**Place and Community Colloquium**

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‘Entering the Labyrinth’: Walking the streets of New York in Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (1985)and Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984)*.*

When touring America for the first time, Jean Baudrillard stated: ‘Nothing could be more intense, electrifying, turbulent, and vital than the streets of New York’ (Baudrillard, 2010, p.18). New York is a postmodern city as it represents a melting pot of cultures and the mixing of the traditional and the unconventional. The city in literature is both a hard city and a soft city. As Jonathan Raban explains in his book *Soft City*: ‘the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps, in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture’ (Raban, 1974, p.2). Both Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* and Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* are set in New York; however, they both depict different experiences of the city.

Although both Auster and McInerney map ‘the city’s streets by use of real names’, the city is not developed in the texts by real-life locations but rather ‘the grotesque and hauntological spaces encountered’ by the protagonists (Beville, 2013, p.616). Aside from the cultural collective experience of a city – for example, Times Square as a staple of the New York experience – every city has its own map tailored to the individual. The myth of the American city, especially New York, is presented in both literature and media. To borrow John Rennie Short’s argument of the city as myth, both Auster and McInerney use ‘environmental myth [which] can contain both fact and fantasy’ (Short, 1991, p.xvi). The hard city of New York is the backdrop for the novels, but it is the ideologies with ‘more limited production and a more selective quality’ (Short, 1991, p.xvii) which enrich the texts.

To create Raban’s soft city, McInerney’s unnamed protagonist (who is unnamed due to McInerney using second-person narration) and Auster’s Daniel Quinn walk around the streets of New York to create their own personal boundaries and settlements in the city. Walking in the city differs from driving or taking public transport. The vehicle is restricted to the roads – particularly limiting in New York’s grid system – and public transport removes the freedom of travelling to a destination as someone else is in charge of movement. Walking, unlike using a vehicle, allows for non-linear detours and the exploration of the hidden areas within the monitored and well-structured system. Quinn in *City of Glass* is assigned a case, under the name of Paul Auster, to follow Peter Stillman around the city and document where he goes. McInerney’s protagonist in *Bright Lights* regularly walks from a club to his apartment and to work. Although McInerney’s protagonist, who shall be referred to as You in this presentation, does use public transport at times to occupy a larger area of the city than Auster’s Quinn, You still relies on walking as a main mode of transport. Walking, naturally, is a slower mode of transport than a vehicle and therefore allows the character to absorb his surroundings and interact with them more. The slowing of pace creates awareness of one’s surroundings and routine.

Quinn in *City of Glass* and You in *Bright Lights* lack a purpose in the city. Wandering around the city is a distraction from the characters’ responsibilities and results in them becoming immersed in a fictional world inside their heads. Walking results in ‘the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper’, which, again, layers onto the personalities of the protagonists in the two texts as their lives lack a purpose in the city; however, de Certeau’s argument suggests walking must be a freeing and liberating act in the strict structure of the grid system (de Certeau, 1988, p.103). Walking is not a free or liberating act for the characters in *City of Glass* or *Bright Lights* – it is a prison. New York as the postmodern city is over-indulged in consumer culture – whether that be as objects or as a mindset. Quinn in Auster’s novel is controlled by Stillman’s footsteps and the tower of Babel; McInerney’s You ends his walks, intentionally or unintentionally, to an object in which could be consumed. Language and consumerism are the end products of walking – both are labyrinths in which the individual is trapped in. Walking in New York in *City of Glass* and *Bright Lights* is not a liberating act; it is, in fact, a prison leading to the consumption of a physical or mental ideology which results in the destruction of the character’s psyche.

New York is an overstimulating environment. Baudrillard notices there are ‘[m]ore sirens here, day and night’ than other cities (Baudrillard, 2010, p.14). McInerney’s New York in *Bright Lights* embodies Baudrillard’s view of the city whereas Auster’s *City of Glass* has an absence of chaos. You in McInerney’s text must navigate these chaotic streets without being sucked in by the material surrounding him unless they match one of his desires. You in *Bright Lights* does not always engage with the environment around him but he certainly acknowledges it. Walking in McInerney’s texts always leads to something You desires. You walks along ‘east on Forty-seventh, past the windows of the discount jewelry stores’ (McInerney, 2006, p.64). You ‘stop[s] to admire an emerald tiara, the perfect gift for your next queen for a day’ (McInerney, 2006, p.64). The street gives shop owners an opportunity to conduct business. Engaging with the salesperson with the leaflets encourages You to stop. The salesperson selling the jewellery benefits You’s needs. The jewellery allows him to imagine he is shopping for his ex-wife Amanda or another version of her. The shop does not meet You’s expensive tastes or matches the life he aspires to lead as the jewellery is ‘Gem-O-Rama’ and You explains to the reader he is only ‘[f]antasy shopping. Of course, when you have money you will not stop here […] You’ll head straight for Tiffany or Cartier’ (McInerney, 2006, p.64). You passing a jewellery shop on east Forty-Seventh street instead of Tiffany & Co or Cartier around the corner on Fifth Avenue reflects You’s financial stability and his status in the social circles of Manhattan.

