Chapter 5

The Immaterial City: Representation, Imagination, and Media Technologies

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I

J.-K. Huysmans's *À Rebours* (*Against Nature*) is a fictional study of a certain type of dandy in the latter part of the nineteenth century, exemplified in the character of its hero, Des Esseintes.[1] Published in 1884, the novel recounts in exquisite detail his love of artifice, his fetishistic obsession with material objects, his often perverse pleasures, and his retreat from the hurly-burly of Paris into a private, interior reality.

As Des Esseintes teeters towards nervous collapse, he turns from his usual literary taste for obscure Latin authors to – surprisingly, perhaps – the works of Charles Dickens. The English writer fails to soothe his nerves as he had hoped. Gradually, however, "an idea insinuated itself in his mind – the idea of turning dream into reality, of travelling to England in the flesh as well as in the spirit, of checking the accuracy of his visions" (p. 132). Impulsively, he packs a trunk, takes a train into central Paris and, in weather foul enough for England, hails a cab.

> . . . his mind conjured up a picture of London as an immense, sprawling, rain-drenched metropolis, stinking of soot and hot iron, and wrapped in a perpetual mantle of smoke and fog. He could see in imagination a line of dockyards stretching away into the distance, full of cranes, capstans, and bales of merchandise . . . Up above, trains raced by at full speed; and down in the underground sewers, others rumbled along, occasionally emitting ghastly screams or vomiting floods of smoke through the gaping mouths of air-shafts. And meanwhile, along every street, big or small, in an eternal twilight relieved only by the glaring infamies of modern advertising, there flowed an endless stream of traffic between two columns of earnest, silent Londoners, marching along with eyes fixed ahead and elbows glued to their sides (pp. 133–4).

Having bought a guide book to London, Des Esseintes seeks refuge from the rain and cold in the Bodega, a cellar in one of the Paris arcades so beloved of Walter Benjamin. It is full of English customers drinking port and sherry.

> His senses dulled by the monotonous chatter of these English people talking to one another, he drifted into a daydream, calling to mind some of Dickens' characters, who were so partial to the rich red port he saw in glasses all about him, and peopling the cellar in fancy with a new

set of customers . . . He settled down comfortably in this London of the imagination, happy to be indoors, and believing for a moment that the dismal hootings of the tugs by the bridge behind the Tuileries were coming from boats on the Thames (p. 138).

From the cellar Des Esseintes moves on to a tavern where, despite months of near fasting, he indulges in what he imagines to be an English meal: oxtail soup, smoked haddock, roast beef and potatoes accompanied by pints of pale ale, Stilton cheese, and rhubarb tart (with porter) rounded off by coffee laced with gin. When the time comes to catch his train, he cannot bring himself to move.

When you come to think of it, I've seen and felt all that I wanted to see and feel. I've been steeped in English life ever since I left home, and it would be madness to risk spoiling such unforgettable experiences by a clumsy change of locality (p. 143).

He gathers together his luggage, his packages, his rugs and his umbrellas, and takes the cab and the train back home.

II

Des Esseintes is able to experience London, a city he has never visited, because he is already familiar with its representation in literature and in paintings. London exists for him as a collection of signs – "smells, weather, citizens, food, and even cutlery" (p. 143) – that connote an idea of the place. The intensity of his imagining may be extreme. Even so, and this is the first reason for starting with Huysmans, this tantalizing passage from *À Rebours* is a reminder that representations have real consequences. The way we experience cities is profoundly shaped by the immaterial city of word, image, and myth.[2] It is through them that we learn not only to see cities, but also how to live in them.

The question is therefore less representations of the city, than mediated pedagogies of urban life. Rather than assuming that there is a real city and then a representation of it, my starting point is that we experience cities as what Henri Lefebvre calls "representational space," and that this space comes into being through the interaction of inextricably entwined realities. The theorist and art practitioner Victor Burgin explains this approach in his book *In/Different Spaces*:

The city in our actual experience is at the same time an actually existing physical environment, and a city in a novel, a film, a photograph, a city seen on television, a city in a comic strip, a city in a pie chart, and so on.[3]

The important point is not just this simultaneity, but above all the productive transactions between urban realities. The traffic between fabric, representation and imagination fuzzies up epistemological and ontological distinctions and, in doing so, produces the city between, the imagined city where we actually live.

