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The ESF-LiU Conference  
Cities and Media: Cultural Perspectives on  
Urban Identities in a Mediatized World  
Vadstena, Sweden, 25–29 October, 2006

Editor

Johan Fornäs

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## **Doing Cities by the Book: Literary Walking-Tours and Cosmopolitan Identities**

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The past decades saw the rise of the literary walk throughout Europe. Like all walking-tours ‘in the footsteps of’, the literary walk is part of the so-called ‘theming’ of historical sites, mediating urban experience in terms of the ‘experience economy’ (Pine & Gilmore) and standing in uneasy relation to ‘city branding’ as the deliberate manipulation of the city’s image for commercial exploitation. Reconstituting a literary experience in space through the ‘rewriting’ of literary texts as urban texts, they mediate people’s approaches to the literary past as they speak of (and to) a desire for an embodied experience that is locked in the ‘fast time’ of economic globalization, at once resisting it and inextricably part of it.

Focusing on the literary walking tour as a performance of the city that is exemplary of the ways in which literature constitutes an ‘imagined city’ that is, in its turn, projected onto the built environment, this paper explores the literary walk as a particular form of cultural mediation that needs to be considered in the context of the transformed cultural, economic and political cityscapes of Europe.

The past decades saw the rise of the literary walk throughout Europe. Today, indeed, there is hardly a city or town that does not have a walk ‘in the footsteps of’ some famous author, and from Dublin to London and Paris, visitors are invited to retrace the trajectories of their favorite authors and characters. There is, of course, nothing really new about pilgrimages to the sites of famous writers or visits to the locations of popular novels; ever since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, travelers have gone to places on account of their being described in literary works. Yet the mediated images that attract visitors to cities and shape their experiences of them are increasingly derived from the books they have read (and the films they have seen). Constituting an ‘imagined city’ that is, in its turn, projected onto the urban environment, these images are part of a collective imaginary that is thus re-enacted, replayed and re-presented. The literary walking-tour belongs to what the French historian Pierre Nora (1996) has termed the ‘era of commemoration’. As part of the current ‘memory boom’ (Huysen, 2000), it is one of the ways in which the culture of memory that has swept over Europe (and the United States) since the late 1970s manifests itself today.

In the European cities that are increasingly construed as historical theme-parks, walking is inevitable, the necessary correlative of pedestrian city-centers that can only be visited on foot (Plate, 2006). Walking-tours are an integral part of the ‘City of Spectacle’ (Boyer, 1994) and a logical extension of the so-called ‘theming’ of historical sites. But the walking-tour is not only a technique of tourism; it is equally to be understood as a response to city-life as dominated by the disembodiment of labor and the weightlessness of capital, both of which have profoundly affected our relationship to space and time (Bauman, 2000). As I wish therefore to argue, literary walking-tours enjoy a heightened popularity because they proffer citizens with an embodied and situated urban identity. Mediating people’s experience of the city by referencing the literary past, city-walks speak of (and to) a desire for an embodied experience that is locked into the ‘fast time’ of economic globalization, at once resisting it and inextricably part of it.

Literary walking-tours characteristically take us through space as if through the pages of a book. Guiding the visitor to the exact spot, walks ‘in the footsteps of’ literary writers and/or their characters bring the body of the tourist to particular places in the promise that to be there and to look upon the sights will make the past present again. On location, the past is re-enacted as place becomes the medium wherein the past is made present as an experience, lived, tangible and seemingly available to consciousness and sensory perception. This ‘presentification of past worlds’, as the German philologist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht puts it in *Production of Presence* — ‘that is, techniques that produce the impression (or, rather, the illusion) that worlds of the past can become tangible again’ (2004: 94) — can be seen as a response to a fundamental desire for immediacy and lived experience in contemporary culture. In Gumbrecht’s analysis, such a longing for what he terms ‘presence-effects’ arises in response to a culture that ‘gives a higher value to the meaning of phenomena than to their material presence’ (Gumbrecht, 2004: xiv). As he argues, we live in a culture that conceives of knowledge as conceptual and the product of interpretation and that consequently bracketed off other, presence-based forms of knowledge: lived and embodied experience, revelation.

