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Intercultural Approaches to Cities and Spaces in Literature, Film, and New Media: A Review of New Work by Manzanas and Benito and López-Varela and Neț

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Ana María MARTÍN CASTILLEJOS

Intercultural Approaches to Cities and Spaces in Literature, Film, and New Media: A Review of New Work by Manzanas and Benito and López-Varela and Neţ

In *Cities, Borders, and Spaces in Intercultural American Literature and Film* by Ana M. Manzanas and Jesús Benito (New York: Routledge, 2011), the authors explore the different nuances of space and place and analyze both theoretical concepts and specific cases. They explore pluralities and hierarchies of space and their resultant visible and invisible geographies in a series of intercultural texts and films. They postulate that spaces and places are socially but also subjectively and historically produced and that experience is fundamental in the sedimentation of what places may represent. Further, they focus on how the concept of space operates for those who have been traditionally crossed by the boundaries of class, ethnicity, or nationality: space is expanded and reduced as appropriate, contracting and expanding, starting from the body itself ("zero degree of spatiality"). Space presented in the different movies and texts analyzed in the book is not static but disrupted, active, and generative: it is not a closed system but open and continuously being made.

In Chapter 1, "Chiastic Spaces: Ports of Entry, Ports of Exit," Manzanas and Benito examine the meaning of the city of (im)migration with regard to "illegal" practitioners who are constantly under the close surveillance. The chapter deals with Thomas McCarthy's 2007 movie *The Visitor*, which presents an apparently US-American character, Tarek, who is transformed into an illegal immigrant. The conceptual space is defined by means of a symbolic location, i.e., Ellis Island and contemporary detention centres: the first one is described as "a processing plant that stamped immigrants into Americans as they proceeded on the assembly line of Americanism" (8) and the second one as "the point where adopted nationhood ceases for the individual, who is then unceremoniously kicked out of the nest" (8). In Chapter 2 the short stories of Chuck Palahniuk ("Slumming: A Story by Lady Baglady") and Helena Viramontes ("The Cariboo Café") are analyzed with regard to the spatial practices of real and simulated homeless people in order to evaluate how they converge in the contemporary post-metropolis, an "urban landscape that provides a constant visual montage" (8). In the first case (Palahniuk's story) the homeless characters cross social and topological boundaries and their "adventure" is lived with a sense of a newly discovered sense of originality and exultation, while in Viramontes's text the mood of displacement prevails. Manzanas and Benito re-evaluate spatiality and the normative violence when exercised against those considered as nomads in society. In Chapter 3, "Unbound Cities, Concentric Circles: Karen Tey Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*," Manzanas and Benito discuss homeless characters in Los Angeles, a post-metropolis *par excellence*. Dividing lines, walls, and separations might not be seen but their presence is there and we may fail to see them because we are not looking in the right places or because we may not recognize them when we see them. Within the processes of un-bounding the city and the wall, in Manzanas's and Benito's view Yamashita introduces a real crossing, an enormous collision on the freeway that acquires both metaphorical and real meanings in her satirical and semi-fantastic novel as it becomes a collision of race, class, and reality.

In the first part of Chapter 4, "Borderland: Middle Spaces, Hybrid Bodies" Manzanas and Benito address the conceptual meaning of the borderlands and make reference to Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands,* which opens with a reference to Aztlán, the homeland, and finishes with a critique of the imposition of borders and a description of the space that Anzaldúa calls "the borderlands," a space where hybridity is an essential component. In such a way, Anzaldúa "creates a theoretical matrix where opposites collapse and are seen as part of a continuous dis/conjunction; dualities and collisions are rearranged into a new assembly, a synthesis that, in a dialectical manner, produces a new, third, element" (74). In the second part of the chapter the analysis of the space of the borderlands is combined with the study of Alejandro Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992), where Gregorio Revueltas inhabits three cartographies which Morales unfolds in his novel: Mexico City, Delhi, and Lamex are examples of "contamiNation," a term that makes reference to the infections of the body but in intimate liaisons with those of the nation. In the end, Revueltas makes an unprecedented scientific discovery: the blood of Mexicans, those who have lived their lives in the most polluted conditions, can

save the lives of people suffering from pulmonary diseases. This supposes that new life can be born out of contamination, a powerful metaphor.