III

The second reason for starting with *À Rebours* is because it enables us to see that the immaterial city has its own histories just as much as any actual city.

The Dickensian London conjured up by Des Esseintes seems to refer to the opening of *Bleak House*, with its imagery of fog over the city, gas lamps dimly lighting an implacable November afternoon, and ill-tempered pedestrians negotiating muddy streets behind their umbrellas. Tracing the particular reference is less important, however, than the general observation that novels, at least from the eighteenth century on, helped to produce "the city" as an experiential category for a reading public. The structure and form of the genre disseminated certain ways of seeing of the urban landscape, certain perspectives on the life of its citizens, and so (I would argue) instituted certain structures of imagination. The earliest of these was probably the opposition between rural utopia and urban nightmare. Gradually, this was supplemented and to some extent displaced by the *Bildungsroman* narrative of heroic self-creation in the great city. The logic of Dickens's novels is a search for subterranean networks of community beneath the obscure and irrational surface of the class-divided city. To some extent they also share with the tradition of French novelists from Balzac to Zola an attempt to grasp the social complexity of the city by recording the variety of its demotic idioms and slang.

Behind the particular Dickensian London conjured up by Des Esseintes, then, there stands a sprawling, composite novel-city. As the nineteenth century progressed, this city of texts came to be characterized by frenetic activity and a growing degree of social opacity. Nevertheless, it continued to be peopled by a type of personality that is recognizably and pedagogically urban. From one perspective, the novel's structural openness to the city's multiple points of view and to the Babel of linguistic diversity gives the genre a semblance of democratic inclusiveness, an urban tolerance of difference. Viewed from another angle, the formal organization of this plenitude often appears to embody a powerful will to domination, a desire to subjugate urban heterogeneity to the design of an omnipotent, panoptic narrator. This mix of tolerance and paranoia produced a repertoire of responses to the city, from popular melodramas about master criminals and secret conspiracies to the *flâneur's* contemplative, estheticizing gaze.[4]

Dickens's mid-nineteenth-century London already contained many of these tensions and ambiguities. For all the detail of its description and the acuity of its observation, this city is already modern to the extent that it exists as a mental landscape as well as a geographical space or a complex but ultimately decipherable web of social networks. This is what is brought out by Huysmans in his account of Des Esseintes's relationship to the city. It is a view of an urban imagination that prefigures the representation of the city in the modernism of the early twentieth century.

Forty years on from *À Rebours*, in 1922, T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* shows how completely the city has been absorbed into the mental landscape of the observer. In the poem, London's fog and river and anonymous crowds are still there as they had been in *Bleak House* 70 years earlier. But now the city has become unreal.

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

"The city is a state of mind," wrote the Chicago sociologist Robert Park in 1915. "The forces of the action have become internal," as Raymond Williams observes of James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, like *The Wasteland* published in 1922, "in a way there is no longer a city, there is only a man walking through it."[5]

What is evident in the increasing emphasis on interiority between *Bleak House* and *The Wasteland* or *Ulysses* is a sense that, by the twentieth century, the narratives and images of the nineteenth-century novel were no longer adequate to the new realities of the city. They had been outstripped by the new rhythms and routines instituted by new modes of transport (the train and the automobile), the appearance of artificial lighting, new forms of communication, the rebuilding of many great city centers, and many of the phenomena analyzed by Walter Benjamin – advertising, expositions, department stores, and so forth. It was no longer possible to make sense of this new reality of speed and artifice using the old representational conventions. That is not to say those old forms and genres – and so the old ways of imagining – disappeared overnight. Rather, they were put into question by modes of literary and visual representation that gave expression to the sense that the city had become illegible. The city could not be represented in a single image. It could not be reduced to an encompassing narrative. In a sense, it had become unimaginable. From that crisis of representation were born cubism in painting, stream of consciousness in literature, and movements like constructivism and surrealism. The question they posed was whether "the city" was itself sustainable as a coherent concept or as a category of experience.

IV

Des Esseintes imagines London from Paris. In the 1880s, this existential dislocation was, it seems, still eccentric enough to be worthy of note. By the early decades of the twentieth century it had become almost a norm. Nor was this urban state of mind explored only by artists and writers. It was a way of being both encouraged and managed by new and largely urban technologies of communication: the newspaper, cinema, and, later, broadcasting.

