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Never mind the city guides: The topos of a city in urban fantasy (with interpretative emphasis on Neil Gaiman's novel *Neverwhere*)

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Abstract:
The paper focuses on the phenomenon of urban fantasy with a particular interest in the topos of a city, which assumes great significance as a thematic and motivic element in the subgenre. The authors touch upon the relation between (sub)genre and topos/topoi in general, but also more specifically, between urban fantasy and the city, regarding the urban area as a distinct setting with a specific atmosphere, character or genius loci. Within this frame, the paper seeks to exemplify the aforementioned relations through an interpretative study of Neil Gaiman's novel Neverwhere, *which breathes life into the London underground scene. London Below comes to personify, literally, the vices of London Above via the use of anthropomorphic strategies. Moreover, the spatial peculiarities of the novel not only contribute to the creation of the fantastical atmosphere but they also function as a vehicle of social critique and a constitutive element of the protagonist's transformation.*

> "Cities are not people. But, like people, cities have their own personalities: in some cases one city has many different personalities – there are a dozen Londons, a crowd of different New Yorks. A city is a collection of lives and buildings, and it has identity and personality. Cities exist in location, and in time.

> There are good cities – the ones that welcome you, that seem to care about you, that seem pleased you're in them. There are indifferent cities – the ones that honestly don't care if you're there or not; cities with their own agendas, the ones that ignore people. There are cities gone bad, and there are places in otherwise healthy cities as rotten and maggoty as windfall apples. There are even cities that seem lost – some, lacking a centre, feel like they would be happier being elsewhere, somewhere smaller, somewhere easier to understand. […] Don't ever take a city for granted. After all, it is bigger than you are; it is older; and it has learned how to wait…" (Gaiman, n.d.)

> "It seemed a bit goth for a short cockney geezer, but then London is the pick'n'mix cultural capital of the world." (Aaronovitch, 2011, p. 5)

> "London calling to the underworld / come outta' the cupboard, ya' boys and girls." (The Clash: *London Calling*)

Introduction

The connection between a place and a story has always been deemed more or less natural, and the distinct, elaborately depicted places of imaginary worlds created by novelists as well as settings adjusted by them have always been part of literary discussions. The spatial context, however, assumed a special significance with the development of the fantasy genre. Whereas in connection with high fantasy, the sense of wonder or enthralment is first and foremost aroused by the thorough and complex construction of fictional realities or, as J. R. R. Tolkien calls it, secondary worlds, what captivates readers primarily in connection with low fantasy is, figuratively (but in a sense also literally) speaking, the magic in/of the world as they know it – in Tolkien's words, the primary world.[1] Undoubtedly, "there is a powerful correspondence between types of setting and types of narratives" since "geography and genre are mutually constitutive" (Fletcher, 2016, p. 1). The validity of the statement rings true especially in the case of fantasy literature, which relies heavily on the author's skill of world-building, or rather world-tailoring, world-approximation: one of the primary reasons of readers' fascination with the genre in the first place. Moreover, since "genre fiction offers readers escapism: genre novels, especially fantasy and romance, promise to transport readers beyond their mundane reality or allow them to temporarily inhabit an imaginary elsewhere" (ibid., p. 3). In the case of fantasy literature, the notion of spatiality and spatial awareness are thus of

utmost importance not only "for the trivial and self-evident reason that everything occurs in space, but because where events unfold is integral to how they take shape" (Warf, Arias, 2009, p. 10).

Cities in fiction and fiction (set) in cities

The topos[2] of an urban area, or more precisely a city, seems to have an exceptionally predominant status when it comes to links between space/places and a specific genre/subgenre. Not only urban fantasy[3] can be taken as a conclusive proof of the stated. This type of setting, regarding the particular (sub)genre-identity, is at least equally constitutive or defining in connection with 19th-century city mysteries with their enigmatic cities, detective fiction, alternatively noir fiction with its grim and rotten cities or – to mention a different though related category – cyberpunk where cities are crammed and eclectic.

