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A Street-Level View of the World-City: John Lanchester's London in *Capital* (2012)

Écrire la ville-monde au prisme d'une rue : le Londres de John Lanchester dans *Capital* (2012)

Marianne Hillion

- Capital* is John Lanchester's fourth novel after *The Debt to Pleasure* (1996), *Mr Phillips* (2000), and *Fragrant Harbour* (2002). This choral novel interweaves the trajectories of multiple characters who are all connected to Pepys Road, a fictitious residential street located in South West London, unremarkable yet highly gentrified. The cast is divided between residents (an investment banker and his shopaholic wife, a Pakistani family who run the corner shop, a young football star player from Senegal living in his manager's house, and a widow who has lived in the street all her life) and regular visitors and workers (a Polish builder, a Hungarian nanny, an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe who works as a traffic warden). With one street as its narrative matrix, the plot revolves around the disruption triggered by the delivery of anonymous postcards to the inhabitants, featuring pictures of their houses inscribed with a simple message: *We Want What You Have*. In addition to this local crisis, the plot unfolds even as the collapse of the global financial system is underway, and the novel has thus been read as addressing the 2007–2008 financial crisis (Di Bernardo, Korte) and been referred to as 'credit crunch fiction' (Shaw 2015). As suggested by the double meaning of the title, *Capital* encapsulates Lanchester's long-lasting concern with both money and London, and in particular with the impact of global finance on urban life. The writer's interest in the transformation of cities under the pressures of global capital was already palpable in *Fragrant Harbour*, set in a fast-changing Hong-Kong, as well as in his numerous essays which investigate the complex mechanisms of the financial system.¹ Yet I will argue that the 2008 crash is just one of the crises which give its structure to the novel. Even more than the spectacular crumbling of global finance, John

Lanchester's novel encodes the frantic—though less dramatic—real estate speculation which heralded it.²

- 2 Besides, if this novel may appear as a typical 'condition-of-England' novel insofar as it 'seeks to diagnose the state of the nation at the time of the 2008 financial crisis' (Perkin 111), this paper follows in the steps of Catherine Bernard's analysis of *Capital* as a 'world novel', which breaks through national boundaries to 'write to the world and about the world from within the turbine hall of the capitalist powerhouse' (Bernard 2015, 145), following a double metonymic logic: 'Pepys Road stands for the capital city which itself stands for the capitalist system at large' (Lanchester 2012, 147). The novel is indeed primarily concerned with London as one of the centres of the world-system, or, in Doreen Massey's words, a 'world-city', 'a crucial node in the production of what is an increasingly unequal world' (3).³ However, far from locating his narrative of the mutating world-city in the urban landscapes of global finance, such as the City of London or the more recent financial district of Canary Wharf, the author paradoxically chooses to situate it in an 'ordinary-looking street in South London' (Lanchester 2012, 1).
- 3 A large number of British novelists have fictionalised the damaging impact of neoliberalism on contemporary London, notably through a similar choral structure: Zadie Smith's *NW*, Jonathan Coe's *Number 11*, Sebastian Faulk's *A Week in December* are only a few examples. Yet the tightened compass of Lanchester's realist geography of London stands out in this literary landscape. What does this representational scale imply and how does it help us think the notion of urban crisis anew? By reading the novel in the light of urban speculation, scale and literary realism, this paper seeks to explain how the street-level view of the world-city and the revisiting of realist strategies enable the author to encode the most insidious effects of global capitalism on urban life.

Literary Realism and the World-City

- 4 Critics have underlined the inscription of *Capital* in the tradition of the nineteenth-century realist novel, based on the observation of social types that are representatives of a given society as it transforms under the pressures of capital. J. Russell Perkin, for instance, has studied the creative dialogue between Lanchester and Dickens, both radical critics and chroniclers of the impact of capitalism on the city. This connection between the two writers is substantiated by common realistic literary strategies aiming at rendering two moments of intensified transformation of London. F. S. Schwarzbach points out that Dickens's novels encode the shift of London from the centre of the nation to the centre of the world (101), a point which is developed by Tanya Agathocleous, who argues that Dickens' 'urban realism' emerged as a literary response to London's growing size and transformation into an imperial 'cosmopolis'. *Bleak House* thus captures London's global expansion while stressing the failure of the house, and by extension, of the city, to 'stand in for a national community' (Agathocleous 111).
- 5 Lanchester's revisiting of the realist, condition-of-England novel to express anxieties over social fragmentation and the disappearance of human connections in a 'world-city' also connects with E. M. Forster's *Howards End*. In yet another era of huge economic and urban mutations, the novel provides a potent critical analysis of England's ailing condition, and the (failed) interaction between various social types

points to the danger of urban modernisation (embodied by the apartment blocks mushrooming everywhere in London), which partly results from Britain's imperialist endeavours. However, if both Forster and Lanchester are concerned by 'suburbanization' (Lanchester 2013, 15), the latter's liberal critique of urban financialisation in *Capital* is underpinned by an egalitarian urban ideal rather than a Forsterian rural, aristocratic golden age.