In his 1903 essay "The metropolis and mental life," with Berlin in mind, the sociologist Georg Simmel attempted to explain the crisis of inner life produced by the modern city. This he attributed to a complex and demanding objective world that made unprecedented demands on subjective resources: the "overwhelming fullness of crystallised and impersonalised spirit."[6] The problem was intensified for the many provincial newcomers to the metropolis. With every crossing of the street, argues Simmel, the great city "sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life." Elsewhere, outside the metropolis, "the rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery flows more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly." Unlike the detached *flâneur*, these new migrants were especially susceptible to "the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli."[7]

The typical response to this intensity of urban experience was both defensive and creative: on the one hand, a blasé and expedient relationship to others, on the other, a sometimes extravagant degree of superficial individualization. In the

rapidly growing Berlin of Simmel's day, however, there was another means for managing the illegibility and anxiety of the city. This was the mass circulation newspaper.

In the early twentieth century – and especially in Berlin, apparently[8] – these newspapers were a pedagogic medium that compensated for the impersonality and overstimulation described by Simmel. It provided dislocated city-dwellers with two things. One was a practical guide to surviving, exploiting, and also enjoying the city. The papers advertised jobs, and they listed sporting events and entertainment. The other was a collage of fragmentary stories to be consumed distractedly at home, in the workplace, or on the move in tram or train between them. Mass newspapers packaged a view of the world that not only mirrored, but actually made sense of, their readers' hurried and often uneasy experience of the metropolitan landscape.

Again it was not just through practices of representation that the newspaper shaped people's experiences of the city. They were affected more profoundly by symbolic structures and media technologies. In "The metropolis and mental life," Simmel was not concerned with modern media like the newspaper. Note, however, the terms in which he describes the experience of the metropolis. The modern city-dweller, he suggests, is overwhelmed by "the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions." Might he not equally well be describing the new experience of the movie theater? For Walter Benjamin, like Robert Park a pupil of Simmel's, this experience of remorseless visual stimuli is what created the need for the film theater. Moviegoers and city-dwellers both equally embody the perceptual experience of the man of the crowd as defined by the poet Charles Baudelaire in nineteenth-century Paris: "a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness." Film renders this experience, argues Benjamin. In the new medium, "perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle." In cinema "multiple fragments . . . are assembled under a new law."[9]

This "new law" for assembling multiple fragments in film to create a reality that transcends time and space was the cinematic principle of montage. This takes us back to the normalization of Des Esseintes's curious adventure. For, as the Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg noted in his pioneering study of film spectatorship in 1916, cinematic editing allowed the viewer to have the experience of being "simultaneously here and there." Benjamin's famous description in "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" of the liberating potential of the cinema might thus be read almost as a gloss on Des Esseintes's fantasy trip to London. However, Benjamin sees in the cinema not just the lure of distraction or daydreaming, but an explosive epistemological power. Montage arms cinema with an analytic light that can reveal the labyrinthine constraints of the ordinary, of commonsense knowledge, and so expand the spectator's field of possibilities:

> Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling.[10]

v

Simmel and Benjamin, like Eliot and Joyce, were interested in the city as the locus of modernity. The mass newspaper and the cinema emerged as distinctively modern media. Does that mean that the representations, technologies, and pedagogies I have been describing have now become irrelevant, of interest only to cultural historians? Hasn't everything been changed utterly by the shift from an age of mechanical reproduction (the newspaper, the photograph, the movie) to an age of electronic communication (television, the fax, the Internet)? The question might suggest a different lesson to be learned from the instructive figure of Des Esseintes. From this point of view, he could be read not just as a portent of the transubstantiation of the city into a state of mind, but as prefiguring a solipsistic virtual reality that displaces the physicality of the city and of bodies moving through cities. Personally, I don't believe it. Why not?

Towards the end of *In/Different Spaces*, Victor Burgin talks about the city, cinema, and television. To be specific, he chides Fredric Jameson for structuring his discussion of space allegorically around the cinema, not television. He does so on the grounds of a comparison between the temporalities of the two media, and their relationship to the time of the city.

