

LOCATIVE NARRATIVE AND AN IPHONE APP: MANCHESTER AS A MYTHICAL CITY

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In this paper, the depiction of Manchester is examined through four different yet linked media representations from the 1950s to the present. These are, an iPhone app, which shows archive film of the city, two novels, and a feature film. All involve navigation of the city's streets and landmarks by the viewer, or by the protagonists of the fictional representations.

The paper argues that far from a real picture of Britain's second city. These literary and filmic versions of Manchester show it to be a dystopian place of the imagination, and that this mythical Manchester still persists in the unconscious as a grey and depressed zone.

The Manchester city centre of today, post the IRA bomb of 1996 and subsequent reconstruction, is a regeneration success story. The textile warehouses of Princess Street, built to resemble Florentine palazzos, burnish red on a summer's evening, as the crowds stream between the lights of Chinatown and the night-time culture of Canal Street and the Gay Village. But the Manchester of the imagination as represented in literature and film, is a profoundly different place, a city of 'ruins, dust, deserted streets, blocked canals'¹, and of rain and decay. A post-industrial Hades.

This Manchester of the imagination, is understood in reality and in its cultural depictions through traversing its streets and bus routes, through "wayfaring" (in Tim Ingold's formulation)², the lymph systems that connect the parts of the city together. And both real and imagined places exist through change and erasure, as buildings are torn down or blown up, leaving visual and historical traces in photographs, or film, or in the memory. The palimpsest of layers of meaning that subtly interact to create a textured picture of the whole.

In collaboration with Marion Hewitt, the director of the North West Film Archive, and app developer Darren Dancey, I explored the narrative of Manchester over the last 100 years, in an iPhone app, *Manchester Time Machine*.³ This is the first app to combine archive film with GPS to enable the negotiation of historical Manchester, overlaying the present with a century of filmed history, from the Whit walks of 1911 to a student demonstration in 1971. The GPS and compass enabled app allows you to view a city centre location and to see it in the past, the choice of 100 films picturing a city's history from multiple viewpoints.

The opening of the Manchester Ship Canal in 1894 had triggered a boom in building of those cotton warehouses and civic buildings, and early filmmakers captured a place and an atmosphere of spirit and pride. The brash optimism of the Edwardian era is represented through scenes of bombastic police marches, the crisp white dresses of young girls parading on Whit walks down Market Street, and the seemingly chaotic mix of transport technologies in the streets, as horse-drawn cabs jostle with steam

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lorries, electric trams and the early examples of the soon to dominate motor car, which narrowly avoid crowds of scurrying pedestrians.

There are hints at how emerging technologies fostered that optimism. A float passes the Town Hall in 1920 advertising the Midland Cinema, and 'films where you can see yourself on the screen'. But the ebullient self-image of Manchester turns darker with the Second War and the destruction of the Christmas blitz of 1940, reducing much of Corporation Street and Piccadilly to rubble.

The narrative arc of Manchester, which seemed to have clawed its way out of the slums of the world's first industrial city, turns darker as that industry is left behind. A ghostly illuminated tram passing by the Town Hall on VE day in 1945, and the destruction by fire of Paulden's department store in 1957, seem like symbols of the city's decline, and by the twentieth century the persistent image is of rain, smog, and inner decay. Partly this was true of most British industrial cities of the time, but whereas London was driving forwards through youth, music, fashion, and creativity to the iconic era of the swinging 60s, visitors to Manchester saw only a bleak absence of life.

As de Certeau notes, the city can be accessed in two ways: from outside through the map or from within as a pedestrian.⁴ But the city can also be accessed through its myth, its resonance in the imagination, and the depiction of Manchester through Time Machine, whilst appealing to a nostalgic rewriting of the urban landscape, has echoes in three works that have depicted the city as a blackened and faintly evil dystopia. In Michel Butors' 1956 novel *L'Emploi du Temps*⁵ (translated as *Passing Time*⁶), W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* 1992⁷ and the 1960 British film noir *Hell is a City*⁸, Manchester appears in turn as a malevolent entity, a place of terminal decline, and a metaphorical Purgatory. Even in the 1950s, this was not a recognisably accurate depiction of the city: instead it relates to a view of Manchester which goes back to the mid-nineteenth century, when Engels wrote about the condition of the working class, and the squalid conditions endured by the inhabitants of Little Ireland, just south of where Oxford Road station stands today.⁹

Just what creates the myth of the city is shifting and intangible. Some cities seem to have the power of myth, of inhabiting the unconscious, whereas others do not, and this is not always the product of a city's size. Of course London, New York, Berlin, inhabit an inner space and have a numinous presence through their appearance through history, or film, or literature or music. A city is always more than its buildings and streets, it is also its stories, its energies, its ideas. But some smaller cities also inhabit the space of myth, for example Liverpool.

