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Dystopia and Euphoria: Time-Space Compression and the City

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This chapter reads representations of urban space in late twentieth-century British fiction as symptomatic of what David Harvey terms 'time-space compression'.[1] As Harvey explains, rapid material shifts within the economic mode of production effect changes in the subjective experience of time and space that cannot be adequately represented by drawing on traditional aesthetic norms and conventions. Accordingly, the increasing popularity of postmodern forms of representation in the second half of the twentieth century can be read as signalling an 'intense phase of time-space compression that had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life'.[2] More specifically, representations of urban space in the 1980s and 1990s must be understood in relation to attempts by Western governments to address structural weaknesses within the global economy that had crystallized in the decade just prior to the period under discussion here, in events such as the 1973 oil crisis, the near bankruptcy of New York City in 1975 and the UK's application for a $3.9 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund in 1976.[3] During the ensuing two decades, urban regeneration functioned as one mechanism for easing these global economic tensions, leading to accelerated change in the form of atrophy and decline in some urban environments as opposed to dramatic redevelopment and gentrification in others. In Britain, this bifurcated experience of time-space compression was captured in literature about the city by increasingly paradoxical

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[1] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Historical Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. vii.
[2] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 284.
[3] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

rhetorical techniques, with dystopian and apocalyptic visions coexisting alongside euphoric experimentalism and new ways of representing communal propinquity.

In his landmark study *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), Harvey argues that the historical developments of the 1970s created the material conditions for the rise of postmodernism, which between the 1960s and 1990s grew from an avant-garde aesthetic into a legitimate and then hegemonic mode of representation. As Harvey suggests, '[T]here is much more continuity than difference between the broad history of modernism and the movement called postmodernism', which he argues to represent a 'crisis within the former, one that emphasizes the fragmentary, the ephemeral, and the chaotic.'[4] If '[p]ostmodernism cultivates […] a conception of the urban fabric as necessarily fragmented, a "palimpsest" of past forms superimposed upon each other',[51] then the primacy of postmodern aesthetics within representations of the city by British writers working in the 1980s and 1990s can be read in light of the crisis that Harvey identifies as having come to a head during the 1970s. Fredric Jameson's imperative 'always historicize!'[6] is thus, in this context, no critical caprice: indeed, contrary to what Dominic Head calls a 'problematic critical myth' that the election of Margaret Thatcher as British Prime Minister in May 1979 'represent[ed] a watershed in the fortunes of the [British] novel',[7] the most prominent chroniclers of the late twentieth-century 'urban experience' explicitly invite their readers to see the legacy of the 1970s as fundamental to the spatial imaginary of their work. For example, the conclusion of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) insists that the adventures of Karim Amir, the novel's liminal, opportunistic *picaro*, will not cease with the electoral triumph of a politician for whom punk music, queerness and cultural hybridity hardly represented a return to

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[4] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p.116.
[5] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p.66.
[6] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. ix.
[7] Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), p. 23.

national greatness. On the contrary, the novel implies that Karim's adventures – which are illustrative of the changing relationship between country and city, province, suburbia and metropole – will continue much as they began. 'And so I sat in the centre of this old city that I loved,' Karim tells us, 'which itself sat at the bottom of a tiny island. I was surrounded by people I loved, and felt happy and miserable at the same time. I thought what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn't always be this way.'[8] Emphatically identifying the city as the locus for any experience of historical change, Kureishi's novel casts Thatcher's election as a fulcrum, not a break, and suggests that the experience of the 1970s would continue to be important even as the decade slipped beyond a Thatcherite watershed after which, it is sometimes assumed, an entirely different historical logic began to apply.

The tendency to view the 1980s as historically exceptional has sometimes been used to account for the preoccupation with historiography in British fiction of the decade, as seen in Graham Swift's early novels *Shuttlecock* (1981) and *Waterland* (1983). Yet even though British literature of the Thatcher decade has become associated with the narrative experiments Linda Hutcheon describes as 'historiographic metafiction',[9] these experiments usually assert the significance of spatiality even as they evidence an ostensible primary interest in temporality. They thus evidence Jameson's assertion that 'the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality' ultimately revealed the 'new spatiality inherent in the postmodern'.[10] In *Waterland*, for instance, it is the indeterminate geography of the Cambridgeshire Fens that provides the basis for wider ruminations on the nature of history. In its identification of the enclosure of private land as fundamental to the development of capitalist modernity, the novel's history of the Fens – narrated from a