In Chapter 5 Manzanas and Benito examine border experience in different real, as well as literary and cinematographic texts. Regarding real locations, there are references to the Mexican-U.S. border to Nicosia's buffer zone, etc. Regarding the literary and cinematographic locations, there are a number of references to border spaces as open wounds forever healing but never completely sealed, as fissures, infected wounds that heal and become "cicatrices" that act like bridges. In this sense, the references, among others, to Steven Spielberg's film *The Terminal* and to Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*. Further, Manzanas and Benito analyze Li-Young Lee's poem "The Cleaving" in which the permanence of pain takes center stage when trying to jump into the other's territory appears as the real tragedy even if Lee manages to finish his poem in positive terms in the end. In Chapter 6, "Terminal Thinking: Border Narratives, Airport Narratives, and the Logic of Detention" Manzanas and Benito discuss what they call "the logic of detention" (112) in the context of border crossing in Luis Humberto Crosthwaite's *Instrucciones para cruzar la frontera*, Dagoberto Gilb's *The Nature of Blood*, and Thomas King's short story "Borders." The variety of border types confronts readers with different possible situations around borders and the spaces they engender, particularly in Spielberg's *The Terminal*, where Viktor Navorski, a tourist from Krakozhia, a fictional Eastern European country, is forced to live at the JFK airport in New York, as a result of the sudden disappearance of his country of origin after a successful coup. Even if the situations these stories refer to are sometimes humorous, there is an obvious sense of tragedy in them and Manzanas and Benito explore the tragic and the comic in these texts. In the last chapter of the book, "From the Great Wall to *Babel*," Manzanas and Benito analyze Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2006 movie, *Babel*, from a spatial point of view and focus on the concept of the dividing wall as the fault line that runs through the different stories in the film. *Babel* is set on three different continents with six languages (actually seven if we consider the sign language used in Tokyo by the deaf protagonist). According to Manzanas and Benito, if language can be considered as instance of teleology directed toward an end and shaped by a purpose, the film dismantles that linguistic premise by providing language with a spatial dimension.

Real and Virtual Cities: Intertextual and Intermedial Mindscapes, edited by Asunción López-Varela and Mariana Neţ (Bucureşti: Univers Enciclopedic, 2009), is a volume that combines semiotics, cultural studies, urban studies, communication studies, architecture, social history, new media studies, etc. Authors in the volume address the problem of knowledge from a sociological perspective and provide approaches to cognitive semiotics by giving utmost importance to space-time representations. Although interdisciplinary research is not easy, work in the volume provides a varied collage of virtual and imaginary urban landscapes in the real and virtual worlds through an interdisciplinary outlook. However, the ultimate goal of this book is to provide an integral perspective of semiotics to cultural studies which combine theoretical articles with case studies (in the volume, unfortunately, articles are not organized thematically in different chapters). The interdisciplinarity of the volume comes from the diversity of topics, which is one of the volume's strongest points. In the first article of the volume, "The City as E-topia: From Intertextuality to Intermediality," López-Varela examines the concepts of intertextuality and intermediality and explains how the study of real and virtual spaces requires to pay attention to those spaces as metacognitive spaces and where the debate focuses on the spaces themselves. López-Varela explains how virtual communities are growing because of economic reasons and digital technologies are colonizing our homes, the primary cell of modern public relations**,** and blurring the distinction between the public and the private. She also makes reference to certain concepts such as multimodal formats and human agency and concludes that it is important to pay attention to the construction of social communities as they are formed by real people each one with his/her own desires, emotions, ambitions, motivations, and agencies.

In the second article of the volume, "Real Cities, Virtual Cities: Model Railroading as Analogue Virtual Reality," George P. Landow discusses how, following the *Oxford English Dictionary*, what virtual means and how and why these miniature worlds of trains can be considered small virtual cities. Next, Massimo Leone examines in his article "Virtual Cities and Civic Virtues: The Semiotics of Space in Gated Communities" why the number of people who live in gated communities is growing all over the world. Leone maintains that gated communities can be considered as one of the most characteristic

settlements of postmodern and globalized cities and how the phenomenon has attracted the attention of scholars working in different fields: economics, law, literary study, sociology, ethnology, anthropology, urban studies, etc. According to Leone one of the reasons why people nowadays choose to live in gated communities is because, by doing so, the semiotic indeterminacy of the public space is reduced. People living in the same gated community think that their neighbours are alike, which makes them feel more relaxed. Leone concludes that the generalization of gated communities may bring with it a lack of effort and risk that may turn into "lack of creativity and intelligence, into the creation of virtual cities without civic virtues" (84).