- 6 *Capital* speaks of London as one of the centres of the world-economy, in which the extreme concentration of capital draws in migrants from the semi-peripheries (Eastern Europe and former colonies) and makes housing prices skyrocket.⁴ In a characteristic realist fashion, Pepys Road offers a wide panorama of social types at a time of socio-economic mutations, and the text minutely details each character's relationship with the city and with money, pointing to the central position of London in the capitalist system. The characters are clearly divided between those who gentrify the street and those who service the gentrifiers, their proximity only emphasising the unequal distribution of wealth in the city. Yet John Day underlines that all of the characters experience London 'primarily as self-interested speculator[s]' (Day 262). Thus, Roger Yount first appears sitting at his office desk in the City of London 'doing sums' (Lanchester 2012, 15). The next sentence undercuts the image of a hardworking banker: 'he was trying to work out if his bonus that year would come to a million pounds' (15). The ironic deflation already hints at the satirical characterisation of Roger as a lazy, egotistical speculator—enhanced by the detailed enumeration of his high-priced possessions in the following pages—but also highlights the importance of speculation in the novel. In turn, Matya, the Younts' nanny, is both exhilarated and frustrated by the perpetual movement of cash running through the city. She has come from her small Hungarian town to London to 'try her luck' in a city which seemed to float on 'currents of money' (337), yet she seems stuck on the threshold of the city: 'things were happening, but not to her. If the city was one huge shop window, she was outside on the pavement, looking in' (337). Her suspended condition echoes the social and existential stagnation of the other migrant characters in the novel, seemingly 'waiting for [their] life to begin' (337).
- 7 Zbigniew's dream of upward mobility, allegorised in his project of elevator business in Poland, is stalled as his construction business and his small share portfolio thrive yet fail to meet sufficient heights for him to go back home, thus indefinitely extending the 'temporary interlude' that his life in London is supposed to be (71). These stories of failed migration, reaching their climax in Quentina's rejected asylum request, suggest the crushing forces of the unequal city. One deceptive plot-twist embodies the deflating of nineteenth-century realist novels' social mobility: as he renovates Petunia Howe's house, Zbigniew comes across a suitcase full of ten-pound banknotes hidden in a bedroom wall. However, this proper Dickensian 'miracle' is crushed as the old banknotes, secretly saved by Petunia's late husband, turn out to be valueless, thus making Zbigniew's sudden fortune melt into thin air. This parable about the volatility of change value gestures towards the self-reflexive rewriting of Dickensian tropes in the light of twenty-first-century London's global position.
- 8 In fact, if contemporary, post-Thatcher London does evoke Victorian and Edwardian London, three time-spaces defined by accelerated urban growth, intense speculation and growing inequalities, Lanchester's novel also embodies the way literary forms adjust to the changing shapes of capitalist production. Thus, Lanchester's

appropriation of realism refracts the metamorphosis of urban space in the latest phase of capitalism, i.e. the shift from industrial production to credit and speculation as the main engines of economic growth. Mobility in Lanchester's *Capital* is primarily that of capital and of property value rather than that of individuals. The novel dramatises what David Harvey calls 'urban entrepreneurialism', or the transformation of urban structure and infrastructure into *markets*, which have become fundamental dimensions of capitalist accumulation, thus making urban housing a critical asset and a prime material of accumulation strategies (Harvey 1989, 2012).⁵ The financialisation of urban space, fostered by Thatcher's policies of deregulation and privatisation of urban housing, has indeed paved the way for the City rule over the city (Duff 4) and has resulted in a profound housing crisis in London (Watt & Minton).

