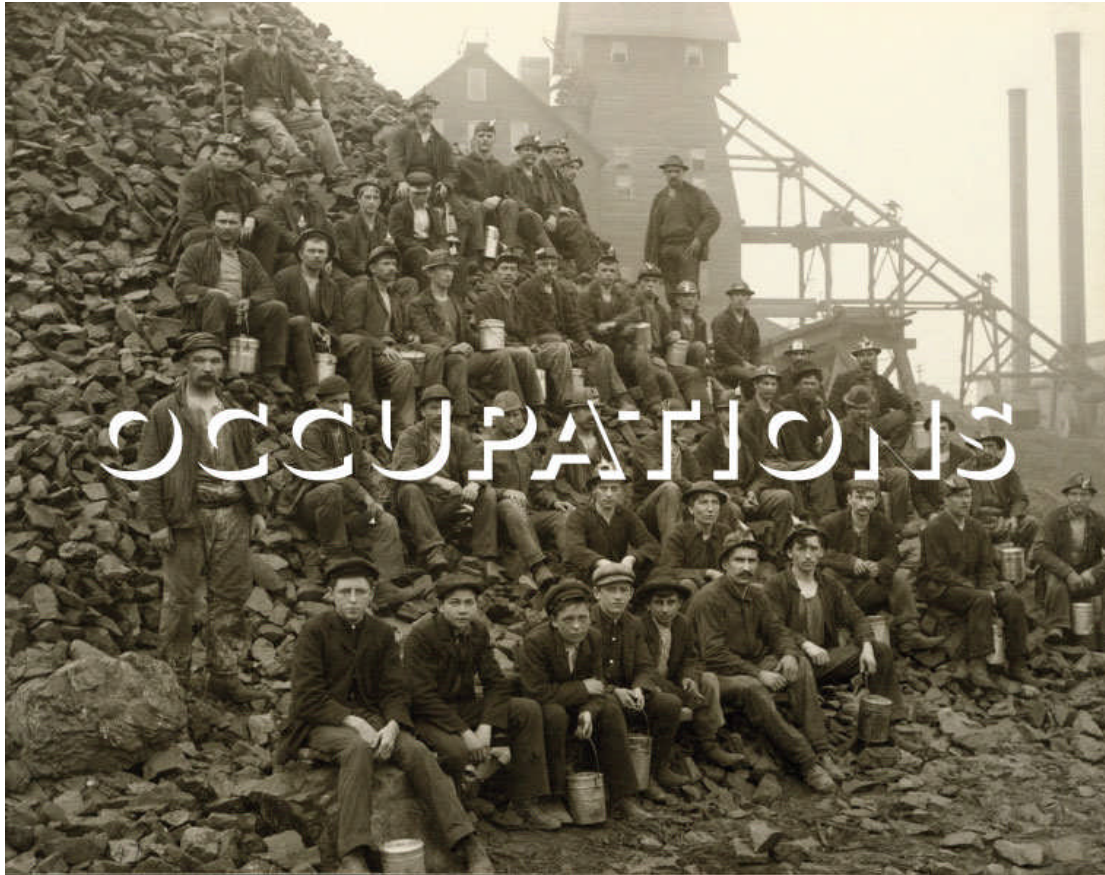


Excursions

Volume 6, Issue 1 (December 2015) Occupations



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Cover design: Danny Bright

John Laurence Dunn, 'Review of *Occupying Space in American Literature and Culture: Static Heroes, Social Movements and Empowerment* by Ana M. Manzanas and Jesús Benito'

Excursions, vol. 6, no. 1 (2015)

www.excursions-journal.org.uk/index.php/excursions/article/view/210

Reviews

John Laurence Dunn

Queen Mary, University of London

Occupying Space in American Literature and Culture: Static Heroes, Social Movements and Empowerment by Ana M. Manzanas and Jesús Benito.

Routledge: London, 2014.

Occupying Space in American Literature and Culture seeks to furnish contemporary American literature with the conceptual spatial paradigms described by the great theorists of the social structures of the everyday, Henri Lefebvre and Michel De Certeau, and the more recent work of Doreen Massey. The volume offers insight into a cultural studies dialogue between film and literary fiction, but is held back by its

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impatience with the theory on which this approach depends. This might explain the unusually Eurocentric sampling in a book on ‘American Literature and Culture’, and any novel additions to the discourse end up resting on texts already well worn by theory: Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, for example, appears in a confused archive only partly explained by the transnational approaches series this volume is a part of. That said, across four chapters, the book reads European and American literature on a ticket where space is characterised by universal resistance to singular determination, perhaps including American exceptionalism. It does this with an eye on Jacques Rancière’s more recent conclusion that politics globally is ‘best understood’ in spatial and relational parameters, because ‘everything in politics turns on the distribution of space. What are these places? How do they function? [and crucially for this volume] Who can occupy them?’ (Rancière, *Theory and Event*, 2003, p.201; cited in Manzanas and Benito, p.5).