In "Bricolage of Urban Spaces in an Italian Church: A Semiotic Approach" Maria Pia Pozzato presents the case of the church of Jesus the Redeemer in Modena (inaugurated in February 2008). She discusses how different this church is from any other she has visited before in the sense that it is a sacred and desecrated enclosure that poses, somehow, certain inquiries of political and sociocultural character regarding the position of the Catholic Church in contemporary social reality both in Italy and the rest of the world. In "What is behind that Wall? Towards a Semiotic Model of 'Walls' as Signs of Self-Location in Political Space", Vassil Anastassov reflects on the meaning of walls and their different functions as metaphors. Anastassov goes so far as to extract political implications that the Cold War or Bush's War on Terror may derive from manipulation of human beings' capacity at dividing the world into a bi-polar antagonism for the sake of dominance of power. In "The Contesting Narratives of 'Garden-Cities' in Interwar France: The French Réseau Du Nord and Reinventing the Space of the French North" Natalia Starostina examines a peculiar case, the "garden-cities" in northern France, which are a rare case in urban environment: these were created in a short period of time and had a strong social and cultural agenda and gave birth to several contesting narratives and different historical agents were engaged in redefining and reinventing the urban environment.

In "Intermediality and Cyber Visualities of Central European Cities" Agata Lisiak and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's focus on how city and municipal governments have used the world wide web on what is referred to as "web presence" with the purpose of reaching diverse audiences — city residents, prospective tourists, and potential investors — for "visibility equals success" (Huyssen). This competition for recognition has evolved from the battle for physical territory historically into the competition for a sharing of mind. Lisiak and Tötösy de Zepetnek elaborate on how this resulted in intermediality, that is, the relationship between and the use of understanding and practices of multimodal media. Considering the importance of visualities in contemporary Western culture and its digital age, Lisiak and Tötösy de Zepetnek analyze several aspects of websites of city and municipal governments in Central Europe — Berlin, Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw — and arrive at some interesting conclusions: while these cities try to be perceived as historically interesting and internationally successful, only Warsaw and Berlin seem to adopt recent developments and show themselves as modern and continually changing, while the others focus on their historical past and traditions. Lisiak and Tötösy de Zepetnek argue that more intermedial and cyberspace rhetoric and practice is needed in the rest of the cities to get a more successful "web presence."

In "The Virtual Image of the City: Representation and Interpretation of Cityscapes in Different Media" Sandra Gröstsch discusses how cities are the most important feature of man-made landscapes and offers a personal approach in trying to understand how our perception of cities is presented through the web. Gröstsch maintains that cities are presented through their architectural features more than through their natural landscape characteristics and why this would be important for a city to convey its image successfully in order to gain visibility and attract citizens, potential movers, business people, and travellers that make the city flourish: this argumentation is similar to that of Lisiak and Tötösy de Zepetnek. Gröstsch also analyzes the two cities she knows well: Frankfurt am Main in Germany and Oulu in Finland, as they appear depicted on the web and concludes that while the image of Frankfurt is adequately portrayed, Oulu offers a poor image so the city needs work on its profile and contents to offer a stronger view of itself to the world.

In "Bucharest 1900: Urbanization and the Middle Class" Mariana Neţ deals with Bucharest's modernization and describes the city in 1900: how it was portrayed as "a little Paris" and "a city lying at the gates of the Orient" (references used almost continuously until today) and what guidebooks published in the nineteenth century said about Bucharest and its dwellers. Neţ concludes that

Romania's capital city appeared already as a modern city in particular since the nineteenth century. Carmen Andraş continues in her article "In-Betweenness and Intermediality in Bristish Images of Inter-War Bucharest (1930-1939)" with the study of Bucharest but refers to the city in the twentieth century and its mixture of Oriental traditions and Western influences British travellers still perceive when they arrive in the city. In Andraş's opinion all British travellers concluded that inter-war Bucharest was a city in transition and modernization and repeated how appealing the mixture of East and West was in the city. Andraş offers a wonderful study of the city with multiple references to inter-war Romania and how the city would have looked like in the historical period studied.

