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**Urban Transformations in the U.S.A.**

**Spaces, Communities, Representations**

**[transcript]**



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## Perspectives in Urban American Studies

## City Scripts

### Urban American Studies and the Conjunction of Textual Strategies and Spatial Processes

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BARBARA BUCHENAU AND JENS MARTIN GURR

A great city may be seen as the construction of words as well as stone.

YI-FU TUAN/ "LANGUAGE AND THE MAKING OF PLACE" (686)

The American city is a text created, a story written by people who sought to impose their vision of order, their designs upon the world, and to some extent to control the wilderness into a contained and disciplined environment.

NEIL CAMPBELL AND ALASDAIR KEAN/  
*AMERICAN CULTURAL STUDIES* (160)

Empirically speaking, contemporary urban U.S. America is a space that makes up just about 3% of the national territory, though it is the home of more than 80% of the population.<sup>i</sup> This disjuncture of territorial expansion and demographic density is inversely mirrored, but also replicated in literature, media, and the arts, where the city takes up an astounding amount of narrative and visual space, while the rural and the anti-urban function as tightly woven and emotionally powerful asides. In the public imagination—in the United States and abroad—contingencies and contradictions apparently rule the representation of urban spaces and urban lifestyles. Cities that look and feel like Los Angeles or other major U.S. American cities seem ubiquitous and yet exceptional.<sup>ii</sup> Found in the classics of the Hollywood *noir* and continually reframed in global screen cul-

ture as well as in urban theory, these cities are represented in scenarios of urbanization and urban transformation that are glorious and fearful at the same time.<sup>iii</sup>

While it is tempting to follow the work of scholars such as Edward Soja and Mike Davis, who have highlighted urban blight and post-metropolitan unrest in L.A., this essay is not so much interested in urban critique and the dystopian character of many artistic representations of the contemporary city. We accordingly will not inquire whether Mike Davis' *noir* aesthetic or Soja's posturban sense of crisis manifest themselves in representations of New Orleans, Quebec and Port-au-Prince. Neither will we ask how the awareness of urban crisis might change when the focus is shifted to the deindustrialization and depopulation of the Rust Belt. Within these frames we would expect to find a public imagination concerned with and about the ethnicization and resegregation of urban spaces, as we do most noticeably in the cities of California, though also in Vancouver, Atlanta, and New York. For the purposes of this paper, we instead want to study American moments of faith in the city more closely, inquiring to what extent this faith owes its strength to the media, to literature and cultural production.

When we consider the particular dynamics of North American urban development as well as the subtle powers of anti-urban imaginaries on the continent, it would seem that an analytical focus on North American urbanity and its scripts – its proscriptive and descriptive systems of reading and writing—might be able to yield a novel conjunction of narrative and urban theory, allowing for fundamental insights into the mediation of and between social process and urban form.<sup>iv</sup> Is it possible to relate fundamental strategies of textual representation to key processes of urban development? The current turn to stories in the field of urban planning seems to suggest as much (Sandercock; Throgmorton). But how can this be done and what would the assumption of analogies between textual practice, social process and urban form entail?

## URBAN STUDIES, AMERICAN STUDIES, URBAN AMERICAN STUDIES?

As Miles Orvell and Klaus Benesch have recently stated, “cities have become both the nemesis and the laboratory of human life in the new millennium” (xi). And Andrew Ross (in his contribution to Orvell and Benesch's volume *Rethinking the American City*) indicates that faith and anxiety are equally pivotal to U.S. American concepts of the city and of urbanity.<sup>v</sup> The fascination and the fear that is affiliated with North American urban spaces is matched by utopic as

well as dystopic discursive modes, which accompany recent discussions of the erasure of North American rurality and the supposedly unchallenged hegemony of North American urbanity (Soja *Postmodern Geographies*). Regarding these conflictive conjunctions, our question is the following: how can recent turns as well as more or less unchallenged paradigms in another multidisciplinary field—urban research—help to answer a few of the most pressing questions in the fields of North American literary, cultural, medial, and historical scholarship? What are the prospects of bringing American studies' current focus on media, materiality and knowledge into a structured conversation with another field's increasing attention to story, narrative and space?