- 9 Raymond Williams stresses the centrality of buildings in Dickens's novels: the novelist perceived that 'the most evident inhabitants of cities are buildings, and that there is at once a connection and a confusion between the shapes and appearance of buildings and the real shapes and appearances of the people who live in them' (Williams 34–35). Lanchester takes a step further by making the houses the central characters of the novel, while undermining the analogy between houses and people, as the city buildings do not emerge as a 'human landscape' (Williams 37) anymore, being primarily considered as liquid assets. This newfound centrality of property speculation is symbolised by the spatial organisation of *Capital*. In fact, the novel moves from one house to another almost in each chapter: the first chapters thus closely depict each house, jumping from number 42 to 51 to 68 and then to 27, and the plot revolves around the houses themselves.
- 10 First, an overarching narratorial voice traces back the history (or biography) of Pepys Road in the prologue, which provides a miniature history of London, a '*buildingsroman* describing the street's changing fortunes as though it were a character in a Victorian novel' (Day 257). These houses, the prologue tells us, were built in the late nineteenth century, inhabited by lower- and middle-class families up to the late twentieth century, when 'an astonishing plot twist on the residents of Pepys Road' occurred (Lanchester 2012, 4). The fictional lexicon stresses the arbitrariness of this process, which is further highlighted: 'For the first time in history, the people who lived in the street were, by global and maybe even by local standard, rich. The thing which made them rich was the very fact that they lived in Pepys Road' (4). The abundant use of the language of irrationality and magic gives these economic shifts dramatic power while enhancing the seemingly arbitrary disconnection between exchange-value and use-value, as with this analogy between Pepys Road and Texas:
- It was like Texas during the oil rush, except that instead of sticking a hole in the ground to make fossil fuel shoot up from it, all people had to do was sit and imagine the cash value of their homes rattling upwards so fast that they couldn't see the figures go round. (6)
- 11 The trivial register and the trans-historical comparison heighten both the magic eruption of money and the transition to speculation, as the production of value is increasingly detached from human labour. The houses thus become sources of profit in themselves, 'central actors in their own right' (6) although only as reified commodities. Through this allegorical language, the prologue thus anchors the plot to the life of these houses, which is delineated in the novel.

- 12 Second, the central plot device used in the novel is the series of postcards sent to the residents, which adds an element of mystery and triggers another type of speculation, since the novel follows a young inspector investigating this crime. This anonymous campaign, which then escalates into proper vandalism, evokes the classic realist code of a secret benefactor or antagonist. However, in this case, the threat is not individual but collective, and it weighs upon houses and their improbably rising value rather than upon their inhabitants. Significantly, the only connection between the residents throughout the novel consists in the potential threat to the value of their property. The neighbours seldom interact and the only time they are gathered together is during a public meeting concerning the postcards, which only highlights how disconnected they are, as nobody truly wants to be there: Arabella Yount is more concerned about her 'knicker crisis' (373) and her shopping plans than about the local crisis the community is facing.⁶
- 13 Lanchester also discusses the transformation of London under the pressure of the City in an essay entitled 'Cityphilia', the term referring to the government's 'uncritical and uninformed' love for the City (Lanchester 2008). Starting with Clapham, the neighbourhood where he lives and where *Capital* is set, he describes the way that 'City money is strangling London life', an argument also made by Chris Hamnett, who states that the expensiveness of the housing market is generated by the demand from highly paid workers in finance, law and related areas.⁷ Lanchester depicts the 'non-stop turmoil' of construction, excavation and extensions as 'generated by the City people, since we aborigines for the most part tend not to move' (Lanchester 2008). The fragment pointedly stresses the rapid turnover of ownership in his street, indicating the liquidity of houses. As we will see, the echoes between this description of frantic construction work and the novel's prologue are striking, even though the explanation for the 'miracle' of such skyrocketing prices is 'kept secret' in *Capital*.⁸
- 14 Lanchester believes in the power of fictional language to grasp financial matters. He complains about the conspicuous absence of money from contemporary literary fiction, 'which often seems to have a positive aversion to the depiction of work in general, and financial work in particular', and traces it to the rejection of 'subject' and research as non-literary since Henry James's conceptualisation of the novel as a self-reflexive work of art (Lanchester 2012a). He thus goes back to Dickens, Balzac and Trollope as forefathers, writers who attended to ordinary objects, money, legal matters, and the materiality of everyday life. This realist lineage, claimed by the writer himself, contrasts indeed with other contemporary literary production's on urban mutation and speculation, characterised by their leap away from realism.

Scaling Down the Urban Crisis

- 15 Location and scale are instrumental to Lanchester's realism and to his subdued encoding of urban crisis: first, the financialisation of urban space is not seen in the novel from the centre-stage of global finance in London, but from an a non-descript residential street located in an area which is mostly an uncharted literary territory. This rather eccentric location enables the author to investigate less conspicuous dimensions of the urban crisis. Second, Lanchester scales down the modernist trope of urban instability and metamorphosis by focusing on the protean nature of ordinary houses rather than on the eruption of new spectacular buildings and monumental

emblems of 'financial architecture' (Shaw 2014, 45).⁹ In fact, the houses on Pepys Road are perpetually renovated, built-up, converted, extended upward or downward. The prologue details the building frenzy meant to increase property values, hinting at the status of housing as a profitable asset.