> The urban dweller who turns away from the image on her or his television screen, to look out of the window, may see the same program playing on other screens, behind other windows, or, more likely, will be aware of a simultaneity of different programs. Returning from this casual act of voyeurism they may "zap" through channels, or "flip" through magazines. Just as Benjamin refers to architecture as appreciated "in a state of distraction", so television and photography are received in much the same way. The cinematic experience is temporally linear. For all that narrative codes may shuffle the pack of events, the spatial modulations that occur in the diegesis are nevertheless successively ordered and experienced as a passage through space and time. The global space-time of television, however, is fractured and kaleidoscopic.[11]

The affinities Burgin notes between television and contemporary urban life could be attributed to changes in the city as well as to changes in the media. The media sociologist Roger Silverstone, for example, believes that too much fuss is made about the twentieth-century city, at the expense of any serious attempt to understand the unspectacular but massive growth of suburbs. As he points out, "for millions, and mostly by choice, the city was too much to bear. It was a place to leave."[12] Like Burgin, however, he is especially interested in the ontological implications of domestically based media like radio, television above all, but increasingly the Internet and other forms of electronic communication. For Silverstone, "suburbia offers a coincidence of the architectural and the televisual." This televisual reality of the suburb then grounds his view that political ideals like Habermas's public sphere are also too city-bound: both backward looking and too literally spatial. The reality of political community in suburbia is less the refeudalization predicted by Habermas than "a new kind of neo-participatory politics based on self-interest and grounded in defensive anxiety."[13] A similar point is made by the media theorist and cultural critic Margaret Morse. A posturban ontology of television, mall and freeway has rendered

any notion of publicness hopeless: "older notions of the public realm and of paramount reality have been largely undermined, and a return to a pre-televisual world of politics, the street, or the marketplace is unlikely."[14]

Historically and sociologically, of course, Burgin, Silverstone, and Morse are right. More people watch television than go to the cinema (even if they watch a lot of films on television.) Fewer people live in city centers than in suburbs – or whatever term fits the sprawling agglomerations spreading across urban regions.

For all that, I still want to defend the cinema as a uniquely powerful prism through which to think the city. For one thing, I think that Burgin is wrong about the temporality of cinema. Of course, the experience of watching a film is temporally linear. But the cinema isn't the experience of a single film, any more than a cinema is the only place films are viewed. Cinema (the introjected cinema that we inhabit and that inhabits us) is the layered and worked over archive of all those narratives, all those images, all those occasions of viewing. Secondly, and more importantly, just as Burgin argues that we should think with television because its temporality is like the "global space-time" on the other side of the urban window (whereas cinema supposedly isn't), Silverstone and Morse too imply that the argument should start from the spatio-temporal homologies between television and urban reality. This is where I disagree. Whereas they seem to assume that the media–city relationship is an ontological one, I go back to Benjamin's account of cinema and insist that we are dealing with an epistemological question. That question, for me, is neither any similarity between geography and medium, nor even urban representations in various genres and media. Rather, it is how to construct a perspective, or a technology, through which to think the city critically.

So, for example, I can agree with Silverstone and Morse that publicness is not now, if it ever was, a matter of face-to-face conversation between citizens in coffeeshop or piazza. For me, though, "the public" doesn't (or shouldn't) refer either to a physical space or to a lost reality or to a dead community. To put it another way, "the public" – like "the city" – refers to the question of community, not the fact of community. It is an immaterial yet effective social force. The public domain is always, inherently, a phantom sphere.[15] In a discussion of public art, Rosalyn Deutsche, with an echo of Simmel and a feminist twist, underlines that it is an epistemological concept: "In the phantom public sphere, man is deprived of the objectified, distanced, knowable world on whose existence he depends and is presented instead with unknowability, the proximity of otherness, and, consequently, uncertainty in the self."[16]

That helps to explain why I think that the homology between television's "global space-time" and urban reality may be the problem, not the solution. Television confirms time-space, it doesn't question it. It renders "the objectified, distanced, knowable world" on which, says Deutsche, man depends. Television doesn't help me to understand the imaginative space, the analytical space, between our private worlds and the public world of the city; the space of proximity, unknowability, and uncertainty.[17]

On my side of the argument, the cultural and media geographer Kevin Robins too holds out against the "death of cinema," against the denial of its imaginative and creative possibilities, and defends "the need to continually transform – to

de-integrate – structures of vision and visibility."[18] He quotes Italo Calvino's recollection that the cinema "satisfied a need for disorientation, for the projection of my attention into a different space, a need which I believe corresponds to a primary function of our assuming our place in the world."