With occupation as the driving theme, the volume is tied to the accessibility of an interior psychology/selfhood/being that a fictional narrative form can offer the desires of individual and collective identities to occupy space somatically, which the body politic of nation/state/capitalism does not provide. The overarching logic of this volume, then, is that the body—site of a human and basic ethics of Self/Other—must act horizontally against the global vertical axis that denies the freedom to its subjects. To that end, and with the World Trade Centre’s ‘twin towers’ providing a rather blunt synecdoche for the haunted spatial nature of power structures, the body is ‘the ground zero of spatiality that occupies or disoccupies a particular place’ (Manzanas and Benito, 2014, p.3).

By reading contemporary novels and films with the above power dynamics of space, self/other in mind—the authors rely heavily on a consensus that modernity must be structurally reimaged by its discursive cultural productions, which paradoxically destabilise the boundaries of commerce and the leviathan body politic as such, even while the force of these boundaries predicate the impact and meaning of these works. Any reader of postcolonialism or postmodernist literature generally would be familiar with this iconoclastic, typically Marxian, tune. The contemporary narrative of Western culture with its blundering, accelerating, overbearing *disregard* for the multiplicity of otherness inherent in the space it describes and hence represses, must be recognised so as to re-inscribe (through occupation, it will be argued by the authors) that same space with a new narrative that is awake to multiplicities and difference.

When strung between these nexus points, 'Space' in literature and film becomes in *Occupying Space in American Literature and Culture* a concept fundamentally driven by the relational matrix of interactions between structures and psyches, always either the expression of a 'true' desire or a 'false' value of structure or identity. The spatial metaphors that mark this valuing are lifted from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*: 'Smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into striated space' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.474; Manzanas and Benito, p.18). Power is mediated out of the hands of a smooth formal register of control, so Manzanas and Benito argue, by the lateral progress made into multiple divisions and 'stripes', which were always there in disguised difference from the engendered identity of the apparent totality. By demonstrating the plethora of ways in which American space has smoothed over difference, Manzanas and Benito illustrate how it is a democratic and ethical imperative that the sovereignty of space be taken into the heart of its particularities and its overlooked corners, from the thematics of stasis, homelessness, encampment, and contested borders.

Any conception of American space must engage the notion of Manifest Destiny. It must also demonstrate how this great push West of the United States into the unincorporated territories of the Americas and Indigenous lands has poignant ramifications for the citizens of the United States and their masters today. The authors choose Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* as an unlikely candidate to mandate social resistance to Manifest Destiny in New York's Wall Street. The novella's modest central premise of resilient occupation is scaled up throughout the book until it is equated with the Occupy Wall Street Movement of 2011. Bartleby's '*I would prefer not to*' is the unequivocal statement of desire and intention of the slave not to function in a way proscribed by the master's singular desires. His gesture defines a form of disobedience in the workplace, but one that is self-legitimizing because of its stance *outside* of the reductive roles a systematic division of labour presses onto a society of self-interested workplaces, which are by implication illegitimate. What is important is his physically staying put when all others are bent on abstracted notions of progress: 'Bartleby is the atypical hero of a culture that prides itself on spatial mobility and dynamic action' (p.15), Manzanas and Benito write. Indeed, that stasis is the inversion of the *laissez-faire* egalitarian competition of the open market with which Melville's America sought to displace the enlightenment project of older Feudalist European cultures it was defining itself against. American culture is full of 'the myriad heroes in

flight from reductive social niches, to explorers sounding the edges of the unknown, to settlers appropriating new spaces' (Manzanas and Benito, 2014, p.16). But, of course, Bartleby is none of these and less. He is figured as the haunting trace of Manifest Destiny, the nomad *within* who creates tensions and resistance where it can be felt as ideological friction. We are told that 'he engages in nomadic thought without becoming a nomad himself' (Manzanas and Benito, 2014, p.20). It is here where the volume could make most gains with a more patient delivery of its concepts across historical continuity.