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[8] Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 284.
[9] Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1988).
[10] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 16, 418.

vantage point in London, where the protagonist is a secondary-school teacher – echoes Raymond Williams' assertion in *The Country and the City* (1973) that 'the division and opposition of city and country, industry and agriculture, in their modern forms, are the critical culmination of the division of labour'.[11] Yet it should not come as a surprise that in another significant example of historiographic metafiction – Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985) – it is the testimony to historical change represented by the city which facilitates the author's narrative experiments, in which the Londons of the early eighteenth and late twentieth centuries are represented as mutually constitutive. Indeed, the fact that British fiction of the 1980s evidences such a preoccupation with urban space suggests that, while the material basis for the opposition between town and country might have originated in rural England centuries ago, it reached its apotheosis in the city during the late twentieth century. Consequently, it was to this location that novelists of the period turned their attention when attempting to understand the historical changes at work in their own day and age.

The sedimentation of history within urban space lends *Hawksmoor* a ghostly quality that became characteristic of an entire subgenre of British literature owing its intellectual pedigree to theorists Henri Lefebvre (1901-91) and Guy Debord (1931-94). Although it did extend to other British cities, this psychogeographic literature is today emphatically associated with London, particularly the major novels of Martin Amis and Will Self, as well as the poetry, prose and film-making of Iain Sinclair. The latter is well-known for obsessively mining space for historical meanings that have been eroded by multiple waves of urban development. His work thus complicates what generations of builders, developers and politicians have described as progress by revitalizing the 'ghosts of objects that have disappeared from […]

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[11] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Paladin, 1975), p. 366.

memory'.[12] To the extent that Sinclair's writing is informed by a rich palimpsest of afterlives that can never be wholly erased or put to rest, his descriptions of urban space frequently take on an air of exhausted prolixity, a paradoxical quality also palpable in Amis' *Money* (1984) and *London Fields* (1989). In Amis' novels the British capital features as a kind of revenant or zombie, implausibly clinging to its erstwhile global splendour despite its relegation to post-imperial and post-industrial decrepitude. John Self, the narrator of *Money*, tells us that 'England has been scalded by tumult and mutiny, by social crack-up in the torched slums',[13] which is perhaps why he spends most of his time in America. All the more telling, then, that after his transatlantic venture goes awry, Self ends the novel in a tawdry and uninspiring London. 'My head is a city', he tells us as he maps the anatomy of his cranium onto the neighbourhoods of New York;[14] however, his schizophrenia and anticipated suicide mark him out more clearly as belonging to the ghostly city in which the narrative ends. Indeed, according to the novel's subtitle ('a suicide note'), Self might already be dead by the time the reader reaches the end of the narrative, reinforcing the ghostly flavour of his narration and the spectrality of the city he seems unable to escape. *London Fields* echoes this existential indeterminacy while pushing it to a new extreme. Like Self, Samson Young is most likely already dead by the time the reader finishes the novel, but now the city has become a 'somnopolis'[15] metonymically associated with the eponymous London Fields, which is less an actual place than it is a paradox – '[T]his is London; and there are no fields'[16] – which functions as a haunting projection of Young's exhausted and disintegrating mind. Another decade on, and the capital in Will Self's *How the Dead Live* (2000) has become a literal necropolis, home to 'unquiet spirits aplenty, the futile shades of dead junkies and drabs and

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[12] Iain Sinclair, *Downriver (Or, The Vessels of Wrath): A Narrative in Twelve Tales* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 270.
[13] Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note* (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 66.
[14] Amis, *Money*, p. 26.
[15] Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 2.
[16] Amis, *London Fields*, p.134.

auto-accident victims'[17] condemned to live forevermore in the suburb of Dulston – in the words of the novel's flyleaf, 'London's borough for those no longer troubled by breathing'.[18]