The fact that the city assumes great significance as a thematic or rather motivic element in literature is also affirmed by the authors of the thematological handbook entitled *Themen und Motive in der Literatur* in their reflection on the fundamental building stones of literary works. This leads to their incorporation of the word "Stadt" (city) into the list of lexicon-entries. In that sense, the short opening sentence is quite eloquent: "A city is a complex style-forming phenomenon" (Daemmrich – Daemmrich, 1995, p. 332; translated from German original by the authors). Moreover, as Horst S. Daemmrich and Ingrid G. Daemmrich conclude, "(c)ities like Berlin, Paris, London, New York and Venice provide the works of art not only with a certain atmosphere [the German word "Kolorit", which seems to be more accurate is used in the original – added by the authors] but also function to a certain extent as a co-player in the plot" (ibid.). This very circumstance seems to be crucial when speaking of what we can label as urban fiction[4] – including 19th-century city mysteries, hardboiled detective fiction, cyberpunk and urban fantasy, etc. In the context of this aggregate of fiction, the city represents far more than just a backdrop to the story since it assumes the function of a character-like and story-affecting (even story-modelling) element.

In his essay *SimCity*, partially quoted above as a motto sui generis, Neil Gaiman states repeatedly that cities are not people; yet at the same time he personifies cities rhetorically by ascribing to them human traits and features: "Occasionally I idle time away by wondering what cities would be like, were they people. Manhattan is, in my head, fast-talking, untrusting, well-dressed but unshaven. London is huge and confused. Paris is elegant and attractive, older than she looks. San Francisco is crazy, but harmless, and very friendly" (Gaiman, 2016). Although one can hardly argue with Gaiman – if approached as multi-level nature-building topoi or rather

as co-players in the plot, as character-like elements with personalities, cities seem to be closer to people than it may seem:

> The claim that a given entity has an atmosphere can be interpreted as an alternative way of saying that it has a distinct character. What is more, atmospheres are understood quite like moods. They may be felt but hardly ever pointed out or fully described to the same extent as, for instance, visual properties. […] One reason why they are compared to moods is that when we perceive an atmosphere, we grasp its essence, not its elements. In other words, atmospheres are totalities. (Andrzejewski – Salwa, 2020)

What is, however, probably even more important within the frame of Andrzejewski's and Salwa's reflection on urban atmosphere, is their initial thought on the meaning of the collocation: "When one thinks of an urban atmosphere, at least two meanings come to mind. It may refer either to the atmosphere of a particular urban space, for example, a street, square, park, and so on, or to the atmosphere of a whole city" (ibid.).

When discussing the subgenre of urban fantasy as literature that is heavily defined precisely by the atmosphere of its urban setting, the mood of its character-like backdrop, and the distinct character of the city-topos, the semantic duality of the phrase *urban atmosphere* provides us with a crucial interpretative tool. After all, London as a powerful example of a city-topos, as utilized in urban fantasy, is – to bring to mind Gaiman's anthropomorphizing words again – *huge and confused*.

In this context, interconnecting the semantics of urban atmosphere and the anthropomorphic approach to cities and city-topoi, the phenomenological concept of genius loci appears to be quite useful. In his inaugural speech held at the 16th general assembly of the International Council on Monument and Sites (ICOMOS), Michael Petzet points out the "dialectics between spirit and place, the intangible and tangible" (2008) and provides an account of cultural origins, diverse presence of genii or "spirits" in different cultures and the current cultural resonance of genius loci. Within the frame of the here-pursued reading of his address, two circumstances are to be emphasized: 1. Interestingly, genius loci can be understood in its totality (city as a whole) as well as its fragmentariness (certain place).[5] 2. Although Petzet does not mention literature directly, by referring to aesthetic qualities in connection with the current cultural significance of genius loci he, in fact, touches upon it indirectly. After all, dealing with literature means to deal with its perception (aesthesis – perception), with the articulation of the

outcomes of perception. In that respect, Gaiman's words – "(t)here are a dozen Londons" – ring true as each of them can be understood as an idiosyncratic, concrete variation of the general or form-providing.

(Urban) spatiality in *Neverwhere*

To exemplify the abovementioned concepts concerning the significance of the city in urban fantasy, Neil Gaiman's seminal novel *Neverwhere* (1996) will be discussed in this context. The novel invites the reader, alongside the main protagonist Richard Mayhew, to explore the subterranean world of London Below. Gaiman's novel recounts the adventurous journey of Richard's entry into the mysterious London underworld which not only posits new challenges for the protagonist but also forces him to reconceptualize everything he knows about the world he inhabits. Although Gaiman's book presents a rather traditional narrative, its charm and appealing character does reside particularly in both the familiarity and unfamiliarity of its setting. The cosmopolitan, busy nature of London Above is contrasted with the enigmatic character of its unknown underground counterpart, which is characterized by dark alleyways and even more obscure inhabitants.