There is a statue in Liverpool's Matthew Street of the great psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, despite the fact that he never ever visited the city. In 1962, just as the Beatles were about to put their birthplace on the world stage, Jung wrote in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, of a dream he had had of Liverpool many years before. He saw 'greyish-yellow raincoats, glistening with the wetness of the rain'¹⁰, but had also a vision of unearthly beauty, as he equated the city in his dream as 'the pool of life'.¹¹ Jung's Liverpool was both a real city, but also a powerful marker in his unconscious, stretching between two contrasting poles of grey bleakness and life enhancing energy.

Manchester also has a place in the collective unconscious, combining the real and imagined buildings, the weather, the character of the people, its post-industrial landscape, and its history, but also perhaps redeemed by music in the 1980s, and its sudden transformation through what became briefly the most

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famous club in the world, the Hacienda. The Manchester of myth as represented in fiction is a dark place, but in order to fully experience that place, even in its darkness it must be traversed.

Thus all the works I cite here, two novels, a film, and an app, involve the negotiation of the city, walking its streets, or traversing it via its bus routes. They reflect Deleuze's concept of the rhizomatic narrative, when narrative connections proceed not via a linear chain of events, like a single root, but more like a tuber root system, a net where any point can be connected to any other point.¹² Whilst Deleuze may have meant this as a model for the conductivity of ideas, it also functions as a powerful metaphor for systems of non-linear narrative, the strategies of hypertext which computer systems eventually made possible.

Although written thirty years before hypertext, Michel Butor's *L'Emploi du Temps* prefigures the form in a fascinating way. It was written by Butor, a writer in the nouveau roman group, which includes Alain Robbe-Grillet, and although set in the fictional northern British town of Bleston, is plainly based on Manchester, where Butor had worked from 1951-3 as a language assistant at the University.

The protagonist, Jacques Revel, comes to work at the Bleston company Matthews and Sons, and seems to get trapped in the city, which reflects the grey post-war grimness of Britain as a whole, and the North in particular. His journeys criss-crossing the city by bus are represented in inordinate detail, and the web of bus routes that lie upon the city become a net which renders him unable to escape. His treasured possession is the bus map, purchased by him from the woman he would come to love, Ann Bailey¹³, and the routes become a figurative rhizome which is reflected in the episodic structure of the novel.

It is ostensibly a diary of the year he spends in Bleston, written retrospectively, but whilst there is increasing complexity, there is very little narrative resolution, and the novel does not so much end, as stop dead. Jacques hates Bleston, hates the soot-blackened buildings, the insipid food, the cold reserve of the people, but more than that he comes to feel that the city has ensnared him, and as mysterious fires erupt across Bleston¹⁴, that it is somehow decaying from within.

The description of the novel's English translation, *Passing Time*, on the back of the original John Calder edition gives a jauntily upbeat view of the story – 'the atmosphere of a British industrial town is perfectly captured, and this French view of England will delight British readers'¹⁵. But most readers must have been appalled by Jacques' frozen welcome, and state of helpless entrapment in a place he had come to see as a labyrinth, with no way out.

One of those readers was the acclaimed German author W.G. Sebald, who also came to Manchester to work at the University, but in the late 1960s, and whose view of the city was if anything even more corruscating than Butor's. His Manchester is stagnant and on the brink of ruin, a vision of unremitting gloom, without light or hope.

Sebald, who seemed until his untimely death in 2001 to be a possible winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, made his name with a series of novels which mix fiction and essay with what seems like documentary autobiography. He said of his works 'the big events are true while the detail is invented to give the effect of the real'¹⁶.