Urban research is characterized by a far greater interdisciplinarity than American Studies—it brings together researchers from fields as diverse as engineering, urban planning, the social sciences, and the humanities. Recently, however, urban research has begun to engage with the concerns American Studies scholarship (or North American Studies, as we call it in the context of the University Alliance Ruhr—an alliance that allows for the cooperation and exchange of students, faculty and research between TU Dortmund University, the Ruhr University Bochum and the University of Duisburg-Essen). Not unlike American Studies, urban research focuses on space and place. Cities are its core matter, just as North American Studies have the North American continent as their major object of inquiry. American Studies, of course, has sought to overcome this spatial limitation and so has urban research. The transnational turn in American Studies finds its counterpart in Urban Studies' assumption that the contrast between city and country, the distinctions between the urban and the rural that had previously served to delimit the field, have been softened, erased and made inconsequential by global urbanization.<sup>vi</sup>

Thus, while the field of American Studies has long been widely interdisciplinary, this is truer still of the field of Urban Studies, which cannot even be said to constitute an established discipline in the institutional sense. What is more, given the fact that, in an urbanized world, virtually any discipline will have something to contribute to urban research, Urban Studies is a scattered and dispersed field of research—so much so that it may not be a “field” at all, as Frank Eckardt lamented a few years ago. The field of urban research has come to include much more than all aspects of material form. Beyond architecture, infrastructure and technology, urban researchers with disciplinary homes in the social sciences, the natural sciences, public health, the fields of engineering, planning, design and the humanities investigate the mobility of goods, people, information, and urbanity. They explore the cognitive and the affective sides of condensed human settlements, and they continue to investigate the social,

political and cultural dynamics of urban spaces. Thus, urban researchers foster faith in smart, sustainable and global cities, while simultaneously highlighting urban vulnerability, dwelling on the risks of the particular condensation that is the hallmark of cities and urban lifestyles. From the perspective of urban North America and its regionally unspecific partner in academia, the interdisciplinary openings of recent spatial and story turns in American studies and in urban studies challenge us to pay more attention to questions of form and shape as they affect both, narrativity and the built environment. Focusing on North American urbanity, we need to develop a better understanding of the conjunctions between matters of materiality and matters of media, narrative and representation. We can do so, we suggest, by fostering a structured conversation between narrative theory, media theory and urban theory.

The scholarship assembled in this volume has investigated the conjunctions of materiality and representation in ways that suggest the need for further structured conversations between American Studies and the field of urban research. It examines how pivotal urban transformations in the U.S.A. manifest themselves in the physical design and the actual usage of spaces, in the make-up and interaction of communities, in cultural practices, and finally in urban imaginaries. Exploring the three dimensions of spatial, communal and representational change while probing current urban, ethnic, literary, cultural, and medial theories, this collection of essays has sought to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of urban and metropolitan transformation processes in the Western world at large. Thus, our research also takes comparative perspectives into account—e.g. early industrial as well as post-industrial urban transformations in North America and Europe, “smart cities” and the impact of information and communication technology on urban developments, the role of culture in processes of urban innovation and renewal, frontier cities, border cities, and divided cities, the “provincialization” of American urbanity in the light of global megacities, etc.

This collection of essays invites future research that can bring two theses into conversation, the first of them developed in the field of cultural studies and the second in the field of the social sciences, each of them having become crucially important for the other.

- The first thesis assigns a central role in “place-making” to cultural narratives and argues that they are central to the persuasive (re-)branding of cities or former industrial sites undergoing redevelopment. This new faith in narratives has provoked a broad and sustained “story turn” in urban planning (Throgmorton, Sandercock; van Hulst).

- The other thesis holds that urban culture can be regarded as the engine of contemporary North America, with cities as the major sites and topics of cultural production and consumption as well as of cultural, social and political progress. This thesis has led to a burst of research on the city in American studies (Judd/Simpson; McDonald; see also Stein).

Dolores Hayden’s *The Power of Place* (1995) has shown that both theses can be productively rethought in conjunction with each other. The wide acceptance of the cultural constructedness of social realities that followed the paradigm shift introduced by Henri Lefebvre’s *La production de l’espace* (1974, Engl. 1991) did carry insights about the social and narrative fabrication of cities into the heart of urban research (e.g. Tuan 686). But these insights are not without complications, as Deborah Stevenson has argued in her critique of the story turn in urban planning. Transformations that have been quantitatively and qualitatively measured and categorized as urban growth, sprawl, shrinkage, depletion, and repurposing deserve to be reassessed with a focus on their manifold scripts and contradictory narratives, in order to develop a critical understanding of their complexity. Here, the later theoretical work of Juri Lotman provides crucial incentives.<sup>vii</sup> Studying urbanity as the result of inchoate and contradictory cultural processes introduces non-linearity and multi-directionality into the current debate on the so-called “intrinsic logic” of specific cities (Löw/Berking) and provides for a critical intervention into current uses of narrative and creative art in urban planning.