London is not always characterized as a haunted site in literature of this period. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, for instance, the capital's inner reaches are lively places full of opportunities for outrageous acts of self-actualization, and somewhere *to* which Karim longs to escape. Yet even in Kureishi's novel, the city as a site of erasure and radical re-inscription is in evidence. In the figure of Eva Kay, for instance, Kureishi satirizes the emergence of a new rentier class that celebrates the city's diversity largely in order to commodify it, increasing the value of the property it owns within London's inner suburbs by making such locations desirable to wealthy outsiders who wish to live their lives according to Samuel Johnson's (now hackneyed) aphorism, 'When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life'. In this light, London's perceived ghostliness becomes somewhat more tangible. Despite its mobilization of a fetishistic and often racially coded discourse of 'liveliness', the project of urban regeneration – aimed at remedying an ailing economy through a dramatic expansion of the property and financial services industries – seemed inevitably to result in a dramatic production of what Marc Augé terms 'non-places'. The latter are characterized by a self-referential logic in which space exists only as a spectacle which facilitates the individual's encounter with her- or himself: 'his own image […] his anticipated image, which speaks only about him'[19]. This typology can be used to understand the kinds of space produced by late twentieth-century urban regeneration, which positions the city as a site of consumption and individual fulfilment in a manner that echoes the self-oriented logic of the non-place. And

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[17] Will Self, *How the Dead Live* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 15.
[18] Self, *How the Dead Live*, flyleaf.
[19] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John How (London: Verso, 1995), p. 86.

while Augé suggests that '[t]he possibility of non-place is never absent from any place',[20] the implication of the literature examined thus far is that place can nonetheless haunt non-place even after the latter has apparently superseded the former. In the psychogeographical literature of Sinclair, for instance, historical patterns of land-use and inhabitation in areas that are subject to aggressive commodification have usually been displaced, yet they continue to haunt the non-places produced by their own displacement. As he writes of the heavily developed Isle of Dogs, regenerated as part of the Docklands development during the 1980s: 'The avenues! Treeless, broad, focusing on nothing […] No beggars, no children, no queues for buses. This city of the future, this swampland Manhattan, this crystal synthesis of capital, is already posthumous'.[21]

The positioning of urban space as a battleground over the erasures that accompany regeneration resulted during this period in a tendency to regard London as increasingly exceptional, subject to pressures but also representative of political and aesthetic opportunities that could not be found elsewhere in Britain. However geographically remote it might have seemed to everyday working-class characters, such as those portrayed in Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) or Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar* (1959), in much postwar British literature London functioned as a metonym for England, the United Kingdom and even the British Empire as a whole. But over the final two decades of the twentieth century this began to change, as noted by Kureishi's assertion that London is '*my* city. I'm no Britisher, but a Londoner.'[22] This perceived exceptionalism has become institutionalized in the concept of 'London literature' which has grown into a notable

[20] Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 107.
[21] Sinclair, *Downriver*, p. 361.
[22] Hanif Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 142, emphasis added.

disciplinary subfield of contemporary literary and cultural studies.[23] Kureishi himself occupies a significant place here, his self-specification as a London novelist enabling us to understand how a new generation of writers, cultural theorists and political pundits came to see the city as an alternative to some of the less appealing aspects of Britain's more traditional nation- and state-bound identities.

However, late twentieth-century metropolitan exceptionalism has also played a significant role in maintaining an unhelpful myth that continues to have considerable purchase within British literary academia. Head describes this myth as 'the false caricature of the British novel in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s [as well as these decades themselves] as parochial and of minimal significance',[24] a caricature which has been exacerbated by the assumption that the eventual revival of the British novel coincided with the regeneration of the British capital. Adherents of this view would do well to remember the dialectical method of Williams' *The Country and the City*, which demands that we recognize the manifold ways in which urban and non-urban peripheries facilitate metropolitan development. What is frequently overlooked in debates on the city in contemporary British fiction is the extent to which London's exceptionalism has been contingent upon the cultivation of new economic hinterlands within and beyond the United Kingdom. One example of this is the North Sea oilfields, which enabled the British government to bankroll its supposedly *laissez-faire* promotion of the City of London to the role of *de facto* capital of the global financial system. This structural realignment of centre and periphery was made possible by sustained divestment from other urban (and indeed non-urban) parts of the country that were already undergoing de-industrialization. In an effort to demonstrate how this realignment impacted

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[23] See, for example: Sebastian Groes, *The Making of London: London in Contemporary Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), Ged Pope, *Reading London's Suburbs: From Charles Dickens to Zadie Smith* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) or, more recently, Nick Hubble and Philip Tew, eds., *London in Contemporary British Fiction: The City Beyond the City* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
[24] Head, *The State of the Novel*, p. 11.

upon literary representation elsewhere in the country I will now look in more detail at examples of urban literature from two peripheral locations: Alasdair Gray's Glasgow-set novel *Lanark* (1981), said to have triggered the Scottish literary renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s, and the genre fiction of the Mancunian novelist Jeff Noon, whose work has so far received only limited scholarly engagement despite its imaginative critique of the increasing disaggregation of peripheral urban space.