The novel opens with Richard, a young, unassuming Scottish businessman, moving to London to pursue a career in the financial sector. Richard comfortably settles in the sprawling metropolis and his life follows a more or less ordinary path – he acquires a secure job position, a nice apartment and an attractive, albeit rather egoistical and selfish fiancée. "When he had first arrived, he had found London huge, odd, fundamentally incomprehensible, with only the Tube map, that elegant multicolored topographical display of underground railway lines and stations, giving it any semblance of order" (Gaiman, 2009). With time, Richard blends in with the city and its newness gradually fades away. The city seems to swallow him up at times as Richard's life is often dictated by the demands of his job and his ambitious fiancée Jessica. It is when he stumbles across Door, the daughter of the recently murdered Lord Portico from a well-established family from London Below, that his life is, literally, turned upside down. Door and her quirky companion Marquis de Carabas introduce Richard to the hidden world of London Below where he joins them on the quest to find the murderers of Door's family.

In Gaiman's version, London's underground world assumes the qualities of a character-like element. London Below, built around the perimeter of the city's vast Underground system, literally comes to life through a peculiar cast of mostly eccentric characters. The names of London Underground stations, which in most cases do not have any literal, personified counterparts in the world of London Above, allude to specific characters in the realm of the

underground city. Blackfriars station is thus inhabited by real black friars, Shepherd's Bush is associated with a real shepherd and Angel station in Islington is occupied by a mighty angel called Angel Islington, to name just a few. Gaiman's underground London thus literally becomes a living character, a breathing organism that contributes to the unique atmosphere of the fantastic environment.[6]

Moreover, Gaiman's imaginary world, built along a perpendicular axis, juxtaposes life in the *real* London (i.e. London Above) with the dark existence in its mysterious underbelly. "Just as a sewer system, hidden underground, supports the city above, London Below supports London Above, and those who do not fit into its ideological boundaries – the waifs and beggars and homeless – are displaced, forgotten" (Baker, 2016, p. 473). London Below thus represents an example of a vertical city according to Elana Gomel's modalities of the impossible urban space. The vertical layout clearly delineates the boundaries between the two worlds which keep them, for the most part, strictly separated. As Gomel elaborates, "the vertical topography is inherently unstable: either the aboveground city is swallowed up by the abyss underneath it or the two cities become completely cut off from each other" (2014, p. 180). In *Neverwhere*, while the two cities exist simultaneously, literally on top of each other, one can, as Richard soon realizes, inhabit only one space. Therefore, as Richard is experiencing his trials and tribulations in the London underworld, he is incapable of returning back to his previous life, no matter how hard he tries.

Arguably, though the two Londons and their respective inhabitants operate in separate spaces, they do function as doppelgänger entities, as inverted representations of one another. London Above exemplifies a typical modern-day metropolis characterized by the ever-present business and fast-paced life that permeates all spheres of both social and individual lives.

> It was a city in which the very old and the awkwardly new jostled each other, not uncomfortably, but without respect; a city of shops and offices and restaurants and homes, of parks and churches, of ignored monuments and remarkably unpalatial palaces; a city of hundreds of districts with strange names – Crouch End, Chalk Farm, Earl's Court, Marble Arch – and oddly distinct identities; a noisy, dirty, cheerful, troubled city, which fed on tourists, needed them as it despised them, in which the average speed of transportation through the city had not increased in three hundred years, following five hundred years of fitful road widening and unskillful compromises between the needs of traffic, whether horse-drawn or,

> more recently, motorized, and the needs of pedestrians; a city inhabited by and teeming with people of every color and manner and kind. (Gaiman, 2009)

The pace as well as the accompanying ignorance of the city dwellers of everything outside their circle of interest is best exemplified by Richard's fiancée Jessica. When stumbling upon the wounded Door, Jessica is more than willing to ignore the girl's plight and continue her evening plans revolving around an important business dinner with her boss. Richard's sensibility, on the other hand, sharply contrasts with Jessica's detachment and lack of empathy, which seem to embody the essence of London's class-divided society. "London grew into something huge and contradictory. It was a good place, and a fine city, but there is a price to be paid for all good places, and a price that all good places have to pay" (Gaiman, 2009). Therefore, "Jessica's intensely individualistic perspective crystallizes as a caricature of the London norm, just as Richard's choice propels him toward a more formulaic transition into another world" (Baker, 2016, p. 473). Richard's act of kindness challenges and defies the norms and routines of metropolitan life and thus earns him entry to the fantastical world of the city's outcasts.