We also seek to do justice to the two equally prominent but apparently contradictory notions about the role of the urban in North America and their support of quite distinctive national projects: On the one hand, the strong belief (shared by many readers and writers, as well as planners and sociologists around the globe) that North America was the paradigmatic urban realm and that the American city was the quintessential city. This faith in the American city is often brought up in national discussions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and justice, but also of wealth, consumption, leisure and learning. On the other hand, there is the long political tradition of “Jeffersonian” urban skepticism and agrarian/rural democracy. In this historically pervasive and affectively persuasive conceptualization of North America as an anti-urban realm, as wilderness and open space, ideas about race, class and gender, as well as about democracy, imperialism and exceptionalism, took shape.<sup>viii</sup>

## WHY LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES?

### Literature and Literary Studies as Alternative Forms for Generating Knowledge on Cities

The notion of the “knowledge of literature” (Hörisch) or the production of knowledge in and through literature is conceptually central to our proposal (e.g. Fluck; Gymnich/Nünning; Felski; Gurr “Without contraries”). What is the achievement of literature and literary texts as forms of knowledge in their own right and as forms of producing, storing and transmitting knowledge? It has repeatedly been argued that the ways in which literary texts represent knowledge (or produce it in the first place) differ thoroughly from those of discursive/expository texts (e.g. Glomb/Horlacher; Hörisch). Specific literary procedures therefore become “devices for articulating truth” (Felski 84). Elements of genre and of literary modeling more generally play a central role: how and to what extent do literary texts (and, arguably, especially poetic texts) work differently from discursive texts? What is the specific cognitive gain in narrative models of urban complexity, as opposed to the currently dominant quantitative models? What, ultimately, can the study of complex urban systems and their development learn from literary and cultural studies?<sup>ix</sup> One answer may be the insight that individual psychological responses to a given urban environment—human desires, hopes and fears—are irreducibly crucial to understanding that environment. Urban literary and cultural studies can contribute an understanding of precisely those elements of the urban that cannot be measured, modeled, classified, or studied in terms of information theory. From the point of view of practical planning, this may mean that what can be planned is very often not what will make a place distinctive. Literature, we argue, may serve as an alternative form of “modeling” that is extremely responsive to space as a place of “dwelling” and “belonging” (Bieger).

If we regard “scenario building” and the testing of the impact of alternative parameter settings on a given system as crucial functions of urban systems modeling, further parallels emerge. According to a view formulated by, among others, Kenneth Burke, Dieter Wellershoff, Wolfgang Iser, or, somewhat more recently, Stefan Horlacher and Stefan Glomb, one of the central functions of literature is to serve as a form of “symbolic action” (*sensu* Burke), as a social experiment free from the constraints of everyday life. In Wellershoff’s classic formulation, literature serves as a “space of simulation for alternative behavior in rehearsal at reduced risk” (57, our translation). Literature allows its readers to symbolically try out in fiction different scenarios or potential solutions for key

societal issues.<sup>x</sup> Kenneth Burke’s notion of “Literature as Equipment for Living” is a related concept, according to which any work of literature has the social function of being an attempt at naming a situation and coming to terms with it. In this sense, literature can be seen as an assembly of case studies in naming situations and in solving problems—an arsenal of strategies for dealing with situations developed in fiction and applied in life.

The views of Jürgen Link, Winfried Fluck, or Hubert Zapf are also helpful here, since they discuss the functions of literature in the system of culture as a “history of its functions.”<sup>xi</sup> Following Zapf’s suggestive terminology in his triadic model (*Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie* 63ff.), literature can serve as form of critical cultural diagnosis (“critical meta-discourse”), as a “reintegrating inter-discourse,” which re-integrates into the cultural whole what is otherwise repressed or marginalized. Finally, it may serve as an “imaginative counter-discourse,” which develops alternatives and thus entails a utopian potential.<sup>xii</sup> This last notion reframes Wellershoff’s view of literature as a realm in which options for the future can be tried out. It also productively ties in with the recent strand of urban research that highlights the role of narratives in urban planning and urban development (Throgmorton *Rhetorical Construction / “Global-Scale Web;”* Sandercock; van Hulst). While Zapf speaks of literature as an “imaginative counter-discourse,” Sandercock uses remarkably similar terms to treat the role of narratives in developing and fostering alternative scenarios: “Stories and storytelling can be powerful agents or aids in the service of change, as shapers of a new imagination of alternatives.”<sup>xiii</sup>

It is not hard to see that “stories” can play a powerful role in urban developments. Take the case of ambitious and large-scale urban development projects such as the re-use of former industrial or port areas, where stories have been used to project a *genius loci*, or to suggest a specific form of urbanity. It is hardly surprising, then, that developers in such large-scale projects occasionally commission literary works for the specific purpose of supporting future scenarios.<sup>xiv</sup> We believe that there is an untapped potential for literary and cultural studies here. While the role of narratives in urban planning and development has received significant attention in planning theory, this is hardly true to the same extent for literary and cultural studies with their specific competence in the analysis of narratives. There is, as yet, no substantial narratology of urban planning and development.<sup>xv</sup>



## INVERTING PRIORITIES

### From Representations of Urban Change to the Scripting of Urban Pasts, Presents and Futures

Representations of the city have, of course, been widely studied, but the normative ways of scripting the city, of rewriting and adapting cityscapes for new purposes and different users as well as audiences, have only recently come into focus. The essays in this volume invite us to assess the impact of U.S. American urbanization and urban change on representations of urban life and its spaces. They also encourage us to inquire into the narrative and medial processes that have made and undone cities. We therefore attempt to map the field of medial and discursive imaginaries of cities as well as of the urban(e) on the basis of insights gained from our work on U.S. American urban transformations. While our earlier MERCUR project, on which this volume is based, took urban phenomena as a given and studied their representations in texts, the media and politics, we now propose to reverse those priorities and study the ways in which urban transformations are initiated and shaped by texts.