You then walks to Fifth Avenue and walks by a shop window; You stops in his steps because ‘[i]nside the window is a mannequin which is a replica of Amanda’ (McInerney, 2006, p.64). His desires manifest themselves on Fifth Avenue as not only are the shops he aspires to shop in resides there, but a mannequin literally modelled on his ex-wife is located on the street. The contrast between Fifth Avenue and east Forty-Seventh Street in McInerney’s novel highlights how close You is to his dream life in a hedonistic 1980s New York, yet he is still out of reach of his end goal, which is to be with Amanda. McInerney states in an interview with *The Literary Review* that the book is ‘not so much a question of “possibility,” though, as it is of retailing a myth about glamour and the good life. The message is so powerful as to be almost overwhelming’ (Pinsker, 1986, p.110). Amanda and Fifth Avenue represent the good life You wants and he buys into the glamour of it. Ideally, You is aiming for Fifth Avenue as that is what he aspires towards. However, the current life he leads without Amanda and failing his job leads him to the streets which sell cheaper merchandise. Eventually the shallowness of his desire is revealed as Amanda’s mannequin disappears and replaced with another. With 5th Avenue no longer holding his fantasy, You ‘walk[s] up and down the block, examining each of the mannequins’ (McInerney, 2006, p.142). With Amanda’s mannequin gone, You has no need to occupy this area of New York. You walks to Fiftieth Street in hope to find the mannequin, ‘but the face is too angular and the nose is wrong’ (McInerney, 2006, p.142). Like Quinn in *City of Glass,* You’s obsessions lead him to walk for over an hour leading him away from where he hoped to originally inhabit. Once the material value of a location evaporates, it is no longer relevant for the character’s personal map of the city. You’s New York is structured by mapped spaces, such as real-life jewellery shops, yet he creates his own soft city by only occupying the places that link to the amount of money he has. However, once the material value disappears, he is left in a nowhere land.

Similarly, Quinn in *City of Glass* is also in a nowhere land. Taking on the identity of Paul Auster, Quinn appears to have a purpose. Yet, that all unfolds. Even though Quinn starts his case as Paul Auster as a detective protecting Peter Stillman jr., his real case is to search for the Tower of Babel. Stillman sets up a false quest for Quinn by tracing letters into the streets of New York. Quinn is eager to find logic behind a seemingly illogical situation. After his first day of sketching the outlines of Stillman’s walk and ‘[a]ssuming the first diagram had in fact represented the letter “O,”’ Quinn concludes the next day that ‘the bird wings of the second formed the letter “W”’ (Auster, 2006, p.69). Suddenly seeing answers in Stillman’s footsteps, Quinn becomes trapped in the city space Stillman wanders around. The city is language as the paths Stillman and Quinn take form letters. After a few days of following Stillman, Quinn decides to sketch Stillman’s movements and ‘[o]f course, the letters O-W-E’ Quinn documents three days in a row ‘spelled a word’ (Auster, 2006, p.69). The letters appear obvious to the reader as the text exclaims ‘of course’ the walking creates words. However, the letters Stillman creates are not obvious and their authenticity should be questioned. After several days Quinn reflects on his research:

‘After fiddling with them for a quarter of an hour, switching them around, pulling them apart, rearranging the sequence, he returned to the original order and wrote them out in the following manner: OWER OF BAB […] the answer seemed inescapable: THE TOWER OF BABEL’ (Auster, 2006, p.70).

Quinn is looking for a meaning as he changes and switches the order before he realises the answer is ‘inescapable’. If it takes time for Quinn to find the answer to Stillman’s quest, it is not obvious. Quinn does not complete the diagrams of Stillman’s footsteps before jumping to the conclusion that Stillman is writing ‘Tower of Babel’ across the city. Much like Auster’s novel, knowledge is also metafictional and intertextual. The conclusion Quinn resides in with the space between walking and language is imaginary. Take the example of the ‘lopsided “O”’ Stillman draws which resembles ‘a doughnut crushed on one side with three of four jagged lines sticking out the other’ (Auster, 2006, p.70). Quinn is actively seeking the shape of letters in his walking. The description of the O could be interpreted as many different things with its ‘jagged lines’ and ‘crushed’ sides. As Lindsey Banco argues, ‘Stillman’s steps, in other words, become “compressed” into timeless individual characters that Quinn believes (falsely, it turns out) he can read transparently’ (Banco, 2009, p.390). In the context of *City of Glass,* Stillman’s footsteps must be transparent because that is how Quinn has documented them and his conclusion that Stillman is writing ‘Tower of Babel’ leads the plot for the rest of the novel. Unlike the original Tower of Babel, only Stillman and Quinn seem to occupy it to reach the original language. New York being an overstimulating place seems vacant in *City of Glass*. The lack of other bodies in *City of Glass* further emphasises the internalisation of Quinn’s thoughts and the further entrapment into his own mind. He fails to see the busy streets; his only concern is Peter Stillman.