Matt McGuire refers to *Lanark* as 'a foundational text within the so-called "renaissance theory" of contemporary Scottish fiction'.[25] The novel is indeed so fundamental to contemporary Scottish literary studies that the flourishing not merely of this particular field of inquiry but of the entire political project of Scottish nationalism has sometimes been indexed to Gray's debut.[26] Importantly, however, the political possibilities associated with the Scottish literary renaissance are a consequence not only of the way in which *Lanark* imagines the nation but also of how it represents the city. As McGuire notes, 'if *Lanark* provoked a serious debate about the state of Scotland, it was equally important in bringing a host of other themes to the fore',[27] and one of these additional themes is surely the way in which the more oppressive and exploitative aspects of twentieth-century urban living were shaped by the material dynamics of late capitalism. The rhetorical mechanism deployed by Gray to establish this connection is his transformation of post-industrial Glasgow into the Kafkaesque nightmare of Unthank, repeatedly compared by the eponymous character to Hell itself. In Gray's vision, Lanark's 'wish to leave this city was powerful and complete and equalled by a certainty that streets and buildings and diseased people stretched infinitely in

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[25] Matt McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 32.
[26] See, for instance, Len Platt, '"How Scottish I Am": Alasdair Gray, Race and Neo-nationalism', in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, ed. by Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 129-144.
[27] McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature*, p. 38.

every direction'.[28] Throughout the novel, post-industrial urban space is persistently

associated with the worst predations of capitalism, which encourages 'our cities [to] get

uglier and uglier' rather than helping them to evolve into 'strong, lovely, harmonious […]

small republics where the people and their bosses shared common assemblies'.[29] What makes

Lanark so indisputably an expression of its time is the novel's postmodernist imbrication of

its realist account of Glasgow with the dark underworld fantasy of Unthank. On more than

one occasion, the protagonist Lanark and/or his split-self *alter ego* Thaw find themselves lost

as the relationship between time and space proves increasingly elastic. On his way to a

woman he is courting, Thaw is suddenly and implausibly 'unable to find the house', and later,

while attempting to draw a sketch of his home city, he finds himself 'invent[ing] a

perspective' that allows him to combine his 'favourite views […] into one'.[30] These subtle

indications of the elasticity of Glasgow's urban fabric anticipate a moment immediately prior

to Thaw's descent into Unthank when the city itself becomes monstrously agential, 'forcing

itself into the sky on every side […] until he looked up at a horizon like the rim of a bowl

with himself at the bottom'.[31] As Thaw travels to the underworld, the shifts in time and space

become yet more marked: at one point he is forced to travel across an 'intercalendrical zone'

in which 'time […] is unpredictable [and] light […] travels at different speeds, so all sizes

and distances are deceptive'.[32] And at the end of the novel the time-space compression

associated with the intercalendrical zone begins to impinge upon Unthank itself with a threat

of devastating earthquakes and floods.

Harvey's suggestion that the fragmentation of urban space is integral to the aesthetic

dynamics of postmodernism is thus readily borne out in Gray's novel. Stretching and

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[28] Alasdair Gray, *Lanark: A Life in Four Acts* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p. 46.
[29] Gray, *Lanark*, p. 307.
[30] Gray, *Lanark*, pp. 279, 348.
[31] Gray, *Lanark*, p. 263.
[32] Gray, *Lanark*, pp. 373-374.

perverting the rules of realist mimesis, *Lanark* appears to incorporate the same kind of

paradoxical representation of urban space that characterizes London fiction in the final two

decades of the twentieth century. Unlike London fiction, however, Gray's portrayal of

Glasgow represents an attempt to confront a profound sense of national peripherality within

the British state. Whereas the productive potential of a renewed London provided the basis

for wholesale strategies of urban redevelopment during the 1980s and 1990s, which in turn

elicited the psychogeographic experiments with literary form we find in works by Sinclair,

Amis and Self, Gray's Glasgow demands to be read as a sustained interrogation of the logic

of divestment and obsolescence that makes up the obverse of neoliberal economics. Unthank

is no longer a productive industrial city, and, in a biting satire of the treatment meted out to

post-industrial regions by successive Labour and Conservative administrations, government

is shown to be interested only in those aspects of the city's decline that can be monetized. At

the end of the novel, Lanark is made Lord Provost of Greater Unthank and sent to a council

meeting in the wealthier city of Provan, where he finds the council unwilling to help him

represent the interests of his dying hometown. As Lord Monboddo, the leader of Provan, tells

him, 'we can only help people by giving less than we take away from them […] I *cannot* give

prosperity to people whom my rich supporters cannot exploit.'[33]

Given this gloomy prognosis, it is tempting to read *Lanark* as straightforwardly dystopian.