Chapter 2 seeks to pin William Kennedy's *Ironweed* and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* as representative of a nomadic rootlessness in American culture and a nomadism *full* of stasis and resistance. The volume's authors here have the difficult task of tying the haunted vagrancy of American masculinity in *Ironweed*'s Francis Phelan to the corporeal redundancy of *Cosmopolis*'s Eric Packer in the face of the spiralling moral and financial free-fall he orchestrates through and with his fiscally constituted world. Here, we are painted a listless and scattered picture of the self-destructive victims of capital nomadism. But, this chapter plumps for a rather cherry-picked equation where one Continental theorist dissolves into another, where the existential work that Husserl's phenomenology seeks to perform by situating the consciousness in the body, arrives already nullified by political theory of state control of any and all bodies in Lefebvre and Foucault. Not only is the political topography the authors describe ignorant of the particular because of the 'panoptical' controlling narrative of modernity, we are led to believe the United States is synonymous with the self-fulfilling prophecy of 'cyber capitalism' where human models are always already inadequate, where the human becomes merely a cypher for New York City's hegemony of cyber-capital. Such is the now paradigmatic conception of DeLillo indicative of a semiotic aporia where 'reality and identity are just two endless reflections and reproductions' (Manzanas and Benito, 2014, p.51) *à la* Jean Baudrillard's hyperreal, and this volume does nothing to refresh this reading.

And this is the point: exactly what the kind of cultural/fictional resistance developed out of Bartleby must work against is hard to say, when his transgressive non-action is transplanted from the mid-19th century Manifest Destiny to an opaque, always disappearing horizon of 'reflective' cyber-capital, rather than a mythogeographic Western shore. The act of base resistance itself is at risk of being subsumed by the heightened degree of abstraction of contemporary capital conditions. Instead, we have

more of a spatio-temporal and phenomenological aporia that in Fredric Jameson logically evacuates transgression and transgressive action against the leviathan state before it can become a recognisable form such as Bartleby. So, in assuming this postmodern standpoint, from which to read we must perform the awkward turns to situate the multibillionaire playboy as ‘homeless’, so that in his retaliation against the world he in no small way controls—in crashing the markets, in intentionally losing millions of dollars—he assumes the paradoxical role of auto-iconoclastic deity with its own internally charged Manifest Destiny. The metaphoric and symbolic implications are stretched beyond even DeLillo’s elastic and implausible signifiers. His vagrancy must chime with the damaged goods of Phelan’s traumatised desert walking, a clearer symbol in my mind for Manifest Destiny’s pathological recurrence in American culture than a rich man stuck in traffic.

The premise of chapter 3 is simple enough: the wall or the fence is a foundational concept of any nation:

Walled countries produce their own brand of citizens, a brand of obeisant and de-individuated theocratic subjects that, curiously enough, resemble the profile of the undesirable that civilized countries seek to fortify themselves against (p.68).

This demonstrates ‘internal colonialism’, a kind of inward movement a state mandates against its own space and subjects. The volume here asks of W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* how its eponymous protagonist can ‘make use of a stretchable sense of space and time that patterns out and generates the hidden landscape underneath the visible?’ which it answers, ‘[t]hrough visions or “spatial epiphanies” that open up the limits of the customarily real’ (p.72). This is via the vortex of time-space characterised by the novel form’s inherently ‘deranged universe’ that is both realistic and pliable and in which he ‘mobilizes space’ the novel’s voided centre (Manzanas and Benito, 2014, p.72).

Nazi death camps are then brashly related to Japanese-American internment camps in California, where citizens of Asian descent were forced into ghettos under suspicion of colluding with Japan. The authors struggle to fit Sebald to an American context when they riff against Miné Okubo’s graphic memoir *Citizen 13660*, which details the artist’s place in the ‘protective custody’ programme immediately after Pearl Harbour. The graphic nature of the work is enabling of resistive change, as ‘[b]y staying within the lines, Okubo is undoing those very lines. She becomes the nomad within’ (Manzanas and Benito, 2014, p.83). Beatrice Pita’s sci-fi graphic novel *Lunar Braceros*

2125-2148 is then used to suggest the United States will always be smoothing over the history of spatial fascism with a more palatable metanarrative. Perverse and privatised in the envisioned near future, bodily containment is state mandated and the exclusion of undesirable 'human waste' in vast camps on the colonised moon has become macrocosmic to Earth's panoptical control of corporeal phenomenality.