For this change of analytical perspective, cues can be taken from paradigmatic periods of citiness and urban renewal that would be unthinkable without the narrative and media innovations that accompanied them. To name just a few of these:

- In the twenty-first century, cities have become, in the words of Chris Barker: “the electronic hubs of a new global information economy” (418, with reference to Castells). The new social media are expressive of citiness; at the same time, they ease its sprawl into rural regions and across the globe
- In the later twentieth century, NGOs such as Greenpeace came into existence. These organizations are thoroughly tied to innovative North American urban spaces, even though they heavily tap into pastoral traditions to battle against the technological exploitation of non-urban regions (e.g. Drennig)
- With the rise of mechanical reproduction and electrification at the turn of the twentieth century, printed matter claimed and literally overran urban sites, as Walter Benjamin famously remarked of Paris (171/72). In North America, photographers and artists were particularly drawn to the multi-lingual nature of the lettered cities and their interdependent trajectories of liberation and segregation

- In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the serialized writings of the muckrakers contributed to the ascent of the magazine industry, helping to invent medleys of journalism and fiction that drew attention to the dark sides of industrialization and urbanization. But muckraking equally nourished dreams of urban redemption, enlightenment and fulfillment
- In the late eighteenth century, the Federalist Papers brought New York newspapers to prominence when they defended, promoted and popularized the US Constitution. Along the way, they helped to establish the infrastructure for long-distance communication as well as concepts of imagined community (see Kelleter *Amerikanische Aufklärung*)
- Beginning in the seventeenth century, North American settler and frontier cities became the home of a transcultural scribal and material culture; in addition, they saw the rise of creolized scientific discourses (Gitlin/Berglund/Arenson)

Each one of these medial and cultural phenomena is tied to North American urbanization and urban renewal. Not one of them would make sense without the growth and change of cities and urbanized regions.

Accordingly, we work with the hypothesis that because today’s new media developments have a profound impact on both the city (“smart” or “digital cities”) and the perception of cities (“the mediated city”), the importance of the mediatization of the city today is unprecedented, and it is therefore a unique moment for an inquiry into the scripting of the North American city throughout history. Today, the new social media permit an unprecedented global access to North American cities and sites—even as electronically underserved rural American regions move farther into the periphery of national and global discourses and developments. Since the twentieth century, radio and TV have interlinked cities and the countryside more closely than ever before; throughout the nineteenth century, newspapers and pamphlets helped to disseminate notions of the North American city; even earlier, books, maps and illustrations aided the rise of the frontier city; and in precolonial times, artwork and tales sustained visions of cities in North America. Assuming, with Manfred Faßler, that “urban developments are historically inseparable from media evolutions” (21, our translation), distinctive forms of mediating the urban deserve to be understood in their historical specificity. Attention to media evolutions can reveal the situatedness of American cities and urban visions in relations of power and hegemony, of commodification and commerce. Given the high degrees of media access and media production and their comparatively open culture of discourse, the medial

and discursive preformation of urban life and urban perceptions can be said to be especially pervasive and powerful in North American cities, making them privileged sites of exploration for the type of research we propose.<sup>xvi</sup>

Observing these close ties between media, narratives and (urban) spaces, a fresh look at current literary, cultural, historical, and medial methodologies is warranted. Can we connect analytical insights into processes of invention, imagination, and simulation with our knowledge about how prefiguration, control, anticipation, and restraint function and occur? In our present research landscape, there is a marked divide that needs to be overcome. Scholarship on the liberating impulse of imagination, invention and simulation needs to be brought into conversation with scholarship on the controlling and restraining functions of literary and medial prefiguration and anticipation.<sup>xvii</sup> Learning from the spatial turn in American Studies and the turn to narrative and stories in Urban Studies, we assume that processes of scripting are central to the ways in which humanity has built its environment. We take the concept of scripting from Walter Benjamin, connecting it to recent considerations about the role of scripts in media culture. Benjamin ruminated in the 1920s that

[s]cript—having found, in the book, a refuge in which it can lead an autonomous existence—is pitilessly dragged out into the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos. This is the hard schooling of its new form. (171)