Walking-tours, and especially literary walking-tours, I would argue, articulate such a desire for presence. Walking is an embodied activity. It engages the body in what has been termed ‘rituals of slow time’ (Franklin, 2003: 13). As a leisure activity that is deliberately undertaken, it can reactivate ‘a feeling or a remembrance of the physical dimension in our lives’ (Gumbrecht, 2004: 118). Producing a literary experience spatially, literary walks constitute a kind of productive reception wherein the literary text is rewritten as an urban one that is also a physical, sensual, emotional and/or aesthetic experience. This reconstitution of a literary experience in space produces less an interpretation than the ‘presentification’ of it: an opening and exposing of both the body and the mind to the ‘imposed upon relevance’

(*auferlegte Relevanz*) of what the English novelist Virginia Woolf used to call ‘moments of being’, but which Gumbrecht prefers to term ‘moments of intensity’ (Gumbrecht, 2004: 100ff.) Seen in this light, the transformation of reading into walking is part of a larger movement within culture that attempts to ‘recuperate the spatial and bodily dimension of our existence’ (Gumbrecht, 2004: 116). It is a way of turning words into experiences whose seat is the body and the senses (rather than the mind). An experiential and multi-sensory form of knowledge, then, the literary walk is not only a quest for the material basis of fiction. Rather, I would argue, it allows us ‘to be in our bodies and in the world’ (Solnit, 2002: 5) while bridging the gap between the fictional worlds with which we are familiar and the real world from which we feel increasingly estranged.

Indeed, as a theme for walking-tours, literature can provide a means for feeling ‘at home’ in the city. The literary scholar Ann Rigney has argued that literary works have a distinctive role to play in the formation of cultural memory precisely because they are capable of ‘arousing interest in histories which are not our own, in the history of groups with which one has hitherto not identified’ (2004: 389). Literary texts, she maintains, need to be seen ‘not just as channels for perpetuating certain memorial traditions but also as the source of new traditions and the means for broadening the horizons of what one considers one’s own heritage’ (2004: 389). Yet, if literary texts can anchor the self in time through the inheritance of histories from the past, can they not equally ground these memories within space? As many have pointed out, literature—like film and photography—produces imaginary spaces and imagined places which then mediate our perception and experience of the material world (Donald 1999; Alter 2005). Novels (and pictures, and films) do not merely represent place; they actively constitute it. And as they produce it for specific audiences, they instruct these audiences not only in ways of seeing, but also in ways of being in it.

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of the walking-tour is its construction of what John Urry has termed ‘the tourist gaze’ (1990; rev. 2002). Telling us where to go, what to see and how to look, walking-tours theme the urban landscape, organize the gaze, objectify sights into signs and reify them into marketable icons (Urry, 2002). Walking-tours systematize the tourist gaze, selecting not only the places to be looked upon, but also the terms in which the gaze is framed. As Urry puts it: ‘Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy... Such anticipation is constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, TV, literature, magazines, records and videos, which construct and reinforce that gaze’ (Urry, 2002: 3). Urry’s exclusive focus on sight to the detriment of the other senses has recently been criticized for its disembodied perspective and for ignoring important bodily aspects of tourism (Franklin, 2003: 9; but see Urry, 1999). Not only is it so that at the turn of the twentieth century, ‘despite the new virtual world (and perhaps also because of it), a new tourism of the body was emerging’ (Franklin, 2003: 9), but the construction of tourism as a semiotic practice involving primarily vision, cognition, and visual technologies such as the camera sidelined important aspects of the body. Indeed, more than just a gaze it is bodies that are constructed in tourism. Thus the literary walking-tour choreographs bodies according to the rhythm of its narrative; it maps the tourist body’s spatial trajectory and paces its step; and it construes the distances (or closeness) at which bodies are to stand from one another, to gaze upon a particular sight or to take a picture of it. Clearly, tourism is one of the urban practices through which, in the words of Elizabeth Grosz, ‘corporeality is socially, sexually, and discursively produced’ (Grosz, 1992: 243).

Attending to the tourist’s body makes clear that the current marketing trend to stage experiences taps into the same desire for presence-effects Gumbrecht longs for. As a way of understanding, of seeing and of being in urban space that retrieves certain physical dimensions in our lives, literary city-walks come to stand in uneasy relation to the so-called ‘experience economy’: an economy that is based not so much on goods and services, as on

experiences that are to leave a memory. As Pine & Gilmore, the authors of *The Experience Economy*, point out, a well-defined, captivating and compelling theme is crucial to this process. It is the theme which provides consumers with something around which to organize their impressions, and it is the theme which enables the experience to yield a lasting memory (1999; 46).

Aimed at producing a ‘memorable’ experience of the city, the literary walking-tour is a theming of urban space that seemingly offers a comforting feeling of belonging and the reassurance of a sense of identity. Walking in the footsteps of a favorite author or character, we feel as it were ‘on familiar ground’. Yet the fact that today, there is hardly a city or town that does not have a multiplicity of such walks should remind us that these re-enactments of the past are invented cultural traditions which, in the context of Europe, are inextricably bound up with Europe as an economic project. Feeding off the desire for lived experience, they make the past seem present and the strange appear familiar. Yet serving to make people feel at home in the city and the world, they also produce space as commodity, creating personal memories of the city that are intertwined with a variety of political and commercial interests.

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