There were builders in the street, all the time, servicing the houses, doing up lofts and kitchens and knocking through and adding on, and there was always at least one skip parked in the street, and at least one set of scaffolding. The new craze was for doing up basements and turning them into rooms—kitchens, playrooms, utility rooms—and the houses going in for this craze had conveyors of dirt flowing into skips. (Lanchester 2012, 6)

- 16 The accumulative syntax mimics the endless construction works which ceaselessly change the physiognomy of the street. The Younts' house perfectly embodies this craze for renovation:

The house in Pepys Road was double-fronted and had cost £2,500,000, which at the time had felt like the top of the market, even though prices had risen a great deal since then. They had converted the loft, dug out the basement, redone all the wiring and plumbing because there was no point in not doing it. . . . They had added two bathrooms and changed the main bathroom into an en suite, then changed it into a wet room because they were all the rage, then changed it back into a normal (though very deluxe) bathroom because there was something vulgar about the wet room and also the humidity seeped into the bedroom and made Arabella feel chesty. (19–20)

- 17 The accumulation of clauses replicates the successive alterations to the house, the piling up of words conveying the absurdity of this endless cycle of creation-destruction. The irrationality and vanity of the process is also heightened by the use of free indirect speech, which underlines the Younts' subjugation to fashion crazes. The satirical tone is particularly palpable in the example of the bathroom, which is finally turned back to its original state, suggesting that this construction frenzy becomes nonsensical. If the house has gradually taken centre-stage in the Younts' lives, it mostly appears as an asset which enables them to avoid ruin when Roger is fired from the bank and when the financial crisis hits. This perpetual make-over thus suggests material investment in properties rather than the creation of an affective bond between the houses and their residents through everyday practices.
- 18 The novel encodes only one long-lasting personal relationship between a resident and their building, and does so through pathos. Petunia Howe's decrepit house, soon to be made up and sold by her daughter even as Petunia is slowly dying of cancer in her bedroom (320–22), stands out in the protean landscape of the street. Its unchanging condition symbolises both the old lady's uneventful life, her affective link to her house, as well as the multi-layered history of the neighbourhood. The crumbling wallpaper, the lace curtains, the linoleum floor, the old telephone as well as her abundant garden appear as relics of a bygone era.¹⁰ Smitty, Petunia's grandson, describes the kitchen as 'a form of time travel to 1955 when his nan was just being his nan, as permanent and unchangeable as a piece of sculpture' (251) and senses Petunia's living presence through her objects: 'the objects had Nan in them, her care and attention and her wanting them to be this way. . . . While she was dying, it was as if they were dying too, the care and the wanting-them-to-be-this-way draining out of them' (251–52). The melancholy tone heightens the loss of meaning of these objects, and points to the disappearance of the lower-middle classes from the city's gentrified neighbourhoods.

The divorce of space from affect is made blatant through Zbigniew's clinical description of the alterations he will make to the house, peppered with price indications:

Linoleum. Strip and repaint, take out the kitchen, put in a new one from a kit. Check the wiring... Quote in the low teens... Everything was going to be neutral, cream and white. Modern fittings. No problem; Zbigniew knew how to do that. More scribbling. Quote heading toward the middle teens... New bath and shower and basin and cupboards and fittings, good margin on all that, subs would be happy. Quote in the middle teens.' (320–21).

- 19 The litany of rising prices mimics the implacable logic of capital, which wipes out and papers over all traces of the life lived in this place. The house is thus emptied of its affective dimension, its historical layers are erased even as it is turned into a more valuable commodity. This process directly evokes the emptying out of the *topos* of the house as an image of the national community that Catherine Bernard observes in contemporary British literature and arts, reflecting the fragmentation of the social and political body in post-Thatcher Britain (Bernard 2018, 199). In fact, the impersonal houses of Lanchester's novel are reminiscent of Rachel Whiteread's *House*, an *in-situ* full-scale caste of the inner space of a terraced house doomed to demolition in London's East End. This inaccessible yet tangible inner space, Bernard argues, 'shows up the body politic of gentrified, impersonal, late capitalist London to be erected on the dumb corpse of a formerly vibrant culture' (2006, 210). If Whiteread's sculpture lets the suppressed culture return under the form of collective recollection, Lanchester's pessimistic novel leaves little doubt as to the resurgence of lower-middle-class culture on Pepys Road.
- 20 However, Lanchester's sticking to a micro-scale of representation and to realism stands out in contemporary British urban writing. Perkin underlines that Lanchester's prose, if satirical, 'tends towards restraint and understatement' rather than excess (106). His quiet narrative departs from the apocalyptic vision of a decaying city, as in Martin Amis's *London Fields* (1999), or from the urban dystopias of J. G. Ballard's *Millennium People* (2003) and Will Self's *Book of Dave* (2006). Barbara Korte also stresses how unexpected Lanchester's choice of realism appears in the light of its concern with financial capitalism. She quotes Paul Crosthwaite, who finds realism 'wholly inadequate' to the subject matter of fiction about a financial crisis 'that was in many ways unreal, impersonal, and amoral' (Crosthwaite 39). In fact, other literary registrations of the shift to finance and speculation as the main sources of surplus value use forms ranging from postmodernist experiment to gothic pastiche and dystopia, all exceeding the limits of realism. Jonathan Coe's 2015 novel *Number 11* intersects in many ways with *Capital*, primarily because it encodes the property boom of 2000s London, and uses similar interconnected plot lines and multiple points of view. Yet Coe's pastiche of gothic horror films in his novel strongly departs from Lanchester's realism. The fifth part of *Number 11* is set in London and charts the trajectory of Rachel, a young woman who is hired as a private tutor for the children of the Gunns, an extremely wealthy family, and moves into their luxurious house in Chelsea. If the demographics of Chelsea and Clapham are obviously different, Coe's novel depicts a similar frenzy of construction and renovation. However, Coe inflates this frenzy through satirical excess as he narrates the unravelling of an extravagant extension project in the house. Mrs Gunn, an extreme version of Arabella Yount, has undertaken the construction of an eleven-level basement underneath the house, comprising, among other, a cinema, a gymnasium, a wine-cellar, and, the servants'