In this respect, Gaiman's novel, with its mirroring layout, participates in a critical social discourse. The carnivalesque environment of London Below, inhabited by strange and bizarre creatures and individuals, purposefully uncovers London's social stratification and class divisions and holds a mirror up to its citizens. Marquis de Carabas touches upon this fact when talking to the confused Richard: "there are two Londons. There's London Above – that's where you lived – and then there's London Below – the Underside – inhabited by the people who fell through the cracks in the world" (Gaiman, 2009). Gaiman characterizes London Above in an almost carnivorous manner – just as the city has sprawled and swallowed its surrounding environs over the course of history, so does the modern city swallow those who do not fit its particular lifestyle and character:

> Two thousand years before, London had been a little Celtic village on the north shore of the Thames which the Romans had encountered and settled in. London had grown, slowly, until, roughly a thousand years later, it met the tiny Royal City of Westminster immediately to the west, and, once London Bridge had been built, London met the town of Southwark directly across the river; and it continued to grow, fields and woods and marshland slowly vanishing beneath the flourishing town, and it continued to expand, encountering other little villages and hamlets as it grew, like Whitechapel and Deptford to the east, Hammersmith and Shepherd's

> Bush to the west, Camden and Islington in the north, Battersea and Lambeth across the Thames to the south, absorbing all of them as it grew, just as a pool of mercury encounters and incorporates smaller beads of mercury, leaving only their names behind. (Gaiman, 2009)

The city's unrelenting nature results in the creation of its underground counterpart which invites and embraces all those who were abandoned by the harsh rules of the space above. In other words, "London sacrifices those who cannot or will not conform to social standards and suppresses them, both literally and figuratively, into its underground core, leaving an inviting and mesmerising veneer" (Michaeli, 2017, p. 22). London Below, constructed around London's Underground stations, dark alleyways and sewers (its topography assumes almost a Gothic character), is home to outsiders as well as some peculiar characters, including Rat-Speakers, angels, warriors, Velvets and other-worldly assassins. Moreover, it personifies the place-names of London Above which are turned into special characters. While the underground city may appear as chaotic and anarchic at first sight, there is a specific hierarchical system in place. In fact, London Below can be regarded as "an allegorical representation of a class-society, one that is a fantastical projection of the present, and one that spatializes class divisions on the space" (ibid., 21). Once plunged into the fantastical realm of London Below, Richard himself becomes an un-person, i.e. he becomes invisible to the inhabitants of London Above.

However, Gaiman's employment of the fantastic setting does not only function as a mirror of London's social stratification; it also operates as a place of transformation. While Richard's personal as well as professional life in London Above, i.e. the real London, was rather uneventful, once he is transported to London Below he becomes a vital part in Door's dangerous quest to find her parents' murderers. The risky mission requires him to complete challenging tasks which, consequently, contribute to a major development of the protagonist. In the course of the quest, Richard is transformed both mentally and physically. Undergoing arduous tasks and facing his fears, he succeeds in evolving into a more mature person, able to articulate his preferences independently and convincingly. In that sense, space both facilitates and imposes his development on him; *Neverwhere* thus alludes to "a metaphorical mapping of the self where there is room for transformation and change, allowing the characters to gain awareness and work out issues of self and identity" (Çetiner-Öktem, 2019, p. 130).

Richard's immersion in the world of the London underground proceeds from an initial stage of bewilderment, disorientation and feeling of entrapment to a subsequent phase of acceptance and his own choice to return to the dispossessed in the end. The unfamiliar space

both moulds and transforms him in a process of reciprocal communication and formation. The acquired ability to navigate the unknown territory earns Richard not only the right to stay but also to decide his spatial preference and affinity for himself. Though he entered the space as an astonished spectator, in the end he represents a rather confident dweller of the fantastic realm.