In focusing on Courtney Hunt's film *Frozen River* (2008) and its depiction of a Native American reservation that straddles Canada and the United States, chapter 4 shows how statehood is formed by the double edge of juridical belonging and non-belonging. A territorial anomaly both within and without the lines of sovereignty, the residents of the reservation are produced as stateless at the same time that they are jettisoned from law and national jurisprudence. However, an outsider exploits the icy liminality of the otherwise unbreakable natural border, the frozen river, for the profitable business of smuggling across a border now revealed to be passable in the more naturally inclined sovereignty of the Mohawk Nation, where the artificial superstructures of nation-state deems it impassable. However, Manzanos and Benito conclude that in North America, '[t]here's no border. This is free trade' (p.109), for what does the smuggler Ray want with her money? A 'double-wide' trailer with insulation from the outside world. The fundamental capitalist coordinates for transaction remain unchallenged by a personal vendetta against state control of space.

There then follows a lengthy transgression into film studies and European political crises. When Simon the French national and Calais local takes *le migrant* Bilal into his home in Philippe Lioret's film *Welcome* (2009), he demonstrates a Levinasian responsibility as a foundational ethics that precedes identity's formal drive for association with state space. Identity is not understood without relation, goes the argument, and this includes the complicated multiplicities of identity and history that always make an unwelcome return. By receiving and sheltering the Other, motive is co-opted by personal investment again, which ultimately lies in the smooth space of the state, not in complications of human care. We see both the redemptive and destructive implications of 'the shattering of the self in the face of the Other' (Manzanos and Benito, 2014, p.123-4). Hospitality also enables a lateral movement from under the pressure of legality, but only with life-threatening consequences of true resistance. The final irony is that after his suicidal bid for freedom in swimming the channel, Bilal washes ashore a corpse and is rapidly dispatched back to France in a body bag, achieving a kind of geographic and economic freedom he could never enjoy in life. The

work done here to demonstrate the contemporary hypocrisy of the French metropolitan state is convincing and draws from legal case studies as readily as it does from media outlets, to give evidence of an internal occupation that is racist.

Manzanas and Benito are strongest when using film studies—and the European samples already noted—which they rely on to give an interdisciplinary scope to the work. They spend time here patiently working through the contextual relevance to a very contemporary issue of human rights over civil responsibilities. But, the question persists, why is the volume much better on European space than American? The implications are that a logic of migration and a tension between hospitality and exclusivity is foundational to the American nation, yet is currently ignored by the Leviathan state the USA has become through constitutional homogeneity and racial privilege enshrined therein.

Perhaps this kind of transnational cultural criticism's problem is the same as that of Occupy, which makes a refrain as the book's coda: it all too easily becomes that which it attempts to avoid—a formal structure that organises the particularities and differences it wants to liberate. The American exceptionalism angle of inquiry—that there is something singular about an American perversion of the universality of space—it inevitably falls back into makes the transnational reading of spatial categories problematic. This leads the reader to concede that the project's positioning of the novel as an escape from the cultural paradigm of neoliberalism/the hyperreal/cyber-capital/neo-city state, into a vision of a truly rhizomatic individually free society is unsuccessful, not because incomplete, but because fundamentally flawed. When Tim Clark warns us against adopting Susan Wolfson's concept of Cultural Formalism as the reduction of an artwork to a 'reflex of social interest, or falsely achieved unity of its material' (Clark, 2005, p.47) and the instrumental application of literary criticism which seeks to shine a light on the Other, we can see Manzanas and Benito's attempt to underwhelm a hegemonic discourse of vertical hierarchies—the man-tower, the camp-logic, the unbroken border—as joining that familiar postmodern narrative of the inaccurate inherently racist/sexist/classist identity that is supplanted by the language game/phrase/selfhood of another, more legitimate one. The Occupy movement could not self-legitimise because it was fundamentally opposed to the categories of legitimacy made available to it. Indeed, the simplicity with which Occupy mobilized was its downfall and as Žižek notes, '[t]he problem is that if you mobilize against the bad financial system you fall into a certain ideological trap, the fascist trap' (Jones, 2011).

If we continue to read literature from the broad liberalist segue afforded Cultural Formalism, we serve only the tautological methodologies themselves, not the people we imagine are liberated or realised by the identity-forming process of literary fiction. Space and geographically oriented criticism offers some leverage into a literary identity coefficient, but not without relying on arguments that are, by now, commonplace to students of postmodernism.

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