligible Metropolis: Urban Mentality in Contemporary London Novels*, paperback, 575 pages, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014. ISBN: 978-3837626728; £57.99.**

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Despite extensive research on London literature ever since Perry H. Boynton first published *London in English Literature* in 1913 (Pleßke 2014: 24) and even though the 1990s/2000s saw an unprecedented surge in scholarly analyses of London literature, Nora Pleßke's *The Intelligible Metropolis* provides an entirely new approach to the subject. In this book, based on her doctoral thesis, which was awarded the Helene-Richter-Prize by the German Association for English Studies, Pleßke provides the first systematic study of 'London mentality' in novels set in the city (31). What is more, Pleßke shows that 'mentality' is crucial to an understanding of the city insofar as it 'renders the metropolis both legible and intelligible' (527). In doing so, her analyses challenge the previously prevalent assumption that the postmodern metropolis is characterised by 'illimitability, diffusion, heterogeneity, fragmentation and fleetingness', and therefore 'ultimately remains both illegible and unintelligible for the urbanite and the urbanologist alike' (513).

Nora Pleßke's study is impressive with regard to both its theoretical framework and the scope of primary texts considered. Arguing that mentality connects 'space, everyday practice and the imaginary' (528), Pleßke develops a concept of urban mentality that is equally aware of urban-generic and urban-specific non-conscious dispositions of thinking, feeling, imagining, and acting. She stresses that her model of urban mentality is not only relevant to an analysis of London but also of any other contemporary metropolis (13). That is, Pleßke's investigation wishes to initiate a 'mental turn' within urban and cultural studies (13) by promoting 'the approach of mentality as a new paradigm for a more inclusive and interdisciplinary study of the urban which helps rendering the metropolis truly *intelligible*' (35). Against the

background of the 'spatial turn' and theories of space and spatial semantics, the study combines the concept of urban mentality with a spatio-narratological approach (13). In accordance with contemporary urbanologists and cultural geographers, Pleßke regards 'the city as narrative and novelistic space' (137) and assumes that urban fiction exposes metropolitan mentality (139). Owing to this nexus between mentality, city and novel, Pleßke's interdisciplinary investigation combines mentality studies, cultural and literary studies. While the book embarks upon a narratological analysis of literary representations of urban mentality, it suggests that its narratological approach can also be fruitfully applied to the study of mentalities in other cultural practices (519).

Apart from the clever integration of the findings of historians of mentalities, sociologists, urbanologists, and cultural and literary studies scholars, *The Intelligible Metropolis* is noteworthy for its unusually large corpus of primary texts. Scrutinising the depiction of urban mentality in 403 London novels published between 1997 and 2007, Pleßke selects twenty novels for closer analysis. Her corpus is deliberately heterogeneous with regard to the writers' gender, age, nationality and popularity, but also in terms of the presented social, temporal and topographical perspectives and the respective novelistic sub-genre, including novel of development, postmodern and postcolonial novel, dystopian fiction, horror novel and neo-Gothic genre fiction. Amongst others, Pleßke investigates Christine Brooke-Rose's *Next* (1998), Geoff Ryman's *253* (1998), China Miéville's *King Rat* (1998), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), Nick Hornby's *A Long Way Down* (2005) and Matthew de Abaitua's *The Red Men* (2007). In addition, Pleßke's book features a comprehensive appendix listing London novels written between 1997 and 2007.

While the sheer number and variety of novels taken into consideration is hugely impressive, Pleßke's decision to focus on the novel genre for an analysis of urban mentality disregards that the short story (collection) shares in the features that she celebrates with regard to the novel, i.e. formal malleability, complexity and multiperspectivity (159–160). Sandra A. Zagarell (1988) has shown that short story cycles are prone to offer 'narratives of community' and thus may equally provide an insight into the norms, values and mental dispositions of a specific community, urban or otherwise. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) is probably the most famous example of the representation of urban—albeit small-town rather than metropolitan—mentality in a short story cycle. Although the novel certainly is a particularly suitable narrative genre for an enquiry into mental dispositions (159), it remains debatable whether there is an 'obvious confluence of the spatial form of the city and the narrative genre of the novel', as Pleßke suggests (168). In any case, it would be interesting to apply Pleßke's theory of urban mentality to contemporary London short fiction, whose diversity is reflected in the two *Time Out Books of London Short Stories* published in 1993 and 2000, in Maggie Hamand's showcase anthology of The Booktrust London Short Story Competition, *Underwords: The Hidden City* (2005), and in the recently launched London Short Story Festival.