Conclusion

In *Neverwhere*, space functions both as a vehicle for social critique and a constitutive element of the protagonist's transformation. It is "not simply a passive reflection of social and cultural trends, but an active participant, i.e. geography is constitutive as well as representative" (Warf, Arias, 2009, p. 10). The underground city reflects the vices of its shinier counterpart above ground and exposes its insufficiencies and flaws. "London Below is devised as a counter-world in which a society chasing after success and money may recognise its own limitations and triviality" (Korte, Zipp 2014, p. 51). The fantastical landscape thus not only satiates the reader's hunger for the unknown but also participates in a larger social discourse as the possibility to view the city above from a different perspective casts a critical look at its social standards and norms. In other words, Gaiman's spatial constructions force the protagonist (and the reader) to navigate an unknown territory that sheds light on his former place of residence as well. At the same time, the protagonist's plunge into a new space demarcates the lines of his own development and transformation. As Çetiner-Öktem argues, "[t]hese doppelgänger cityscapes both haunt and liberate the protagonists as they journey through mappable and unmappable spaces that enforce a reckoning of the self" (2019, p. 130). Thus, the novel allows the readers to ascend to the inverted city alongside the protagonist and uncover his individual potential. In her essays on the mythopoetics of the city, Daniela Hodrová states that "[i]n both texts – in the literary text as well as in the Text of a city – what is more important than the moment of knowledge is the process of acquiring knowledge" (2006, p. 24). She concludes that "within urban texts this process is then certainly or as a rule more substantial in fictional texts than in books about a city or city guidebooks" (ibid., p. 24-25). Urban fantasy, epitomized by Gaiman's *Neverwhere*, provides readers with a unique experience that reaches far beyond the daily, the ordinary and the mapped, albeit being largely set in daily or even ordinary areas: "Regardless of what urban-fantasy type or formula is described, however – a number of strands – tropes, character types, settings, and genre elements interweave, indicating a thematic concern of the genre. Dark, labyrinthine, or subterranean settings that obscure our view; social outcasts we consciously look away from; and fantastical beings that hide out of sight combine to produce

a strong focus on that in which in some sense or other is not seen; the Unseen" (Ekman, 2016, p. 463).[7]

Endnotes:

[1] Tolkien's distinction between a primary and secondary world, as we here refer to it, is contained in his iconic and well-recognized essay *On Fairy Stories*. Concerning the connection between this dichotomy and urban fantasy, we agree with Stefan Ekman (2016, p. 456): "Both primary and secondary worlds can provide settings for urban fantasy".

[2] Also Miroslav Marcelli, the author of what can be understood as a loose trilogy of monographs reflecting on the relation between philosophy and cities (2008, 2011, 2015), addresses the nature of topos/topoi relatively briefly and with reference to Ernst Robert Curtius, Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov. See and compare Marcelli 2014, pp. 42-45.

[3] Unlike Ekman (2016, p. 452), however, we see and approach urban fantasy here as a subgenre, not genre per se.

[4] Similarly, Daniela Hodrová uses the collocation "urban text" in this meaning (in Czech original „urbánní text"). See and compare for example Hodrová, 2006, p. 47.

[5] The concept of genius loci is creatively – although, in fact, simply by turning back to its cultural roots – utilized by Ben Aaronovitch in his urban fantasy *Rivers of London* series: "The *genii locorum*, like Beverley, Oxley, and the rest of the dysfunctional family Thames, were also living beings on one level, also got their power from their surroundings" (Aaronovitch 2011, p. 189). Moreover, Aaronovitch's as well as Gaiman's works, so to speak, both legitimize the aforementioned dual (city as a whole, as a certain place) understanding of genius loci within the frame of literary practice.

[6] This creative strategy is echoed in Aaronovitch's work: "Bartholomew, who could bore for England on the subject of *genii locorum*, was adamant that 'the nature spirits' as he called them, would always take some of the characteristics of the locus they represented" (Aaronovitch, 2011, p. 179).

[7] Ekman's concept of the Unseen can be linked to Hodrová's concept of "places with a secret" (in Czech original "místa s tajemstvím"), i.e. the city. See and compare Hodrová, 1994.

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