In "From Urban Depravity to Rural Redemption: The Case of Onitsha Market Literature" Terri Ochiagha writes about the birth of Onitsha Market literature, one of the most studied developments of African popular art that took place at the end of the Second World War and explains how many of the pamphlets functioned as guides to urban morality as they explained the dangers of the city. Ochiagha focuses on the particular work of Ogali A. Ogali, whose representations are especially interesting and analyzes the image of the city as described in Ogali's pamphlets and his novel *Coal City* (1977). Ochiagha describes how the Onitsha pamphlets are simple in language, generally brief and economical, and how they were read (and written) by the same collective: students, junior clerks, primary school teachers, drivers, farmers, mechanics, journalists, etc. In general, they were concerned with the problems brought on by urbanization and the ensuing modernization that stimulated new desires, attitudes, and values in the masses.

Izhak Schnell's "The Artist Nahum Gutmann as Creator of the Pioneering Myth of Tel Aviv" article is about the importance of Gutmann's work in creating the mythical notion of Tel Aviv. Together with the photographer Avraham Suskin, Gutmann created the myth of Tel Aviv as a city invented in the middle of the wilderness, far from settled areas. Gutmann made use of his own visual memories as a child to portray the city but did so without being faithful to the past or to the city's factual description. Nevertheless, his conceptual work impacted national collective memory more than actual urban history, which we can derive from the few documents that survived. Schnell shows how the city that Gutmann depicts in his landscapes contains mythical elements derived from the Zionist world view and how it always appears portrayed in positive terms in comparison to Jaffa and Arab landscapes in general.

Xiana Sotelo's article "Intersectionality and Gender Perspective in the Virtual Communities of Social Networks: Critical Perspectives" is about the creation of a new "technological polis" and explains how communities are now turning into virtual networks under social, professional, or interest-based criteria such as Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Linked-In, Tuenty, LiveJournal, etc., virtual networks which anyone can join. However, immediately after signing up users can actually block all the personal information provided and give false details about themselves to other members. On the positive side, users have the potential to become who they want to be and, even more than this, they can show themselves the way they really are. Therefore, even if racism and discrimination of all types still exist in virtual communities, new ways of self-representation to get individual empowerment are possible in online formats as a new kind of cyber-power.

In "Semiotic E-Models" Roxana Bârlea and Boddan Calcan analyze the way in which a series of virtual cities are represented and the way they can be experienced in four online and offline computer games: *Civilization*, *Ikrarian*, *eRepublik* and *Travian*. Bârlea and Calcan reflect upon the forms these communities take and the role they have in the real life of the people who play these games. The conclusions the authors draw are the following: the games represent parallel worlds, utopian human communities, and offer the player to go beyond the frontier of real life in order to create their own ideal world. In addition, it appears that for some people playing from time to time is a necessity, not only for children but also for adults. Another reason for their popularity is that these games satisfy the human need to be part of a community: to have a social life and a group of friends. A third need these games fulfill is to provide people with a source of competition and release from aggression. They also discuss a disadvantage of playing the games: they generate a lot of money for those who have created them but nothing at all for those who spend a lot of time playing them.

The last article of the volume, Verena Laschinger's "The Reluctant Orientalist: Critical Reflections on how to Look at Istanbul: A Photoessay," is about how the tourist industry in Istanbul is based on

selling the city's Orientalist image as this is what tourists expect to find. After discussing Istanbul's image, Laschinger explains how the traveller needs to unify body and mind in order to enjoy the travel experience and "start noticing the place with an open heart" (285) because in order to see the true nature of a place the traveller must concentrate on the experience of the single moment: if one looks at the city of Istanbul with such a state of mind, the traveller will realize that the city is neither ugly nor a paradise.

In conclusion, *Real and Virtual Cities: Intertextual and Intermedial Mindscapes* is relevant scholarship for cultural and social history, semiotics, technology, and media. In most instances grounded in theoretical thought, particularly aspects of space and time are interesting while in case studies we encounter the applicability of theoretical frameworks. *Cities, Borders, and Spaces in Intercultural American Literature and Film* is relevant for scholars interested in the notion of space and place and the application of both notions to borderline cases. In sum, the two volumes are relevant because of the variety of approaches discussed and applied in a number of disciplines and fields.

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