Nora Pleßke's analysis of London mentality focuses on the Blair era because, she explains, London life changed drastically at the turn of the millennium (15). During Tony Blair's first term economic recession, pessimism and *fin-de-siècle* mood gave way to revived optimism, the rebranding of Britain as 'Cool Britannia' and the

architectural as well as cultural reinvention of London (16–18). Yet his second term marked the beginning of 'a new phase of gloom', triggered by 9/11 and the resultant erection of the 'Ring of Steel' of CCTV cameras in London, Britain's participation in the war in Iraq, the 7/7 bombings and the concomitant increase in Islamophobia (19). Therefore, Pleßke considers the years between 1997 and 2007 a threshold era in-between the Cold War and international terrorism, which radically altered urban realities (19–20).

She sees these societal and specifically urban transformations reflected in the way in which London mentality is represented in the twenty contemporary novels under scrutiny. Her literary analyses culminate in a 'typology of contemporary London mentality' (519). Borrowing the term 'rhizome' from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Pleßke argues that London mentality has a rhizomatic, i.e. structural side (47–48), and a functional side that she calls 'organon' (47). Pleßke discerns eight characteristic structures of London mentality that serve different functions (519). First, she argues that the novels depict 'isolationist' mental dispositions, which function as 'protective mechanisms' against the metropolitan overload of stimuli (520). While she traces the creation of 'postmodern Privatopias' (520) in novels such as McEwan's *Saturday*, she also reveals that the boundaries between public and private become permeable in the postmodern city (192, 520). The public enters private spaces mostly through media (radio, television, the internet) and the transformation of the labour market. The latter is illustrated in Ali's *Brick Lane*, where the spatially isolated protagonist Nazneen changes the domestic sphere of her flat into a workplace and through her sewing gains personal freedom and financial independence (210). Conversely, public spaces are being privatised and novels like Maggie Gee's *The White Family* (2002) depict how semi-public spaces such as hospital, park, church, and shop come to serve 'as a refuge from a devastated private family life' (202).

Second, Pleßke detects 'subterranean' structures of mentality, i.e. mental dispositions in relation to underground London (520). These dispositions mainly function as a means of orientation, social integration and transcultural contact (520–521). The Tube novels *Tunnel Vision* (2001) by Keith Lowe and *253* by Ryman illustrate that indifference and inattention are mental dispositions of acting prevalent in the Tube, which ultimately serve the purpose of urban socialisation and acculturation (265). In addition, the Tube is 'an interpersonal and transcultural contact zone' (265) where Self and Other meet. As such, it plays a vital role in the (re-)negotiation of London's multicultural society (244). Moreover, the underground simultaneously mirrors the city above and provides a counter-image. It is what Michel Foucault calls a 'heterotopian' space (520). As a 'thirdspace', a space of liminality in-between familiarity and strangeness, the underground is depicted as 'the site of the urban uncanny' (520). It causes 'cognitive uncertainty' whilst 'offering sublime knowledge on the urban' (520–521).

According to Pleßke, a third feature of London mentality is located in its '(sub)textual' dispositions that enable urbanites to orient themselves and grasp the seemingly unintelligible city (521). The novels under analysis illustrate that the characters possess a 'textual knowledge of London' (34). While Geoff Nicholson's *Bleeding London* (1997) depicts map-making as an idiosyncratic strategy of perceiving the city (271–277), Brooke-Rose's *Next* presents 'walking the city' as a means of

urban perception in the sense of 'writing and reading the urban' (278, 521). For Pleßke, Henry Perowne's driving through the city by car in McEwan's *Saturday* constitutes a specifically postmodern type of *flânerie* (302). Another (sub)textual way of perceiving the city is exemplified by Miéville's *King Rat*, where the polyphony of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile senses is shown to facilitate orientation and a profound understanding of the metropolis (291). Reading *Saturday* as 'a new kind of meta-consciousness novel' (297) that 'is self-reflexive about urban perceptual processes and the construction of consciousness' (302), Pleßke argues that McEwan's novel also exposes the complementary contributions science and art—particularly literature—make to a (sub)textual understanding of the city.