For Benjamin, western urbanization is wedded to a textual, textural and narrative overload that has only become possible with technological reproducibility:

before a contemporary finds his way clear to opening a book, his eyes have been exposed to such a blizzard of changing, colorful, conflicting letters that the chances of his penetrating the archaic stillness of the book are slight. Locust swarms of print, which already eclipse the sun of what the city dwellers take for intellect, will grow thicker with each succeeding year. (172)

Script, for the modern subject, appears to have been a city's most visible and most confounding layer and it seems to have hindered the modern subject's access to the city as much as it disabled him/her from studying literature as an autonomous art form. Moving forward from this disconcerting vision of the coincidence of script and city into current debates about the anthropocene and its insights into the collision of human agency and geological and climatological processes (Whitehead; Heggland), it can be said that forms of description, inscription, rescription, and prescription have become central to the ways in which

people and territory intersect. These scripting processes are never teleological or mono-directional, despite the degree of intentionality that is at their core.

Suggesting that scripting processes play a central role in the (trans)formation of cities, we hold that procedures familiar from the fields of storytelling and cinematography—acts of scripting the storyline and framing the setting—are central to the making and shaping of cities and city life. Basic elements of film scripts, such as “structural templates” for “plot construction and characterization,” as well as the ensuing selective focalizations and directive texts, help to set up convincing or intriguing narratives for and about concrete cities and urban projects (Bordwell 11, Buchenau). This type of research might be pursued in three arenas of cultural production and consumption that acknowledge the structural and functional analogies between city and text while allowing insights into the narrative overdetermination of the North American city. Scripts in the form of narratives and medial frames lead to *re-descriptions* of a city's past in the construction of (alternative) urban heritages, descriptions of its present in modes that look like “the plotting of the everyday,” as well as *prescriptions* for its future. They relate urban spaces to new purposes and urban populations to new social dynamics, making aspects of the city accessible to different users as well as to previously unaddressed audiences.

## ON THE COINCIDENCE OF TEXTUAL PROCESS AND URBAN FORM

Looking forward from the findings of the research assembled in this volume, three paradigmatic forms of urban change appear to have shaped North American cities and their representations throughout history.

- Urban growth has fostered a series of sprawls (frontier/ suburban/ post-metropolitan) and multiple forms of repurposing (culturally, politically, socially, and economically speaking) while simultaneously galvanizing ethnic communities, enforcing racialization, creating diasporic communities, and fostering forms of condensation—ethnic, gendered, economic, aesthetic, and otherwise.
- Shrinkage—agrarian, industrial, as well as postindustrial—has equally initiated multiple forms of genteel, cosmopolitan and gentrified repurposing commonly known by terms such as the great migration, mass immigration and white flight. These processes contain striking elements of spatial and social, but also artistic and aesthetic inversion like the

urbanization of rural cultural traditions, the gentrification of rural areas, as well as the aesthetization of ethnic and social segregation.

- Various waves of depletion (rural/ inner city/ suburban) have spurred ethnic, racial, as well as functional segregation; have pitted, for instance, suburbia against the urban poor, the novel of manners against the naturalist romance; and have led to riots and gated communities. But they have also fostered forms of creative and productive assemblage such as guerilla gardening, street art, or the musealization of industrial ruins or racial ghettos.

These forms of urban change are recurrent, and they indicate that the story of accelerating urbanization needs to be rethought. The deployment of terms from the field of the social sciences and urban research to be found in the essays assembled in this collection has allowed for a selectively transdisciplinary intervention into the social production of urban space. These urban transformations can be empirically observed in major historical and present-day American cities and metropolitan regions. But they also provide insights into the multiple interdependences between American cities and processes of text-based identity creation in the face of hybridization and mediatization, ultimately demanding a detailed examination of how urban spaces are constructed through inter- and transcultural communication, literature and art. We propose to conceptualize “condensation,” “inversion” and “assemblage” as three procedures that conjoin texts, cultures and cities. They designate both central patterns of urban change *and* key processes and strategies of representation in urban cultural production and in narratives of the American city.

### Condensation

Condensation is a process through which matter becomes increasingly dense as it becomes less voluminous. It involves both shrinkage in size and growth in intensity as well as complexity. Cities and narrative imaginaries equally imply and require condensation.<sup>xviii</sup> Both have only limited space at their disposal and they need to accommodate a myriad of elements in this limited space. Forms of condensation replicate and facilitate the formation of multi-layered, complex semantic as well as spatial networks, in which various elements, developments, interests, and ideologies meet, compete, intersect, fuse, or collide. In metropolitan areas, ethnically defined communities and spaces such as ghettos and ethnic quarters thrive on and suffer from strategies of condensation, because they attract large numbers of people with similar interests without allowing for the

necessary growth and diversification. A detailed study of this process allows insights into the conceptualization of ethnic and diasporic cities, aesthetic techniques of representing complexity and various forms of city marketing and the production of urban heritage.<sup>xix</sup>