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In his 1993 Novel *The Emigrants*, Manchester features in one of the four stories about Jewish emigrants from Nazi Germany. The unnamed yet Sebald-like narrator befriends Max Ferber, a painter (based on Frank Auerbach) who works on his paint-encrusted canvases in the decaying Salford Docks, a mocking nod to the optimism of the Ship Canal opening 60 years before. Max, like Jacques Revel, is trapped in Manchester/Bleston and, but this time for good; ‘Manchester has taken possession of me for good. I cannot leave, I do not want to leave. I must not’.¹⁷

Sebald read Butor’s novel during his two stays in the city in 1966–8 and 1969–70, and wrote a long poem *Bleston: a Mancunian cantical*¹⁸ while he worked there. Obviously influenced by Butor, it prefigures *The Emigrants* in its bleak views of ‘’Soot covered trees’, starlings ‘‘huddled together on the sills of Lewis’s big warehouse’’, and ships offshore ‘‘waiting in the fog’’.¹⁹ Sebald’s view is so unremittingly gloomy that his experience of Manchester (like Butor’s, from the point of view of a European immigrant) must have been blended with the inner melancholy which permeates all of his novels. Or as has been suggested²⁰, his picture is a projection of post-war German guilt, felt by the survivors (Sebald was a Bavarian catholic) and exemplified through his Jewish refugee characters.

But Sebald’s view is loosely corroborated by the 1960 Val Guest film, *Hell Is A City*, a late British Hammer film noir, filmed on location in and around Manchester. Here the city is seen as a changing but decrepit landscape, still scarred from the war, where what threatens to erupt is not a mysterious conflagration but simmering female sexual tension.

A killer is on the loose, and the opening night-time travelling shots from a police car, over a brassy jazz score, make Piccadilly seem like the centre of Chicago or New York. But overlaying this is a working-class northern landscape of billiard halls, bookies, and illegal pitch and toss games on bleak hills surrounded by factory chimneys.

Most of the action takes place in the city centre, and as with the novels, there is a strong sense of traversing the streets and rooftops, literally in the spectacular denouement. The protagonist Inspector Martineau clammers at roof level rather improbably from Castlefield to the eaves of the Refuge Assurance building on Oxford Road (now the Palace Hotel), to overpower the armed villain Don Starling. As they grapple high above the streets, in the background Oxford Road station is clearly being rebuilt, a telling example of erasure and renewal of the city’s fabric.

Don Starling’s getaway car is American, but far from a glamorous symbol of 1950s excess, this one is a seedy pre-war Buick, fitting in well with the overall rundown atmosphere of the film. And when he drives outside Manchester to dispose of the body, the countryside is not as in most films of the era, a place of health and escape. More the windswept moors are cold and forbidding, an eerie prefiguring of the chilling events of the Moors murders which would occur within a couple of years of the film’s release, and which also contribute to the dystopian myth of Manchester.

Some of the locations for *Hell Is A City* have been swept away, but there are muffled traces which show through faintly, despite the rubbing out of the buildings. The robbery of a bookmaker’s van takes place in a fictional Higgitt’s passage, off Corporation Street in the city centre, which was in reality a narrow alley called Cromford Court. The whole area was redeveloped shortly after the film was made, to become the vast Arndale shopping centre, and then again in the 1990s after the devastation of the IRA bomb, but the name Cromford Court still survives as one of the ‘‘streets’’ in the Arndale, a muted footprint of a lost history.

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At least one Manchester landmark appears in nearly all of these cultural texts, and is unchanged to the present day: Strangeways prison, the symbol of the corruption of Manchester/Bleston, with its characteristic hexagonal shape. Butor refers to Bleston's 'safeguard, a six pointed star with the penitentiary in its centre, the image of which had appeared to me like a black crystal....A negative of the gleaming mark imprinted on Cain's forehead'²¹.

Sebald's narrator goes to the one-time Jewish quarter around the 'star-shaped complex of Strangeways prison'²² on his increasingly long walks on Sundays, overcome by 'aimlessness and futility'²³. He roams the city and is always amazed how anthracite-coloured Manchester 'displayed the clearly chronic process of its impoverishment and degradation to anyone who cared to see'²⁴. And at the end of *Hell Is A City*, we see the forbidding exterior of the prison, as a knot of bystanders stands outside, and a Manchester Guardian placard proclaims 'Starling To Hang'²⁵.

There are numerous echoes in these sources of the internalised image of Manchester. In *The Emigrants*, Max Ferber lodges at 104 Palatine Road, the same house that the austere and often tortured philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein stayed in when he came to study aeronautics at the University in 1908²⁶. The fires that consume Bleston from within are paralleled by the 1957 destruction of Paulden's department store off the Oxford Road by fire, which is one of the film scenes in *Manchester Time Machine*.