Fourth, Pleßke contends that London mentality is structured like a palimpsest. Indeed, she calls the palimpsest 'the master metaphor in contemporary London novels' (521). It encapsulates the notion of the multifaceted, heterogeneous and mutable city and functions as 'a contemporary coping strategy against a postmodern London overload induced by temporal, spatial, social, textual, and hypertextual compressions of the metropolis' (350). In other words, layered dispositions of thinking, feeling, imagining and acting allow Londoners to realise and deal with the city's complexity (352). Especially in Nicholson's *Bleeding London* and Jane Stevenson's *London Bridges* (2000), the city is perceived as a 'historical palimpsest', where 'traces from mental structures of the past still have relevance for the present, while the palimpsest also conveys ideas of change and transformation' (348). Conversely, the city emerges as a 'spatial palimpsest' (311) in novels like Nicholas Royle's *The Matter of the Heart* (1997), in which psychogeography functions to depict the emotional atmosphere of particular urban places (311) and connect personal history with 'the *lieux de mémoire* of great history' (521; see also 317–321). In a related manner, the city is represented as a highly heterogeneous 'socio-cultural palimpsest' (325). Whereas postcolonial novels such as *Brick Lane* expose the multicultural renegotiation of specific places, *King Rat* portrays subcultural and class-induced urban layering (349).

London mentality is, fifth, shaped by what Pleßke calls 'relational fluidity', i.e. dispositions towards temporary, secondary relations with others that come to replace the weakening primary ties among family members and friends (355). Relational fluidity is opposed to Londoners' isolationist dispositions (522). Its momentary and dynamic structure aligns urban citizens to their continuously changing social environment in postmodern London (391). For instance, Hornby's *A Long Way Down* indicates that chance encounters in the metropolis always hold the potential for developing into future relations or networks (391). The four lonely, suicidal protagonists in Hornby's novel overcome their urban isolation and even form a close relationship after they have saved each other's lives. Hence, the novel illustrates that 'urban primary relations like friendship still exist, but they are more diffuse, dynamic and based on temporarily felt personal deficiencies rather than on collective similarities' (367). Furthermore, novels like Ali's *Brick Lane* show that London has become a 'cosmopolitan contact zone' that invites new forms of 'transurban, transnational and transcultural sociabilities' (392). Indeed, Pleßke's study reveals that figures like the stranger, the marginalised woman or the cosmopolitan are especially able to respond to the demands of a highly dynamic social environment (392). Their

subject positions in-between Self and Other entail that they have developed a number of strategies of coping with relational fluidity.

Pleßke discerns mental structures of deviance as a sixth feature of a London-specific mentality. That is, the novels present a crisis of traditional hegemonies in terms of class, ethnicity and gender (522). Pleßke discusses the representation of a middle-class crisis in McEwan's *Saturday* and J. G. Ballard's *Millennium People* (2003), and she reads Gee's *The White Family*, Blake Morrison's *South of the River* (2007) and Patrick Neate's *City of Tiny Lights* (2005) as depictions of the 'multiple racial and ethnic frictions in the postcolonial and world city' (432). As ethnic diversity and multiculturalism are transformed into cosmopolitan ways of living together, contemporary urbanites are shown to develop 'hybrid mentalities' (432). While this becomes also apparent in *Brick Lane*, Pleßke discusses the protagonist Nazneen as an example of the 'New London Woman' (416), i.e. of female vigilance, agency and emancipation in the postmodern metropolitan realm (412–416). Conversely, Gautam Malkani's novel *Londonstani* (2006), which also testifies to London's hybridity and Homi Bhabha's notion of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism', is taken to indicate a crisis of masculinity insofar as it deals with machismo among second-generation British Asian men (417). Pleßke argues that the protagonists' insecurity concerning their performance of masculinity becomes apparent in their 'hyper-masculinity', that is their excessive hate of the Other, their violence and criminality (424). Interestingly enough, Pleßke further traces 'a reconfiguration of the urban underclass' (432) in London mentality. Not only do de Abaitua's *The Red Men* and Brooke-Rose's *Next* exemplify urban marginalisation by depicting London's East End and the city's homeless people respectively, but the novels also reveal that all Londoners feel othered in a number of ways inasmuch as they live in a highly differential and heterogeneous metropolis (426). Therefore, according to Pleßke, 'the postmodern urbanite is an outsider *per se* in the sense that s/he is an intrinsic part of the city's socioscape but simultaneously positioned outside society as a member of a specialised pariahhood' (426).

