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► **To cite this version:**

Yves Clavaron. “ Mapping the Memory of Cities ”. Yves Clavaron et Bernard Dieterle (dir.). La Mémoire des Villes/ The Memory of Cities, Publications de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, p. 13-15, 2003, 978-2-86272-275-7. <hal-05487898>

HAL Id: hal-05487898

<https://hal.science/hal-05487898v1>

Submitted on 1 Feb 2026

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MAPPING THE MEMORY OF CITIES

Historically, the appearance of writing is contemporary with the first urban concentrations and primitive forms of capitalist economy. Writing initially has an economic function, as its origin proves: it was used to manage stocks, trade, to establish account books, and the invention of the alphabet was the work of Phoenician merchants. But it also has a political function: insofar as it is typical of a ruling class, it can be regarded as an instrument of power and repression. However, writing is condemned by Plato, in his very writings about the political organization of the *polis*, for being a dangerous *pharmakon*, both poison and medicine (*Phaedra*). In the Bible, it is Cain who builds the first city, called after the name of his son, Enoch. It seems strange enough that the cursed and banished murderer, the fugitive and transgressive nomad should be the first builder of the city but Gérard Bruns suggests that ‘the reasoning man dreams the *polis*, while desiring man lives the labyrinth’. Being a compelling force, writing is anything but an anarchic one, as the myth of Babel suggests. The modern metropolis is not only the very place where languages multiply, but also where signs extend up to the city walls. For this reason, city planning — a rationalization of space — might be considered as a means of disciplining society through the City and building a nation. A number of different types of symbol carriers, such as monuments, statues, and street names which can be transformed into a cornerstone of historiography, can be distinguished. Symbols of urban identity have a specific function, such as, for example, the legitimization of leadership or nation building. Cities have traditionally been centers of representative power, especially with the rise of nationalism. Besides, symbols are embedded in a political structure, which is subject to change. Before the official birth of Italian neorealism with Roberto Rossellini’s *Rome: Open City* (1945), Mussolini pushed forward a version of realism designed to enhance fascist collective identity, and which depended upon a nostalgic gaze toward the glory days of the Roman Empire. The ruins of ancient Rome were strategically used as icons of imperialism, connecting ancient and modern empires within the urban geography of Rome. Paris, London and Rome, old European cities, are places of memories, *lieux de mémoire*, *luoghi della memoria*, *Erinnerungsorte*. To this list, we could add a younger one, New York, which recently suffered a terrible wound. When the monumental towers collapsed, so too did the United States’ dream of inventing a new conception of urban space in the age of globalization. The dreadful events that occurred in the United States on September 11th produced an instantaneous ruin encoded with the memory of a traumatic event within the urban landscape. The destruction of visible icons of transnational capitalism by a much feared and vilified Other (Muslim fundamentalism) can be seen as a significant disruption of history’s continuum, calling into question the interdependent relations between the West and the Other.

Representing a nation, political symbols which come within the scope of urban space also

function as structuring principles in the sphere of mental mapping. To be out on the street, to wander through the city, without plan or purpose, “Street Haunting”, is typical urban behaviour. Poets enjoyed the liberty of the Baudelarian *flâneur*, the distraction of parenthetical imaginings, whether strolling aimlessly along the boulevards or within the arcades with their bustling anonymity. According to Walter Benjamin, *flânerie* is a promenade into the past — the street leading the strolling person into a vanished time, a description with which the surrealist movement would engage in its empathy for the outmoded and ruined place. The urban text is the presence of verbal signs, a haphazard concrete poetry of shop-fronts, street-indicators, street-names, posters on walls or buses and even plaques, scattered upon the façades of buildings. Urban spaces are sometimes remapped in a labyrinthine manner: the city with its streets, parks, neighborhoods and alleys becomes multifaceted and richly ambiguous, simultaneously familiar and alien (Myth of Daedalus). As for Tennessee Williams, his representation of New Orleans is romantic but hardly unique; New Orleans has suffered from the masque of the exotic since its earliest colonial history, and the result has frequently been the identification of that city as a jungle. The city for spatial theorists like Lefebvre, is never an *a priori* blankness, but something made again and again by one’s own movement, vision and encounters with others, whose movement and perspectives are themselves weaving the complex tapestry of a contingent and multiple urban world. Within contemporary cultural geography, there is a new wave of interest in urban walking that maps a geography of memory. D. Pinder notes how surrealism addresses the intersection of subjectivities and urban spaces and how dreams and the ‘ghostly’ of the urban are requisite to thinking about the possibilities of ‘other cities that exist inside the city’. De Certeau proposes that ‘one must awaken the stories that sleep in the streets and that sometimes lie within a simple name’ and speaks of ‘énonciation piétonnière’. Furthermore, the modern city becomes a metaphor for the unconscious, where memory lurks, where secrets are hidden. On an other hand, in the novels of modernism, urban reality is subjectively experienced and these experiences produce memories, founded not in history, but in the private life-stories of a split-self individual. Clarissa Dalloway, V. Woolf’s eponymous heroine, strolls through London and her outer impressions are closely intertwined with personal associations, reflections and memories. Endowed with a temporal thickness, saturated with monuments, marked out with memories, London stretches as far as the borders of the Empire and becomes a huge screen, a transparency, where hallucinations, emotions and dreams are projected.

The movement to and in the metropolis can be seen as an encounter with an ontological border. One of the most famous instances of a city which functions as an ontological construct is Thomas Mann’s Venice in *Der Tod in Venedig*. Loti’s Istanbul appears as a city adrift between Bosphorus and Golden Horn, conveying a deep feeling of nostalgia and mirroring the irreversible decay of the Ottoman Empire, as the nineteenth century waned. *A Room with a View...* Forster’s novel ironically promotes the tourists’ liking for panoramic views of cities such as those provided

by the notorious *Baedeker* or, more recently, *Le Guide Bleu*. A. Corbin dates this ceaseless search for a favorite vantage point by travelers back to the end of the eighteenth century: ‘Under the eyes of the tourist often coexist the telluric ruins, the remains of old times and buzzing industrial and commercial activities’. Having a dominant view of a city comes down to expressing a desire for ruling, or at least overcoming, space and history. To occupy the bird’s-eye position is ‘to arrogate to oneself, even if momentarily, the cartographic and metaphoric authority of the colonizer’ (Boehmer). The off-center space of the modern city, comprised of communicating blocks, open to outside, in which voices, strata and differences infinitely expand, displays, as M. Butor suggested, an image of textual space interweaving a desire of otherness with the requirements of nomadism through a non-linear narrative, mapping an increasingly contested urban space.

Yves Clavaron