quarters. When Rachel asks the construction manager the reason why she wants the eleventh level built, he answers:

'Nothing. She can't think of anything that she wants it for.' . . . 'She wants it,' said Mr Blake, 'because she can have it. Because she can afford it. And because . . . I don't know—because no one else has an eleventh floor in their basement? Or she's just heard about somebody who has ten and she wants to go one better? Who knows? She's mad. These people are all barking mad.' (Coe 544)

- 21 The lack of rationality behind this colossal excavation project is reminiscent of the Younts' nonsensical make-over of their house. Nonetheless, the construction pit itself, 'deeper than most tube stations' (293), takes on eerie tinges as the works progress, and is perceived by Rachel as a 'fathomless void' (477), 'an inflamed, gaping wound in the landscape' (525). In a deliberate intertextual play with horror films, Coe's novel shifts from satirical realism to comic-gothic horror as the construction site becomes the stage of tragic events: one of the construction workers dies in a work accident, before other people and animals are mysteriously killed by a giant spider haunting the basement.¹¹ This haunted basement, suggesting the excess of the upper class and the consequent spectralisation of the working classes and of immigrants, is metonymically related to the city at large, as human skeletons are discovered underneath Liverpool Street Station, giving rise to a character's disquieting statement on London:

They tell us something important about London, which is that we're never quite sure what lies underneath us, beneath our feet. There is always the sense that if we dig too deeply beneath London's surface, we might uncover something sinister, something nasty. People find this a frightening idea, of course, but also rather an exciting one. (Coe 482)

- 22 As Vanessa Guignery argues, 'Coe's exploitation of the concepts of haunting and spectrality enables him both to inscribe his novel within a specific filmic and literary tradition and to portray contemporary British society as a frightful world haunted by past and present traumas' (180). Lanchester's realism contrasts with Coe's political gothic parody and dystopian undertones, even though the prologue hints at the sinister dimension of the mountains of dirt excavated to dig basements (Coe 6).
- 23 The aesthetic politics of Lanchester's realism rather lie in his minute, sometimes suffocating depiction of everyday life in an ordinary residential street. I contend that this tightened scope as well as the author's dense, reticular prose may be best suited to expose the way in which neoliberalism permeates the most ordinary social practices in the city, turning all human connections into a web of financial transactions. Thus, while Barbara Korte seems to regret the narrow geographical and social range of the novel (Korte 501), I would argue that this zooming in on one neighbourhood brings out the everyday effects of great historical changes. This intensive study of a circumscribed area does not bring out the rich life of a local society but reveals that the very notion of society has been annihilated in post-Thatcher global London.

A City of Suburbs? Fragmented London

- 24 From Monica Ali's fictionalisation of Brick Lane to Iain Sinclair's psychogeography of Hackney, a number of London novels and essays downscale their exploration to one neighbourhood, the most emblematic one being Zadie Smith's North West. These texts encode the socially and imaginatively constructed formation of the local, built through relationships, stories, and memories. In his anthropological work addressing the

impact of global flows on the production of locality, Arjun Appadurai conceptualises localities as 'life-worlds constituted by stable associations, known and shared histories, collectively traversed and legible spaces and places' (Appadurai 1996, 191). He defines the locality as a material reality combined with a relational and affective formation, both dimensions requiring regular work to be maintained. This never-ending process of locality production requires the resources of habit, custom, history, as well the ability to imagine a future. Appadurai's understanding of 'the work of imagination' is stimulating inasmuch as he considers it not as an individual ability but as a collective 'quotidian energy, not only visible in dreams, fantasies, liminal moments, and rituals' but used to implement concrete projects (Appadurai 2013, 287). Yet, novels charting a specific area also illuminate the ambivalences of this work, which can sometimes be stifling rather than emancipatory, triggering a sense of claustrophobia rather than of freedom and power.