### Inversion

Inversion is a process by which an element is turned upside down or inside out, reversed, made to face the opposite direction, made to mean the opposite thing, or possibly upset and overthrown. City scripts—no matter whether they are sketched by city planners or artists—are subject to a more or less acknowledged logic of inversion. The space of the inner cities for instance—for a long time written off as lost to decay, poverty and crime—has in many cities come to be characterized by procedures of inversion through revitalization and gentrification and the outward migration of lower-class urban minorities. These planned and spontaneous processes have been closely accompanied by manifold communal and artistic projects aiming at charting, monitoring, or even steering the changes. The involvement of writers and artists in these processes has a history as avant-garde cultural and artistic practices originally developed in connection with urbanization. Hence, the countercultural poets of the 1950s and ‘60s in San Francisco and New York, who stopped foregrounding the elaborate “written” character of poetry to emphasize speech and improvisation as basis and measure of poetic production, took poetry in “performances” from the private study and the university into the bar or onto the street. Thus, they not only widened and in part changed the audience for poetry, but also transformed mundane city spaces into artistic venues. This direct interference with what Lefebvre would have called *perceived* and *conceived space* revived and transformed, i.e. inverted it into actively *lived space*.

A comparable kind of connected inversion of representational strategies that invert and thereby revitalize the state of a city can be seen in a recent medialization of a city, namely David Simon’s and Eric Overmeyer’s acclaimed *Treme*. This HBO drama series uses the strategies of representing a region, i.e. of local color, to fashion an image of New Orleans supporting the re-construction of the city in the aftermath of Katrina (see Freitag; Ehrenhalt). Inversion is also a concept that can appropriately describe the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to northern cities. This change from rural to urban life entailed a reversal of life styles and value systems, which found its artistic expression in the exuberant art and literature of the Harlem Renaissance. Yet, the embrace of the “emancipatory promise of urban modernity” (Dubey 4)

was soon inverted in books like Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946). By the beginning of the 1970s, African American literature foreshadowed how "the century-long stream of black migration out of the rural South into the urban North began to reverse direction" (Dubey 4), and how the "vision of the city as the promised land of opportunity" finally became untenable for African Americans at the end of the decade (Dubey 5). This inversion was accompanied by the "emergence of alarmist accounts of urban crisis that were coded in decisively racial terms." Narratives about the supposed "collapse of black cultural values and community" (Dubey 5) can be read as practices of race (Markus/Moya) that folded the inner city and its population into one. These practices were taken on and ironically inverted by black writers like, e.g. Mat Johnson in *Drop* (2000) and *Hunting in Harlem* (2003).

### Assemblage

Assemblage is a process that brings together elements that were previously unconnected and that maintain their original function while obtaining new functions in their assembled state. In literary and aesthetic theory we have come to think of artworks as objects that are produced as assemblages—combining different materials and materialities, citing distinctive contexts, yet repurposing each item by drawing on and revitalizing its earlier function. An assemblage, according to Deleuze/Guattari's erratic approach to systems analysis and its pragmatic explanation by Manuel DeLanda, is built around ideas of fluidity, exchangeability and multiple, often incommensurable, functionalities. It describes units that apparently function as a whole, but that are compiled with parts that have been "yanked" out of a variety of not necessarily compatible systems and "plugged" into a new context in which they assume a vital function that might be different and even incompatible with their function in the other system. Each item, however, does not lose earlier meanings and purposes through its integration into the assemblage. In city narratives, assemblage is particularly highlighted whenever improbable junctures between forms, media and themes envision simultaneously, for instance, urban decay as well as urban biodiversity, procedures of spatial injustice as well as modes of empowerment and liberation.<sup>xx</sup> In cities, procedures of assemblage are today particularly noticeable in contexts of repurposing and reinscription, which have become the hallmark of western postindustrial cities. But it stands to reason that this procedure has been driving urban growth, sprawl and depletion all along.

These cultural practices of condensation, assemblage and inversion lend themselves to a heuristic classification of most urban phenomena, and they