The possibility of an alternative to the squalor of Unthank is, however, embodied in Lanark

himself, who, upon arriving in the underworld, gives himself a name he has seen 'printed

under a brown photograph of spires and trees'.[34] We are thus invited to equate Lanark the

character with Lanark the town, which had the status of royal burgh conferred upon it by

King David I in around 1140, making it one of the oldest towns in Scotland. The true

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[33] Gray, *Lanark*, pp. 550-551.
[34] Gray, *Lanark*, p. 20.

symbolic value of our hero's chosen name, however, appears to reside in its reference to *New Lanark*, a model industrial village founded by David Dale in 1786. The proto-socialist principles of New Lanark contrast crassly with the dystopian conditions of Unthank, but the effect of this interplay of historic places and past utopian projects within the protagonist's made-up name is to plant at the centre of the novel a hopeful awareness of the possibility of historical change. In fact, what makes *Lanark* so compelling is that not only does it imagine urban space, but it imagines its protagonist *imagining* the city. These imaginative acts are not just a form of escapism; there is also a great deal of serious social critique embedded in Lanark's apparent flights of fancy. Engaging Gray's imagination of Unthank in a critical conversation with the Neverland of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904), Cairns Craig argues that '*Lanark* is a journey to the Never Land, transfiguring the commonplace, in order to be able to discover the commonplace which was unacceptable because untransfigured'.[35] The 'double structure'[36] of Gray's novel, in which the author imagines a character (Thaw) imagining a nightmarish embodiment of British state capitalism (the city of Unthank), which he will ultimately come to govern (as the character Lanark), thus reveals the capacity of postmodern style to execute in narrative space a hopeful cognitive remapping of the world while resisting more apolitical forms of escapism.

Jeff Noon is another British novelist who at the end of the last century embarked on a fantastic remapping of peripheral urban space. When he won the 1994 Arthur C. Clarke award for his debut novel *Vurt* (1993), Noon was celebrated as an original voice whose unique cyberpunk universe – an alternately morbid and colourful place where information has taken the form of a drug called Vurt, which is crafted into the shape of a feather and consumed by being inserted into the throat of the user – opened up new possibilities for

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[35] Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 230.
[36] Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, p. 230.

British science fiction. His early success was not without its detractors, who saw his work as derivative of William Gibson's classic cyberpunk novels *Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988).[37] But, notably, such critics were blind to the significance of the writer's decision to set his narrative not in an advanced information economy of his own imagination but in post-industrial Manchester, a location which, like Glasgow, last represented modernity's vanguard around the turn of the twentieth century. It therefore seems worth engaging *Lanark* and *Vurt* in a critical conversation with one another. In the postwar period, their respective settings underwent massive economic decline and became identified as provincial backwaters symbolizing exhaustion, redundancy and decay. In response, *Lanark* and *Vurt* encourage these hard-done-by locales to 'speak'. As Noon has acknowledged, he considered it his 'mission [… t]o put Manchester into […] prose[; t]o discover, and write in, a language that had come out of the city'.[38] Even more intriguingly, the novels share common intertexts among the children's literature of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. As already mentioned, Craig notes the significance of *Peter Pan* for Gray's vision of Unthank. Indeed, in a footnote Gray somewhat self-laceratingly lets it be known that '*Lanark* is erected upon an infantile foundation of Victorian nursery tales'.[39] Gray moreover explicitly cites *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) as an intertext, while Noon acknowledges the influence of Lewis Carroll on his work in the title of his third novel, *Automated Alice* (1996). For both *Lanark* and *Vurt*, then, the fantasy landscapes of children's literature provide opportunities to reimagine the peripheral urban sites that lend their novels their respective settings, and in this sense they continue a formal strategy that is identifiable within the intertexts themselves. As Christine Roth explains, 'Carroll, Barrie, and their adult