Also in the cinema party is the Australian literary and cultural theorist John Frow. He cites the enthusiasm for television by the fictional academic Murray in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*. Murray's students do not share his postcritical celebration of the medium. They see television as "worse than junk mail. Television is the death throes of human consciousness, according to them. They're ashamed of their television past. They want to talk about movies." "Murray is a postmodernist," comments Frow. "His students, wishing to return to the high modernism of cinema, are postpostmodernists."[19]

From the preposterous position of postpostmodernism, my argument is that the very fact that cinema (or the novel, for that matter) is in some sense out of date may be one of the things that makes it good to think with, and especially good for thinking the city. Gilles Deleuze argues the epistemological case for subverting temporal homologies:

> To think means to be embedded in the present-time stratum that serves as a limit: what can I see and what can I say today? But this involves thinking of the past as it is condensed in the inside, in the relation to oneself (there is a Greek in me, or a Christian, and so on). We will then think the past against the present and resist the latter, not in favour of a return but "in favour, I hope, of a time to come" (Nietzsche), that is, by making the past active and present to the outside so that something new will finally come about, so that thinking, always, may reach thought.[20]

The philosopher John Rajchman links this style of thinking on behalf of future times and future people to the questions about the city, representation and the media I have sketched here:

> The principle of such other, invisible, future peoples is not some recognition withheld by a state or its majority. Rather, we can invent the other peoples that we already are or may become as singular beings only if our being and being-together are indeterminate – not identifiable, given, recognizable in space and time – in other words, if our future remains unknown and our past indeterminate such that our very narratives can go out of joint, exposing other histories in our histories, releasing the strange powers of an artifice in our very "nature". Fiction and cinema have both explored the powers, the times, the spaces of this principle of the future city.[21]

Des Esseintes's daydream about London suggests how representations inform our capacity, and our need, to imagine "the city" – cities elsewhere, but also the pedagogic city we inhabit physically and as a state of mind. Fiction and cinema (rather than representation as such) suggest another capacity and a different need. The "principle of the future city" is conceivable even if it resists any attempt to represent it. That is why we are still haunted and provoked by abstract utopian ideals like the City of God, the republican polis, the Ville Radieuse, or the public sphere. The immaterial city is a disconcerting yet hopeful reminder of imagination beyond images.

NOTES

1. J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, tr. Robert Baldick (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1959).
2. "The immaterial city" is Ihab Hassan's phrase. See "Cities of mind, urban words," in Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts (eds.), *Literature and the Urban Experience* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1981), p. 94.
3. Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996), p. 48.
4. Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992), p. 221. See also Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1973); D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988); and Klaus R. Scherpe, "The city as narrator: the modern text in Alfred Döblin's Berlin Alexanderplatz," in Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick (eds.), *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1989).
5. Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 243.
6. Georg Simmel, "The metropolis and mental life," in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture* (Sage, London, 1997), p. 184.
7. Simmel, "The metropolis," p. 175.
8. See Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1996).
9. Simmel, "The metropolis," p. 175; Walter Benjamin, "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," in *Illuminations* (Fontana, London, 1973), p. 227; Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (NLB, London, 1973), p. 132.
10. Benjamin, "Work of art," p. 229.
11. Burgin, *In/Different Spaces*, p. 34.
12. Roger Silverstone (ed.), *Visions of Suburbia* (Routledge, London, 1997), p. 4.
13. Silverstone, *Visions*, pp. 11–12.
14. Margaret Morse, "An ontology of everyday distraction," in Patricia Mellencamp (ed.), *Logics of Television* (BFI, London, 1990), p. 213.
15. See Bruce Robbins (ed.), *The Phantom Public Sphere* (University of Minneapolis Press, Minnesota, 1993), especially Thomas Keenan, "Windows: of vulnerability."
16. Rosalyn Deutsche, "Agoraphobia," in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (MIT, Cambridge, Mass., 1996), pp. 325–6.
17. See Kevin Robins, *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision* (Routledge, London, 1996), p. 143.
18. Robins, *Into the Image*, p. 145.
19. John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1997), p. 26.
20. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988), p. 119; quoted in Nigel Thrift, *Spatial Formations* (Sage, London, 1996), p. 295.
21. John Rajchman, *Constructions* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998), p. 113.