



The Space of Literature, The Literature of Space

(Laura Colombino, *Spatial Politics in Contemporary London Literature. Writing Architecture and the Body*, London, Routledge, 2013, 212 pp. ISBN 9780415624800)

by Nicoletta Vallorani

At first sight, Colombino's *Spatial Politics in Contemporary London Literature* seems to state a very definite (and often dealt with) field of work, choosing to focus on London literature in contemporary times and clearly identifying a number of writers whose relevance is not to be discussed. The purpose of producing a convincing map of the many ways in which architecture and the body interlace in contemporary creative prose on London is pursued within a methodological frame that is clearly declared in Colombino's introduction, when she writes "What differentiates my analysis from previous studies is, first and foremost, the methodological approach, which is interdisciplinary in various ways" (5). Though cultural studies as a research method is never mentioned, Colombino – maybe without fully realizing it – borrows some of the highly flexible guidelines of this mode of inquiry as she widely refers to recent developments in sociology, visual arts, anthropology, architecture and art criticism in order to show – through the work of the selected authors – how deep and fertile is the cross-pollination of different fields in contemporary writings on the city.



Fully aware of the need to define the borders of her analysis, Colombino defines a selection of profiles that appears quite ample and diversified. The choice must have been quite a challenge: whatever one decides, some “London authors” are bound to be left out. London has been narrated by a practically endless number of creative writers, from a huge variety of different points of view and the city is – in practice as well as symbolically – a mobile urban landscape that, to make things even worse, tends to be prey to unpredictable urban metamorphosis. Colombino proves fully aware of the intrinsic dissipation and constitutional dishomogeneity of the fictional paradigm she is analyzing, but at the same time she exhibits a very clear awareness of the direction she is taking when choosing to focus on a definite time span (from the 1950s to today) and moving from J. G. Ballard to Zadie Smith. In between them, authors such as Geoff Dyer, Michael Moorcock, Peter Ackroyd, Iain Sinclair, Geoff Ryman, Tom McCarthy and Michael Bracewell naturally bring the reader to reflect on some features of London architecture, from the sculptures of Rachel Whiteread to the buildings of Richard Rogers, from the documentary filmmaking of Patrick Keiller to the bizarre urban philosophy of *Archigram*.

Among the writers and understandably enough, much space is devoted to J. G. Ballard. Presented, and with good reasons, as a foundational figure (“the initiator of the interest in the relationship between architecture and the body in contemporary British literature”), Ballard seems to show in a very explicit way how London incubates disaster, producing apocalyptic transformations that propagate in the body of the city in the same way as infections. A godfather and a master for many of the other mentioned London writers, Ballard opens and closes the volume, creating a symbolic circle that has its own coherence.

At least two of the authors, in Colombino’s list, are directly connected to Ballard’s artistic and human profile. Michael Moorcock is the first one, with particular reference to his *Mother London* (1988) as a parable on the consequences of the Blitz on the architecture of both bricks and souls composing the city and on the scars left on the urban landscape thereafter (87). The novel is analyzed in Chapter II – Part II. Quite meaningfully, this section of Colombino’s study is titled “Ruins and Memory”, and it is not surprising that Moorcock and Sinclair are mentioned together. Iain Sinclair is in fact the other author deeply belonging to Ballard’s legacy. Currently known as a psychogeographer and a walker, Sinclair has in fact produced, between the beginning of the 90s and today, a number of books (and films) that interlace reflections on history, architecture, politics, literature and art, and that can be easily all chapters of the same journey, a sort of personal “London epic”. Colombino herself is aware of this aspect of Sinclair’s fiction if she suggests that spatial representation 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" (101).

Though less closely analyzed, also the other creative authors chosen by Colombino contribute to the representation of London as a multifarious space/place, a rhizomatic architecture of bricks and bodies, labyrinthine and disorienting, hybridizing the real and the imaginative shape of the city. The most relevant thematic guidelines are developed by means of comparison between different representations. While reflecting on the consequences of Thatcher's politics as well as on the degenerative urban evolution in the 1980s, Colombino evokes images from Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* as well as from 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). In the same way, in her last chapter (Part I – "Islands and Rifts"), she compares J. G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* and *Millennium People* with Geoff Ryman's vision of the relationship between contemporary architecture and society" (142). Finally, simplifying a little and possibly putting aside the legacy and formulae of science fiction genre, Ballard's *The Drowned World* is related to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, because "The London he [Ballard] describes clearly evokes Conradian settings and concerns" (47).

On the whole, Colombino's study appears excellent both in terms of critical references and in the precise and very wide selection of creative artists mentioned and analyzed. It is of course always possible, in this kind of study, to suggest implementations and names to be added (I would have liked more women, for example, and maybe some more space given to authors such as Rachel Lichtenstein, Will Self, Martin Amis, Chris Petit, Neil Gaiman, China Mieville, and others, but as ever the list could be endless, according to one's own favorite readings ...). At the same time, Colombino's selection holds tight, and it serves the purposes of her study, proposing the image of London as a set of architectural and literary paradigms interlacing in a sort of "organic" pattern where the factual conditions of urban life and the imaginative representations of the city as a body provisionally converge in the visions of some representative artists.

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