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[37] L.S. Klepp, Review of *Vurt*, *Entertainment Weekly*, February 10, 1995, accessed July 6, 2016, http://www.ew.com/article/1995/02/10/vurt.
[38] Jeff Noon cited in Antony Johnston, 'Jeff Noon : Needle in the Groove : Liquid Culture', *SpikeMagazine.com*, Aug 1, 2000, accessed July 6, 2016,
http://www.spikemagazine.com/0800jeffnoon.php.
[39] Gray, *Lanark*, p. 489.

readers perform a kind of erasure, clearing a space for the expansion of an adult imagination and for the pursuit of adult desires within such a fantasy space; however, the adult presence comes through the child's perspective and experience, passively commenting on what the child sees and feels'.[40] For Noon, this logic of 'speaking through the child' enables the fantastical dimensions of children's literature to provide opportunities for substantive political critique. Specifically, he appropriates the grotesqueries of Carroll's *Alice* world in order to uncover the political possibilities harboured in the Manchester music scene without eclipsing or losing sight of the unemployment, gang violence, deprivation and disaggregation accompanying the collapse of the city's industrial base.

Vurt frames its traversal of peripheral urban space using a quest structure in which, Orpheus-like, the protagonist Scribble is propelled by grief and guilt to embark on a journey into the underworld in order to find his younger sister Desdemona, with whom he had a passionate incestuous relationship before losing her in a Vurt fantasy. More emphatically than in *Lanark*, however, the over- and underworlds of *Vurt* intermingle. In return for Desdemona, Scribble's gang is burdened with an illegal artefact they call the Thing-from-Outer-Space, a 'fat sack' of organic matter that 'ramble[s] in his own language' and resembles 'old tyres and a ton of animal fat'.[41] The illegality of this artefact functions as a metaphor for the sexual prohibition attending Scribble and Desdemona's relationship; this, in turn, establishes at the heart of the text an economy of desire – sexual compulsion, drug addiction and consumerism – that is embodied in the Vurt feather. Moreover, Scribble's relationship with the incomprehensibility of the Thing mirrors the relation of the reader to the *Vurt* universe itself, which is described in a way that borders on deliberate obfuscation. As his name indicates,

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[40] Christine Roth, 'Looking Through the Spyglass: Lewis Carroll, James Barrie, and the Empire of Childhood', in *Alice Beyond Wonderland: Essays for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Christopher Hollingsworth (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), p.24.
[41] Jeff Noon, *Vurt* (London: Pan, 2001), pp.18, 23.

Scribble's record of his experiences is crucial to the narrative's legibility; however, his narration is frequently interrupted by his unconscious thoughts, messages from the Vurt itself, and fragments from a magazine run by a tenebrous figure named Game Cat. The result is a highly fragmented narrative that, while adhering to the generic conventions of cyberpunk, is occasionally so frenzied as to become nearly indecipherable. Like the Thing, *Vurt* seems to speak its own language, and Scribble's struggle to understand the not-so-objective correlative of his desire for Desdemona mimics the reader's effort to follow the narrative of the novel. Noon, like his protagonist, is 'scribbling […] down, chasing the moments',[42] but it is not always clear what is actually being related.

This stylistic obliqueness is mirrored in the text's corybantic representation of urban space. Though in some parts of the novel Noon maps his universe onto the physical geography of Manchester, just as frequently his representation of the city undoes any sense of narrative realism with a combination of allegory and fantasy. As Lynne Pearce notes, in Noon's fiction 'Manchester both is and is not recognizable […] because material reality is […] so confused with virtual reality that the streets of the city are only one of the places in which a subject "lives"'.[43] Into his map of actual buildings, roads and landmarks, Noon inserts cyberpunk tropes such as brigades of violent punks and a brutal, technologically-advanced police force alongside more idiosyncratic visions of pyromaniac, mindreading goths and humanoid canines with whom Scribble and his entourage engage in a range of queasily pornographic activities. He also creates allegorical versions of actual locations such as the Crescents housing scheme, which is rechristened Bottletown and described as 'some kind of urban dream' that was abandoned and turned into an enormous bottle bank, which 'from the

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[42] Noon, *Vurt*, pp. 18, 23.
[43] Lynne Pearce, 'Manchester's Crime Fiction', in *Postcolonial Manchester: Diaspora Space and the Devolution of Literary Culture*, ed. by Lynne Pearce, Corinne Fowler and Robert Crawashaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 121.