Always the overwhelming connotation of the city's traverse is less the freedom of discovery of the "derive", or the pleasure of navigation of the story, but rather the pacing of the floor of the trapped prisoner. Jacques Revel feels he cannot escape Bleston, and refers to the parallel of Theseus in the Minotaur's Labyrinth²⁷. Sebald's narrator returns from visiting Max Ferber in hospital, walking through the Hulme estates regenerated in the Seventies, but already decayed again²⁸ past derelict warehouses to the Midland hotel, which the owners would be surprised to know was 'on the brink of ruin'²⁹. And yet there are premonitions of the new myth of Manchester that would arise in the 1980s.

Don Starling is cornered by Inspector Martineau in a two-storey Castlefield building, just around the corner from the fictional Hotel also where Sebald's narrator comes to lodge, eight years later. In the background through the railway bridge, can be glimpsed the yacht-building showroom that would become what Newsweek called in the 1990s the most famous club in the world, the Hacienda.

Manchester today has largely assimilated its Victorian past; the world's first industrial city has co-opted its cotton warehouses into attractive apartment blocks, or restaurants and bars. Lewis's department store, where Inspector Martineau meets a streetwalker at the end of *Hell is a City*, is now a branch of Primark. Where Sebald's Max Ferber found Manchester deserted, this would be unrecognisable to the tens of thousands of revellers who swell the night-time economy and the pubs and cafes every weekend, (many of them students living in the city centre, some in converted Victorian mills).

Manchester Time Machine, like the other texts quoted here, maps the city through its past, but also points to another, internalised Manchester. There is a direct path that leads from Engels and the misery of Little Ireland, through the despair of Butor and Sebald, to the pessimism of Joy Division and Morrissey. The famous Anton Corbijn photograph of Joy Division in the Hulme estates (the same ones

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that Sebald's narrator trudges through) freezes an image, a myth of Manchester that paradoxically resonates as truthful, even as it is at odds with the bright lights and swarming crowds of the literal city.

The four literary and filmic sources quoted all show that this frozen image persists as a disconnect between the everyday Mancunian experience and the city's place in the imagination, perhaps to a greater extent than in other cities. The pleasure that can be gained by the negotiation/navigation of the streets and buildings becomes in these representations the relentless pacing of a prisoner in a condemned cell, unable or unwilling to escape. The myth of Manchester mixes the real buildings of today with layers of real and imagined history, a film of soot from two centuries of industrial chimneys, that may have been removed in reality, but persists in the unconscious.

ENDNOTES

¹ Janet Wolff, "Max Ferber and the Persistence of Pre-Memory in Mancunian Exile", in *Melilah*, 2012 Supplement Memory, Traces and the Holocaust in the Writings of W.G. Sebald. (Guest editors: Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Janet Wolff) 1. Accessed Dec 20th.2013 <http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/storage/melilah/2012/s2/6.pdf>

² Tim Ingold, *Being Alive; Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description* (New York: Routledge, 2011)

³ *Manchester Time Machine* (2012). Manchester Metropolitan University and North West Film Archive (Version 2) [Mobile application software]. Retrieved from <http://itunes.apple.com>

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2002)

⁵ Michel Butor, *L'Emploi du Temps* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit 1956)

⁶ Michel Butor, *Passing Time*, trans Jean Stewart (London: Jupiter 1965)

⁷ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans Michael Hulse (London The Harvill Press 1996)

⁸ *Hell is a City*, DVD, directed by Val Guest (1960 London: StudioCanal 2005)

⁹ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the working class in England* (London: Penguin Classics 2009)

¹⁰ Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London : Fontana Press 2005), 223

¹¹ Jung, *Memories*, 223

¹² Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, (Cambridge Mass, The MIT Press 1997), 132

¹³ Butor, *Passing Time*, 38

¹⁴ Butor, *Passing Time*, 121

¹⁵ Butor, *Passing Time*, rear cover

¹⁶ M. Jaggi, "Recovered memories", *The Guardian Profile* (22 September 2001)

¹⁷ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* 169

¹⁸ Janet Wolff, *Melilah* 3

¹⁹ Janet Wolff, *Melilah* 4

²⁰ Janet Wolff, *Melilah* 4

²¹ Butor, *Passing Time*, 254

²² W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* 157

²³ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* 156

²⁴ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* 156

²⁵ *Hell is a City*, Val Guest

²⁶ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* 16

²⁷ Butor, *Passing Time*, 299

²⁸ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* 231

²⁹ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* 233

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