Seventh, London mentality is shown to be characterised by hypertrophic mental dispositions towards self-definition (522). The novels under analysis typically depict performative self-fashioning, metropolitan role play, the formation of hybrid identity, as well as anthropomorphised conceptions of the city, indicating 'a decisive self-hyperbolisation of the individual' (474). Contrary to assumptions of individual disorientation and alienation in the postmodern age (474), the narrated characters illustrate that hypertrophy facilitates orientation in the postmodern metropolis (523).

The last feature of London mentality that Pleßke deduces from her reading of contemporary novels is a disposition to feel terror and fear. In spite of the prevailing optimism during Blair's first term in office, 'in tropes of attraction of repulsion, crime, terror and apocalypse, the texts expose a psychology of underlying mental fear that reaches back to Lady Diana's death, resurges with the millennium and transforms into an expectancy fear after 9/11 and real terror with 7/7' (523). Novels like *Brick Lane* illustrate that these mental dispositions towards mistrust, fear and terror are linked with feelings of hate, resulting in new kinds of racism and Islamophobia (510). But Ali's novel also presents cosmopolitanism as a potential means of escaping the fatal essentialist logic of Self versus Other (510). In turn, McEwan's *Saturday* presents

'humanist compassion' and empathy as viable strategies of countering terrorism (500). Pleßke stresses that the depicted terror structures of mentality render Londoners' persistent disposition towards stoicism in the face of crisis obsolete (523). Following Elias's conceptualisation of 'fear as a sign of civilisatory change', she therefore interprets the narrated disposition to feelings of terror as the herald of a transformation in London mentality (523).

While the findings of modern sociologists, new urban economists, postmodern urbanologists and cultural geographers have 'served as a major focus for the literary analyses' conducted by Pleßke (519), her study is most interesting whenever she traces the ways in which contemporary London novels contradict sociological assumptions about postmodern metropolitan mentality. This is especially the case with regard to the discerned (sub)textual strategies of rendering the metropolis truly legible and intelligible, and in connection with the represented hypertrophic disposition to hyperbolic and narcissistic self-fashioning, which seems diametrically opposed to 'the notion that the Postmetropolis leads to disintegration and a loss of the Self' (474). But it is also true for the non-stoic, angst-ridden mental dispositions that permeate the analysed London novels. Literature then emerges as a space of alternative 'realities', a space of creative experimentation and potentiality, and a fictional seismograph of societal developments.

As the first study of its kind, Nora Pleßke's interrogation into London-specific mental dispositions of thinking, feeling, imagining and acting may prove to be a pathfinder in the analysis of urban mentality. It shall be instructive to see whether research into non-fictional discourses of the Blair era confirms her findings. Which mental dispositions will an analysis of newspapers, journal articles, postcards, tourism guides, official documents concerning city planning and development and other texts reveal? Furthermore, an investigation of London mentality in other periods of the city's history will throw Pleßke's findings with regard to urban mentality between 1997 and 2007 into sharper relief and indicate long-standing London-specific mental dispositions. What is more, a comparison between contemporary London and other metropolises across the world will disclose whether certain aspects of London mentality are urban-generic rather than urban-specific. While the outlined typology of London mentality is certainly unique to the British metropolis, features such as (sub)textual and layered dispositions of perceiving and constructing the city may apply to the postmodern condition more generally rather than being 'exclusively London-like' (521). Similarly, 'rooted' or 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' may prove to be not only 'a London-specific urban value of resisting new totalitarian forces' (494).

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### **Note on Contributor**

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