highlight the way in which urban processes, developments and interventions are fundamentally initiated in the discourses of cultural production. Moreover, it can be argued that "condensation" (by means of layering, plurimedial experiments, multiple references, and other textual strategies in the compression of meaning), "inversion" (for instance of generic conventions) as well as "assemblage" (in the sense of a montage of distinct, seemingly irreconcilable genres, conventions, styles, or techniques) have all been central to attempts at textually rendering "cityness," in order to simulate what urban sociologist Gerald D. Suttles has called "the cumulative texture of local urban culture" (283). Such literary innovations have frequently evolved in response to the challenge of representing urbanity (Gurr "The Literary Representation"). In light of the reversal of perspective, we here argue that these analogies between urban processes and textual strategies not only make these textual procedures highly suggestive in attempts at rendering the city, but may also account for the powerful ways in which "scripts" have continued to shape cityness. Addressing these processes on the basis of a methodology derived from the field of literary and cultural studies will foster a better understanding of the multiple roles that literary and discursive texts have played in the construction and transformation of cities in North America. If we want to move beyond the critical consensus about the socially produced, culturally imagined—indeed scripted—nature of the North American city, the emplacement of *Scripting/ Schrift* in North American cities deserves more thorough attention. Etymologically speaking, scripts are pieces and systems of writing; they are lexical, alphabetical and technical short-hands and typographies; they are known as part and counterpart, script and rescript; and they are understood as social roles, but also as theatrical and cinematic manuscripts and typescripts, maps and other visual media (*OED*). A focus on scripting processes permits further insights into literature's ability to tentatively build scenarios and thereby preview future actions. Attending to literary and textual logics of condensation, inversion and assemblage gives us a better sense of how communities are inscribed or inscribe themselves into a given city, its history, shape, architecture, and political and social structure. It indicates how the built environment may script and predicate human behavior and social interactions. In addition, scripting also relates North American urban spaces to international political, economic and philosophical traditions that curtail and/or propel urbanization. In this way, scripts open a given place to new purposes, facilitating and enforcing change. They confront city dwellers with contending social dynamics, making aspects of the city and urbanity in/accessible to different users. In this capacity, scripts can bring in previously unaddressed audiences while antagonizing the authoritative established "reader" of the city.

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## COMMENTS

- <sup>i</sup> Nickerson et al. 29-32. According to the US Census of 2010, 81% of the population lives in urban areas. This scenario does not seem to be unique to the U.S.A. The Canadian census data for 2001 and 2006 render similar results: 80% of the Canadian population lives in cities (cited by Lapointe 1). In the Caribbean and in Latin America urbanites also rule: here 75% of the population was classified as urban in 1999 (see United Nations).
- <sup>ii</sup> For Ed Soja the urban is ubiquitous in postmodern times, but he also finds that the so-called *postmetropolis* might be a phenomenon that is hard to envision anywhere else but on the U.S. American west coast (1995). For a critical discussion of the ubiquity hypothesis see also Dirksmeier 14. For an

- exemplary presentation of U.S. American cities as both exceptional and ubiquitous see Chakrabarty's *A Country of Cities*.
- <sup>iii</sup> As Mark Shiel points out, the film noir that originated in Hollywood and that emerged from the lack of understanding and the unease produced by the immense, sprawling growth of Los Angeles.
- <sup>iv</sup> The concept 'script/*Schrift*' is productively employed in many disciplines that are relevant to our inquiry. For the formative impact of script/*Schrift* on the production of "connective structures" supporting the formation of cultural memory see Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, esp. 87-122 (our translation); for the social complications of written communication – delay of understanding, social redundancy as well as a proliferation of new social connections, the illusionary presence of the past and the future – see Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 249-91; for the role of texts and writing in social inquiry itself see Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 121-28 and Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 10-19. On the concept of "scripts" as used in cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence see Schank/Abelson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding*; for scripts and cultural models as guides of individual and collective human behavior, see Quinn/Holland, "Culture and Cognition"; for a compelling case study on how cultural scripts and models support or impede action, see Ungar, "Knowledge, Ignorance and the Popular Culture."
- <sup>v</sup> Andrew Ross notes that in the U.S. there is an old tradition of regarding "cities as sites of salvation" (grounded in John Winthrop's famous image of the city upon a hill), a younger tradition of fearing "[t]he infernal Victorian city of industry," while a still younger tradition seeks "to redeem" people caught in the conundrum of industrial city life "through environmental uplift" and "through planning aimed at decongestion" (30).
- <sup>vi</sup> See Lenger 454-62; Sieverts; Davis. Peter Dirksmeier has reviewed the scholarly debate. According to his summary, recent urban research operates with the consensus that concepts such as "city," "suburbia" and "country" are no longer adequate to grasp the situation: "Stadt und Land haben sich demnach funktional, sozial und kulturell in einer Weise angenähert, die räumliche Differenzierungen als stabile räumliche Ordnung des Sozialen zum Verschwinden gebracht hat" (11). Dirksmeier contends, though, that, for one thing, the hegemony of cities over the countryside, of urbanity over rurality, is best seen as a consistent feature of at least European history since the Middle Ages. Additionally, he surmises that lifestyles that coherently bring together and accommodate urban and rural elements might be the true hallmark of European modern landscapes (12) and that the theoretical conse-