- 25 The discrepancy between John Lanchester's and Zadie Smith's uses of the neighbourhood as a narrative matrix enlightens *Capital's* imagination of social fragmentation. Zadie Smith's *NW* draws a harsh portrayal of contemporary London through the lens of the fictional low-income council estate of Caldwell in Willesden. It appears as the opposite of Pepys Road both in geographic terms (from North to South) and in social terms (from the disenfranchised working class to the gentrifying upper-middle class). At odds with the impersonality of *Capital's* neighbourhood, *NW* explores the social production of space through life-stories, memories, shared references. The text stresses the characters' sense of belonging to this marginalised locality: 'Leah is as faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square of the city as other people are to their families, or their countries' (Smith 6). The text is fuelled by the more or less recent history of the area, surfacing through visits to an old church or through the residents' memories: Lloyd, Felix's father, appears as the living memory of the Garvey House commune in the 1970s (Smith 105–108). Yet the circumscribed territory charted by the novel does not lead to an idyllic portrayal of convivial community life and close-knit social ties, as what stands out is precisely a sense of claustrophobia (Marcus 2013). The relationships between the childhood friends Leah, Keisha (renamed Natalie) and Felix, have weathered, and they seem trapped in this neglected part of London, as the weight of socio-economic determinations is never lifted off, even for upwardly mobile Natalie.
- 26 In the case of Lanchester's *Capital*, the street-level view emphasises social fragmentation rather than construction. Where Caldwell is defined by fixity and stagnation, Pepys Road is mostly characterised by fluctuating house-owners, who never seem to ground themselves in the area. The choral structure of the novel, made up of very short chapters, only brings out the insulation of the houses, which do not organically coalesce into a local whole. The lack of connection between the characters, which may seem disappointing to the reader, enhances the minimal social interaction at work in the area and unveils the author's intention to show the utter absence of common space in contemporary London (Lanchester 2012b). These individual trajectories are juxtaposed rather than intertwined and they only intersect through transactions, as with Arabella Yount and 'her builder' Zbigniew, whom she keeps calling 'Bogdan', or Ahmed Kamal and Petunia Howe. Even social conflict is handled indirectly, through anonymous postcards (originally sent by Usman Kamal as a protest against the rampant materialism of Western society), rather than through direct violence as in *NW*, a lack of confrontation which may be frustrating to the readers. The

novel thus enhances the atomisation of British society into a constellation of individual or family-based monads, a society in which the interstitial space of the neighbourhood has no social significance.

- 27 Social fragmentation is rendered, among other means, through the daily choreography of deliveries made to Pepys Road houses, suggesting that the public space of the neighbourhood is reduced to its function as a thoroughfare. The novel revisits the trope of the anthropomorphic city through the representation of Pepys Road houses as monstrous bodies gorging on food, commodities, people and services, illustrating once again the downscaling movement of the narrative.

But the houses had things brought to them all day. As the houses had got more expansive, it was as if they had come alive, and had wishes and needs of their own. Vans from Berry Brothers and Rudd brought wine . . .; there were florists, Amazon parcels, personal trainers, cleaners, plumbers, yoga teachers, and all day long, all of them going up to the houses like supplicants and then being swallowed up by them. There was laundry, there was dry-cleaning, there were FedEx and UPS. . . . The houses were now like people, and rich people at that, imperious, with needs of their own that they were not shy about having serviced. (Lanchester 2012, 6)