shopping centre to the fortress flats, shone and glittered like a […] palace, sharp and painful to the touch'.[44] Though less explicitly than *Lanark*, *Vurt* adapts the imaginative framework it inherits from children's fiction, as well as science fiction, in order to stage a critique of the tawdry living conditions in Britain's post-industrial cities. In this respect, it too can be read as symptomatic of how the material processes of industrial capitalism – including de-industrialization – invited novelists to juxtapose and interweave realist and non-realist representations of space in order to capture the experience of time-space compression towards the end of the twentieth century. As Harvey suggests, the attempt to locate new sites of economic accumulation in order to resolve the shocks of the 1970s necessarily produced 'paroxysms of devaluation through deindustrialization'[45] in places such as Glasgow and Manchester. But this does not entail that such sites were somehow marginal to the reconstitution of capitalism over the following decades. Rather, such paroxysms of decline formed an important component of the broader experience of time-space compression. Consequently, the cultural and aesthetic responses to decline – as embodied in novels such as *Lanark* and *Vurt* – should be placed in a dialectical relation to the new forms of representation that were developing in the so-called 'London literature' discussed above.

This does not mean that *Vurt* and *Lanark* are equivalent to one another; in fact, they differ sharply in regard to where they locate the possibility of opposition to the dystopian conditions they represent. Whereas in *Lanark* the promise embodied by an alternative nation provides an answer to the squalor and oppression represented by Glasgow, *Vurt* conceives of the national as a site that produces only trauma and instead discovers in the euphoric potential of Manchester's musical subcultures an opportunity to push the experience of time-space compression to a point at which it begins to represent utopian possibility rather than

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[44] Noon, *Vurt*, pp. 58-59.
[45] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p.185.

dystopian entrapment. Scribble's loss of Desdemona is emphatically associated with a repeated Vurt fantasy that takes place in a 'serene and beautiful, quintessentially English' garden with 'burbling fountains and a mass of flowers […] overflowing their beds'.[46] Here, Scribble is able to revisit a primal moment of illicit desire he shared with Desdemona in a public park on an idyllic summer's day; however, the experience always culminates in discovery by his father, who in the novel's final rehearsal of this fantasy abruptly replaces Desdemona, punishing Scribble while shouting, 'It's all that you deserve, wretched boy!'[47] Clashing with the squalid reality of the post-industrial city, the one space emphatically associated with the nation in *Vurt* comes to stand for pain, guilt and sexual trauma rather than, in *Lanark*'s words, the possibility of a 'strong, lovely, harmonious […] small republic'. Instead, the novel seeks relief from the traumatic kernel of Scribble's quest in electronic dance music as we find Scribble abandoning the search for his sister and taking solace in the dancefloor and DJ booth, where he can watch 'the sub-masses moving, groin to groin […] the whole generation, all of the various shapes of existence, moving to the latest remix […,] my voice […] amplified throughout all of the land'.[48] Noon appears to be suggesting that it is not from a re-imagination of the polis but from the semi-magical, trance-like potential of 'the djinn'[49] – a pun on DJing – that the possibility of a new kind of communal propinquity will arise.

While *Lanark* and *Vurt* use similar postmodernist techniques as well as a common set of intertexts to represent not just the phenomenon of time-space compression, but also the peripherality of their respective settings, they arrive at substantially different conclusions in their identification of an alternative to the destitution of the post-industrial city. Yet, as I have

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[46] Noon, *Vurt*, p. 106.
[47] Noon, *Vurt*, p. 308.
[48] Noon, *Vurt*, p. 121.
[49] Noon, *Vurt*, p. 121.

suggested elsewhere, it is hard, from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, not to see

the euphoric solution Noon identifies in musical subcultures as the less promising of the

two.[50] As Pearce explains, 'not only punk but most of the city's musical and artistic ventures

of this period appear to have arisen out of a collective will, or enterprise, and manifestly in

spite of the lack of economic or other resources.' Meanwhile, even if 'the marginal status of

contemporary writing and publication in the city has been exaggerated,' Pearce notes that

'Manchester's authors and publishers have sometimes lamented the fact that the city's writing

scene has never achieved the high profile and success of its music scene'.[51] This is certainly

true of Noon, who, in an interview with *Spike Magazine* following his move to Brighton in

2000, points out that, despite his commitment to his hometown, he felt 'isolated' there; by

contrast, in Brighton, he 'started working with other artists much more than [he] did in

Manchester'.[52] Herein lies a significant distinction between the literary cultures into which

Lanark and *Vurt* were published: while, as Pearce's work with Corinne Fowler and Robert

Crawshaw reveals, Manchester is not without a prominent literary culture,[53] the readiness

with which, in Scotland, *Lanark*'s representation of peripheral urban space was assimilated

into a national tradition, which it subsequently played a significant role in revitalizing, was

not necessarily mirrored south of the Anglo-Scottish border.

