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► **To cite this version:**

Julie Morère. Introduction: The Spatial Imaginary in Contemporary British Literature and the Arts. *Études britanniques contemporaines - Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines*, 2014, 47, 10.4000/ebc.1770 . hal-04564844

HAL Id: hal-04564844

<https://hal.science/hal-04564844>

Submitted on 30 Apr 2024

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/1770>

DOI: 10.4000/ebc.1770

ISSN: 2271-5444

Publisher

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

Brought to you by Nantes Université



Electronic reference

Julie Morère, "Introduction: The Spatial Imaginary in Contemporary British Literature and the Arts", *Études britanniques contemporaines* [Online], 47 | 2014, Online since 21 October 2014, connection on 30 April 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/1770> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.1770>

This text was automatically generated on February 16, 2023.



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Introduction: The Spatial Imaginary in Contemporary British Literature and the Arts

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- 1 The 2013 annual Conference of the SEAC held at the University of Nantes and *lieu unique* in Nantes, France, chose to investigate new perspectives in both literature and the arts through their intrinsic relation to the imaginary of space. The 'spatial turn' which was largely initiated by Henri Lefebvre's work *La Production de l'espace* elicited renewed interest in the category of the imagination as theorized by Su, offering new tracks to study contemporary fiction writers.
- 2 The Conference was a success due to the exceptional papers that were presented by international researchers whom the organizers wish to thank warmly for their enthusiastic involvement in this event. We also wish to thank the University of Nantes and the CRINI research group (*Centre de Recherche sur les Identités Nationales et l'Interculturalité*) for their help and support. On the second day of this Conference, we were honored to be hosted at the *lieu unique, scène nationale* of Nantes, a unique space for artistic exploration directed by Patrick Gyger. The Conference was followed by a thrilling round table initiated by Catherine Bernard, University Paris -Denis-Diderot, President of the SEAC, and was dedicated to recent British fictional works.
- 3 'The Spatial Imaginary' Conference aimed at no longer drawing a neat dividing line between reason and the imagination and refusing to confine the latter to the realm of aesthetic judgment and artistic creativity. Contemporary thinkers tend rather to see imagination as a way to reach and shape other forms of knowledge, or to attain to knowledge by different means, through oblique, circuitous ways. Far from being a safe retreat, severed off from the world, imagination may be said to be fully engaged in it, intensifying the real. Seen in this perspective, space in literature and the arts (photography, music, painting, the visual arts, etc.) is no longer limited to a topical, metaphorical or rhetorical function. It is no longer reduced to the level of setting or

backcloth and pertains to the artistic experience, both at the production and reception levels.

- 4 The first papers explore the spatial imaginary by questioning its very (non)existence, its abstract yet textual dimension, and its temporality. By underlining the way in which Swift plays with disjointed time-spaces to discuss the idea of uprootedness—cutting, pasting, condensing, extracting or remodelling the text—Pascale Tollance shows how the author questions the notion of ‘no-place’ or ‘indeterminacy’. *Wish you Were Here* recreates a fictional space somehow composed as a musical score along which the mind is set into motion only when the body starts being translated from one space to the next. Addressing *The Unlimited Dream Company* by J. G. Ballard, Smeralda Cappello sheds light on the staging of space and the way in which Ballard uses Surrealism to criticise an illusory materialistic world. By juxtaposing a new universe and the ordinary space of the London suburbs, he makes physical space a simulacrum hiding Surrealist elements that subvert the rationality of the modern world. Marie Mianowski insists on McCann’s poetic spatial imagination in terms of journeying across, following one’s own trajectory over vast periods of time, generations and transatlantic distances. Mianowski’s paper argues that space is a constant state of ‘becoming’ (Ingold 142), and ‘not a flat, abstract, two-dimensional surface deprived of temporality’ (Massey 3). In C, McCarthy explores modernity as an abstract spatial system encrypted with transmissions, codes, and frequencies which Catherine Lanone engagingly reads as a metatextual attempt to grasp perspective on the world. The paper underlines the way visual arts (photography, film, painting) or soundscapes (the radio) help to create in-between landscapes in which the human and the technological are entangled.
- 5 Other papers have also chosen to concentrate on the hybridity and variety of media used in British and Irish arts, which constitute another layer of spatial analysis in relation to the creative process. The three photographers chosen by Valérie Morisson draw inspiration from the local West Irish landscape and the scars left by history. The paper wonders whether Ireland has been an imaginary place made real through photography or if real places have been made imaginary through photography, positing the artist as an ‘envisionary’ (Lippard 19) who construes photographic *memento mori*. Focusing on the works of three fashion photographers who have elected Glastonbury festival as a common setting at some point in their career, Julie Morère’s article measures the impact of festival culture on the imagination of the three artists under scrutiny—and of these artists’ works on the Glastonburian space—as well as on the British imagination at large in the light of global culture industry theories and the hybridization of cultural practices. Nicole Terrien’s paper explores the mechanisms through which Rhys creates a complex space of representation between urban landscapes and imaginary spaces, allowing the reader to hear, see and feel through references to the fine arts and the power of language, from the multi-layered space of the imagination to a space of contradictions.
- 6 Layered spaces, literary creation and the quest for identities are questioned by Philip Tew, from Brunel University, who kindly accepted our invitation as a keynote speaker for this Conference, as he considers the notion of traumatic space in Will Self’s and Zadie Smith’s culturally significant fictions that evoke a strong sense of uncertain times and spaces. Lucie Guiheneuf investigates Bryher’s personification of space, spatialization of identity and ‘geographical emotions’ (Bryher 23). She observes how space shapes the memory and imagination of the subject—if writing about a place close

to one's heart necessarily means that one is writing about oneself—reinventing oneself through a nomadic form of the imaginary space on the page, from one island to the next in the Isles of Scilly. Abolishing the dichotomy between the country and the city, questioning the territories of genders in *Late Call* by Angus Wilson, Jean-Christophe Murat shows how the novel is trying to explore and map a high and low cultural terrain on the metalinguistic level.

- 7 The notions of itinerancy, inner and outer spatial trajectories, are tackled in papers that harp upon the structural impact of spatial imaginaries on the novel. In her paper on *Pilgrimage* by Dorothy Richardson, Florence Marie shows how London plays a metaphorical and symbolical role in the way the young protagonist becomes a writer as she relentlessly wanders along the London streets, listening to the tapping of her feet on the pavement. When considering the motif of the road in *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri, Christian Gutleben insists on its impact on the structure of the novel which is a sign of the author's ideological commitment: the road in Okri's work is neither to be seen strictly from an African point of view as exclusively circular, shamanic or infinite, nor literally linear, nor even as a journey of initiation as often suggested in Western literary works. Borrowing the title of her paper from Ben Okri's second novel *The Landscapes Within*, Vanessa Guignery chooses to focus on the blurring of boundaries between inside and outside in *The Famished Road*, between the physical world and the imaginary one, showing how this apparent space duality fuels the author's limitless imagination and is reflected in the oscillation between the Western literary tradition of realism and the West African attachment to the supernatural.

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