- quence needs to be a theory of urbanity that replaces the spatial dimension through recourse to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus—redefining urbanity as a change in the hysteresis effect of habitus (17). In their introduction to *Rethinking the American City*, Miles Orvell and Klaus Benesch suggest that Mike Davis' vision for future urbanity is in part utopian, because it promises an ecological turn that will set up new “well-defined boundaries between city and countryside” (xii). For the discussion of one global economic context of what has been called the peri-urbanization of rural landscapes see Bryceson/Kay/Mooij.
- vii Lotman points out that “one of the foundations of the semiosphere is its heterogeneity. Sub-systems with variable speeds of cyclic motion are drawn together on a temporal axis” (114).
- viii These distinctive notions have been juxtaposed most prominently by Richard Wade in his 1959 study *The Urban Frontier*. His study eloquently reflects the postwar turn to the city of the whole multidiscipline of “American Studies”. The contemporary TV series *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-06) seems to play rather wistfully with the postwar, frontier-driven ideas about U.S. American urbanization outlined by Wade.
- ix For the importance of genre and literary modelling see especially the GRK 1886/1 “Literarische Form: Geschichte und Kultur ästhetischer Modellbildung” at the University of Münster. For the “mechanics” of literary as opposed to discursive texts see Gurr, “Two Romantic Fragments.” For the explanatory power of narrative models of urban complexity see Gurr, “Urban Complexity” and “The Modernist Poetics.”
- x See also Glomb and Horlacher, *passim*. However, literary texts frequently do not attempt to solve a problem by imposing an answer—and even if they do, they are often less interesting for the answer they propose than for having asked the question and raised awareness for the problem.
- xi “Funktionsgeschichte;” for an overview see Gymnich/Nünning; for one influential account, see Fluck.
- xii See also Zapf 2001 as well as several contributions in Zapf, *Kulturökologie und Literatur*.
- xiii Sandercock 25; see also van Hulst, 303 *et passim*. According to Bieger, a central distinction between literary narratology and the narratology employed in the social sciences can be found in the visionary and temporal thrust attributed to stories. Whereas literary narratology thinks of stories as primarily “restorative,” the social sciences tend to treat stories as profoundly “proactive” (21). Thomas Heise has captured the difference in hierarchical rather than temporal terms. He speaks of a “top down” reading of cities by “sociologists and planners” and a “bottom up” writing of cities “by writers who speak about the experience of social and spatial isolation, about the experience of being an object of scrutiny, suspicion, and fear” (6). For our purposes it seems best to keep these competing notions of literature at play and to retain Wellershoff's notion of the “reduced risk” (57): literary scenario building might be tentative and playful, but it is so consequential, so potentially liberating, precisely because it does not directly risk anything.
- xiv We owe this reference to Lieven Ameel of Helsinki University. In his presentation “Hooked on the Waterfront: The Zoning of Stories in Jätkäsaari from a Narrative Theory Perspective” at the conference on “Writingplace: Literary Methods in Architectural Research and Design” at TU Delft in November 2013, he mentioned the novel commissioned in the course of redeveloping the former port area Jätkäsaari in Helsinki. This need for good stories is also addressed by Löw and Berking in their discussion of the “intrinsic logic” that is unique to each city.
- xv A promising path has been projected in the collection of essays *Urban Plots, Organizing Cities*, edited by Giovanna Sonda, Claudio Coletta and Francesco Gabbi. This volume pursues a sociological perspective on narratives, however.
- xvi As de Waal shows, the new social media have even been conceptualized as urban media. See also Butler/Gurr.
- xvii Johannes Voelz discusses two options available for New American studies scholarship—utter distrust of your material (interpellation) or thorough faith (reification).
- xviii For the notion of “density” as central to urban discourses, see Nikolai Roskamm's *Dichte: Eine transdisziplinäre Dekonstruktion*.
- xix See, for instance, Olaf Kaltmeier's edited volume *Selling EthniCity*. Condensation is also a prerequisite of the formation and often the clash of ecological vs. industrial interests, physical vs. virtual realities, public vs. private spaces, business vs. labor concerns, work vs. leisure activities, surveillance and oppression vs. civil rights, etc. When Clifford Geertz speaks of “webs of significance,” which are superimposed onto each other and interlaced in complex ways, North American cityscapes are prime examples of the ensuing condensation. National and transnational migration and exchange as well as globalization connect the condensed webs of an individual city to the wider North American, inter-American, and world-wide webs of condensed signification. A focus on condensation reviews North American urbanity through the lens of heterogeneous, complex systems with a myriad of internal interconnections as well as relations to what lies outside these

systems (like the nation, language, or cultural specificity of the geographic origins of a specific community among the city dwellers).

<sup>xx</sup> A good example can be found in the mixed media text *Exit 43* by Italian American poet Jennifer Scappettone (<http://arcadiaproject.net/jennifer-scappettone-exit-43/>). The format, which places writing and visual imagery into cyberspace, is concerned with illegal, poisonous landfills at a New York junction where Scappettone grew up.

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## Authors

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