- 28 The rest of the novel expands on this image of the powerful houses as insatiable bellies or mouths developed in the prologue, as characters are represented waiting for deliveries, delivering things, coming and going for services (the nanny, the builder). The first chapter thus represents Petunia Howe waiting for a Tesco delivery, a system that her daughter has implemented to help her without being compelled to visit her, enhancing the widow's loneliness (13). The downscaling of the urban body to the body of the house is enlightened by Sebastian Groes's reflection on the dispersal of London at the level of fictional representations: 'the organic metaphor used by Peter Ackroyd in his biography of London, has become obsolete partly because London is increasingly a less urban, and increasingly a suburbanized city' (Groes 257). Lanchester's anthropomorphic houses appear indeed as a miniature devitalised version of the organic urban body, and the atomised society living on Pepys Road evokes a suburb rather than a city.
- 29 This is also suggested by the rewriting of the modernist trope of the perpetual motion of the city, the 'rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions' assaulting the urban-dweller's consciousness (Simmel 25). In twenty-first-century London, the moving crowd of urban-dwellers is reified into a crowd of commodities and services (people being placed on the same level as commodities in the above-quoted paragraph). Apart from the inhabitants, the other characters (the builder, the nanny, family visitors) are very often depicted as stepping in and out of these houses, so that human characters appear as satellites moving around the non-human cores of the narratives. This intricate ballet of deliveries also undermines the image of the busy street as a space of social interaction, and interestingly contrasts with Jane Jacobs' well-known romanticised description of the 'intricate sidewalk ballet' performed each day on the street in New York, 'in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole' (Jacobs 50), encompassing children, people walking off to work, shopkeepers, housewives, all taking part in the same organic order of modern urban life. No such ballet is visible on Pepys Road, the neighbourhood being emptied of its social significance, thus undermining the 'urban' nature of London itself. A particular scene

captures the way property value overlays all social interactions between neighbours, including expressions of empathy and solidarity. As Ahmed Kamal, the local shopkeeper, walks Petunia Howe back home after she fell in his grocery store, the text presents the house through his eyes:

'Let me see you in,' said Ahmed. He helped her over the threshold. His guess had been right. There was clean but old carpet and ugly wallpaper with a flower pattern, and a telephone in the hallway. One million six. Ahmed reprimanded himself and gave Mrs Howe his full attention. (Lanchester 2012, 50)

- 30 The concision of the nominal sentence conveys how quickly his mind converts spatiality into capital, as if the grid of property value could never be completely pulled off from his eyes, suggesting the way finance capitalism seeps into all social relationships and quotidian practices. Far from being protected from transactional exchange for a sense of community to develop, the neighbourhood is shaped by capitalist culture and appears as an anti-locality. The narrow spatial scope of the narrative does not emphasise the collective production of the locality but its disappearance, pushing back against the idea of a street-corner society.
- 31 In fact, if the name of the street conjures up the village where Samuel Pepys settled at the end of his life (in Clapham), the neighbourhood rather evokes the social atomisation and spatial division of a suburbanised London. As mentioned above, in his essay on the London Tube District line, Lanchester thus describes London as a collection of suburbs: 'people sometimes say that London is a city of villages. A less genteel way of putting it is to say that London is a city of suburbs. The truth is somewhere in the middle: London is a city of suburbs, which prefer not to use the term' (2013, 15). Seeing twenty-first-century London from Pepys Road thus brings out that the city is increasingly splintered, gradually turning into a constellation of reified, 'fortified fragments' (Harvey 2012, 15).
- 32 Lanchester's small-scale exploration of urban crisis therefore challenges the idea that postmodernist experimentation, gothic horror, or dystopia are the only literary forms suited to expose the way in which speculation, by becoming the main source of economic growth, fundamentally frays the social fabric of the city. At odds with both Coe's gothic London and Smith's writing of the locality, *Capital* appropriates and scales down the great nineteenth-century realist tradition to dramatise the social fragmentation and suburbanisation of the world-city. This 'return to explicitly realistic strategies' (Bernard 2015, 147) such as the subdued tone, the panorama of social types, the dense ethnographic description of local realities which gesture towards global forces, may be representative of the 'shift to the factual pole' that Sebastian Groes identifies in early twenty-first British urban writing, which tends to a more materialist approach to the city, 'a more sober representation that stresses the importance of understanding London as a material structure' (Groes 259). The financialisation of urban space analysed by David Harvey is thus fictionalised through the emphasis on the protean materiality of houses, which take centre-stage not as symbols of an imagined community but of its annihilation. For all the novel's apt rendering of the invisible tentacles of finance capitalism smothering urban life, one may ultimately question the aesthetic politics of this quiet, materialist approach to the dehumanised city. The sense of claustrophobia generated by the dense, 'stuffed' prose (Bernard 2015, 149), as well as the evasion of direct social conflict and the suspended state in which the characters are left at the end of the novel are more likely to induce fatalism in the readers rather than fuelling their envisioning of a better future.