Noon's other reason for leaving Manchester concerns the ways in which certain, formerly

peripheral and subcultural spaces in the city had by the turn of the millennium begun to be

co-opted by (or to capitalize upon, depending on one's perspective) the neoliberal logic of

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[50] See Alexander Beaumont, *Contemporary British Fiction and the Cultural Politics of Disenfranchisement* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
[51] Lynne Pearce, 'Manchester: The Postcolonial City', in *Postcolonial Manchester: Diaspora Space and the Devolution of Literary Culture*, ed. by Lynne Pearce, Corinne Fowler and Robert Crawshaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 44, 46.
[52] Noon cited in Johnston, 'Jeff Noon : Needle in the Groove : Liquid Culture'.
[53] See contributions to Lynne Pearce, Corinne Fowler and Robert Crawshaw (eds.), *Postcolonial Manchester: Diaspora Space and the Devolution of Literary Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

urban regeneration that had also accompanied urban gentrification and commodification in London and elsewhere. In interview, Noon explicitly identifies what he calls the emergence of 'New Manchester'[54] – a city built upon its subcultural associations but orientated towards the lifestyle, new media and property industries – as a reason for his departure. His final novel set in the *Vurt* universe, *Needle in the Groove* (1999), asks to be read as both an affectionate swansong to the city and a satire of the ways in which its international fame as a night-time destination had led to mainstream appropriation and commodification. Of all Noon's novels, *Needle in the Groove* is probably the most experimental, having been composed using a Burroughs-esque technique he terms the 'cobralingus filtering system',[55] whose provenance he traces back to Manchester's music scene. Moreover, the novel was released alongside an album of experimental electronic music composed by David Toop, with sections of the novel performed by Noon himself.[56] In *Needle in the Groove* music is quite literally a drug and, as in *Vurt*, the dancefloor is represented as a flexible, radically inclusive and ultimately ateleological form of community: 'It's like the whole club is moving through space, taking off, going into orbit […] I look down once more, through the glass, down to the floor / where all the people now crowd […] the whole place caught tight and released'.[57] Yet Manchester itself comes across as much more dystopian, if perhaps less cataclysmically decrepit, than in Noon's earlier novel. The city's legendary music scene, memorialized in street names such as 'ian curtis boulevard',[58] has failed to deliver on its promise as a vehicle of utopian possibility and has ossified instead into a mawkish reminder of its own bygone heroism and radical allure.

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54 Noon cited in Johnston, 'Jeff Noon : Needle in the Groove : Liquid Culture'.
55 Jeff Noon, *Needle in the Groove* (London: Transworld, 1999), p. 6.
56 Jeff Noon and David Toop, *Needle in the Groove* (London: Sulphur Records, 2000).
57 Noon, *Needle in the Groove*, p. 116.
58 Noon, *Needle in the Groove*, p. 13.

While it initially seemed as though new forms of communal propinquity were presenting themselves within the Manchester music scene's subcultural response to the late twentieth-century experience of time-space compression, an in-depth reading of Noon – who must count as one of its most euphoric chroniclers – reveals that it eventually failed to deliver upon its alternative potential. Rather, the subculture yielded to the neoliberal logic of commodification, which, while giving British cities a refreshing face lift, also rendered them politically vacuous, haunted by and shot through with the narcissistic logic of the non-place. According to Harvey, the anxieties that attend historical moments of time-space compression always bear the potential to open up opportunities for the development of new aesthetic, cultural and political strategies. At the same time, the material contradictions and crises that produce time-space compression in the first place can just as easily yield to neoliberal co-optation, with seemingly promissory representational techniques ultimately delivering the author into a political dead-end. As my brief discussion of Noon's work has demonstrated, the form of communal propinquity offered by *Vurt*'s urban-subcultural politics falls drastically short of the role Gray's *Lanark* was able to play in stimulating a more far-reaching conversation about the utopian polity that might yet come to establish itself north of the Anglo-Scottish border.

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[1] Ibid., p.66.