Towards the end of the novel, Quinn embarks on a grand tour of New York without a purpose. Going from Sheridan Square, ‘he turned east again, ambling down Waverly Place, crossing Sixth Avenue’ and continues walking until he ‘walked the remaining seven blocks to the United Nations and decided to take a short rest’ (Auster, 2006, p.105). Pinning the streets Quinn walks on in this paragraph onto a map of New York, Quinn walks an almost straight line up and down Manhattan. As Quinn reaches ‘Park Avenue South’ (Auster, 2006, p.105), his movement becomes more chaotic – reflecting his unstable mindset during the Stillman case. He only ‘stops to rest twice, on either side of the allegorical mirror that structures the narrative space’ (Soderlind, 2011, p.7). Including Quinn’s breaks, he walks almost constantly for at least two days. The narrative sees Quinn go to ‘West Broadway’, ‘the World Trade Center’, and ‘Union Square’ to name a few locations famous to New York and familiar to people who have never visited (Auster, 2006, p.105). This obsessive and straining path Quinn walks is, according to Sylvia Soderlind, ‘a Puritan walk from type to antitype, from the Old Testament’s punishment of human hubris to its redemption in the New Testament’ (Soderlind, 2011, p.7). Following Stillman on his quest for the original language, Quinn goes on his own religious pilgrimage himself which descends him into madness. To be on a pilgrimage is to have a purpose. You in *Bright Lights* is on his own pilgrimage to find Amanda and the consumer goods he needs to live a New York hedonistic lifestyle. As a result of this searching, protagonists in both books lose themselves and become a product of what they are searching for. The city traps the characters to keep them searching for an unobtainable goal. Walking creates a sense of familiarity and ownership. The city becomes alive as it touches the feet of the character moving around the streets. The characters in both texts must actively engage with their environment to create a soft city and to truly inhabit the city.

The charm of New York’s streets prevents the pedestrian from leaving the grid-system and encourages the embracement of consumer culture. Areas of the city, such as Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue, are home to an abundance of shops. According to a study by Hyunjoo Oh and Jenny Petrie, the shop window allows artists to convey ‘abstract messages to induce curiosity and further encourage exploration within the store’ (Oh & Petrie, 2012, p.29). The shop window is a space for artistic freedom in a hope it will mesmerise the consumer to purchase the items for sale. The study goes on to suggest ‘visual contact of storefront window displays with a shopper is very brief, artists and merchandisers employ creative ways to display products, such as the artistic, theatrical, and story-telling window displays’ (Oh & Petrie, 2012, p.29). The seduction of the shopping district is not only a literary device as many high-streets, not only in New York but in any major city, ploy this technique to bring in money. You in *Bright Lights* does not fall prisoner to the consumer elements of the window displays but rather the personal elements with the mannequin of Amanda in the store front. McInerney in his text certainly considers the magnetism of the streets for the pedestrian as You is always surrounded by consumer products. If You was to take public transport more in the novel rather than walking most places, he would fail to be consumed by the products he indulges in and the ghost of his ex-wife Amanda. Walking the streets of New York, whether as a tourist or as a resident, is a mouse trap to stay caught in the postmodern city.

Paul Auster’s New York in *City of Glass* does not engage with the contents inside buildings in New York as much as McInerney’s text; however, Auster demonstrates the labyrinth of New York more clearly in his novel. Soderlind comments: ‘New York is also the city that never sleeps but that never remembers; it is a city that is constantly rebuilding, erasing memory as soon as it forms’ (Soderlind, 2011, p.11). Auster displays the restlessness of New York by Quinn walking almost constantly for over two days. Quinn’s trance-like state walking up and down the streets of New York emphasises the need of remapping the city. As the city constantly regenerates, everything has a sell-by date and history disappears. Quinn’s attempt to plot the Tower of Babel in New York after immersing himself in Stillman’s life is ultimately a failure as the city will change and cover up the paths Quinn has already created when walking.

*City of Glass* and *Bright Lights, Big City* portray an isolating and lonely city. John Rennie Short states the city is ‘the scene of the gaining of wisdom and the loss of innocence, a place of tension between naivety and experience, youth and maturity, dreams and realities’ (Short, 1991, p.44). The city is a paradox and is never fully real. You’s perception in *Bright Lights* is distorted by his drug consumption and where he occupies in the city, which tends to be shopping districts of New York. Quinn in *City of Glass* is locked inside the labyrinth of Peter Stillman’s footsteps so much so that he begins his own pilgrimage after he loses Stillman. Michel de Certeau may argue the city ‘invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future’ but that is not a liberating act; it is, in fact, a daunting and engulfing concept for the human psyche (de Certeau, 1988, p.91). With a lack of history and the uncertainty of the future, both texts highlight the prison of a city with no start or end – just a path leading further into the labyrinth.

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