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NOTES

1. LANCHESTER completed the first draft of *Capital* before writing his bestseller essay on the 2008 financial crisis, *Whoops! Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay* (2010), which supports the idea of a singular intellectual, creative process giving birth to both his fiction and his nonfiction (LANCHESTER 2012b).
2. David HARVEY, among others, considers that the 2008 financial crash was triggered by real estate speculation and needs to be understood as an urban crisis, too (see HARVEY 2012).
3. I borrow the term 'world-system' from Immanuel Wallerstein's work on the history of capitalism, which holds that the capitalist system is fundamentally one, or global, and unequal, divided between core, semi-peripheries and peripheries, tied together by a relationship of inequality (2014).
4. Lanchester's tracing of the devastating impact of the new currents of global capital on city life from the core of the world-system interestingly connects with literary accounts of urban transformation in the semi-peripheries, with cities like Delhi or Johannesburg being reshaped by global forces in a similar, although heightened, manner, as described by Ivan VLADISLAVIC (2006) or Rana DASGUPTA (2014) in their literary essays.
5. See also PECK and others 2009.
6. In that sense, *Capital* differs from Jon MCGREGOR's first novel, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2002), which also portrays everyday life in a suburban British street, yet in which a tragedy momentarily brings the inhabitants all together. The only event which ties them together in *Capital* is the series of anonymous postcards (which turns out to be a mere prank), and this deceptive plot device does not result in any significant change.
7. 'On the one hand, the increasingly expensive market where prices are set at the top end by the demand from highly paid workers in finance, law and related areas, as well as the international wealthy, and on the other, the council and social rented sector which houses most of those who cannot gain access to home ownership or high-cost private renting.' (HAMNETT 129).
8. The language of colonisation pitting 'aborigines' against bankers-invaders also recalls Forster's 'vision of internal colonisation by the forces of bourgeois modernity' in *Howards End* (PEPPIS 51).
9. By contrast, Iain SINCLAIR, a fierce critic of the depredation of London by urban neoliberalism, devotes a chapter to the colossal Shard building in his latest essay, *The Last London* (2018).
10. Petunia Howe's passion for gardening (Lanchester 2012, 6, 177–78), her frail personification of a neighbourhood under siege, and her death from a terminal illness, are reminiscent of Ruth Wilcox's fusion with nature and her incarnation of a bygone era pitted against the ruthless materialism of modernity in Forster's *Howards End*. This downgraded, lower middle-class version of Ruth Wilcox, a powerless *genius loci*, ties in with the *downscaling* movement of Lanchester's novel.
11. The underworld of the eleventh-floor basement is also interpreted by Laurent MELLET as a Wellsian allusion to *The Time Machine's* dystopian world, divided between the Haves above ground

and the Have-nots below ground, except it is revisited as the Haves conquer London under too in Coe's novel.

ABSTRACTS

In his choral novel *Capital* (2012), John Lanchester charts the intersecting trajectories of the residents of Pepys Road, an ordinary-looking street of South London, even as the 2008 financial crisis hits. More than the spectacular crumbling of global finance, this realist novel focuses on the property boom which heralded it. This paper contends that this street-level view of one of the centres of the world-system, which contrasts with dystopian, gothic and apocalyptic literary imaginations of London, enables the author to encode the most insidious effects of global capitalism on urban life, and the ways in which real estate speculation fundamentally disrupts the social fabric of the city. This downscaled narrative of contemporary London, which foregrounds houses as central characters, thus does not emphasise the collective 'production of locality' (Appadurai) but the divorce of space from affect and the disappearance of the neighbourhood as a common space, thus suggesting the splintering of London into 'fortified fragments' (Harvey), in other words, the suburbanisation of the world-city.

Dans son roman choral *Capital* (2012), John Lanchester dessine les trajectoires des habitants de Pepys Road, une rue ordinaire du sud de Londres, qui s'entrecroisent alors que la crise financière de 2008 éclate. Plus que l'écroulement spectaculaire de la finance globale, ce roman est en réalité centré sur le *boom* immobilier qui l'a précédé. Cet article vise à montrer que cette exploration réaliste de l'un des centres du système-monde à l'échelle d'une rue, qui contraste avec les récits dystopiques, gothiques ou apocalyptiques de Londres, permet à l'auteur d'appréhender les effets les plus insidieux du capitalisme global sur la vie urbaine, et la façon dont la spéculation immobilière déchire le tissu social de la ville. Ce récit à petite échelle du Londres contemporain, qui fait des maisons de véritables personnages, ne met donc pas l'accent sur la « production de la localité » (Appadurai) mais bien sur le divorce entre espace et affect et sur la disparition du quartier comme espace commun, suggérant l'éclatement de Londres en « fragments fortifiés » (Harvey), en d'autres termes, la transformation de la ville-monde en une gigantesque banlieue.

INDEX

Mots-clés: John Lanchester, *Capital*, roman, réalisme, Londres, ville-monde, capitalisme, spéculation, urbanisation, maison

Keywords: John Lanchester, *Capital*, novel, realism, London, world-city, capitalism, speculation, urbanisation, house

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