

This article was downloaded by:

Publisher: KKG Publications

Registered office: 18, Jalan Kenanga SD 9/7 Bandar Sri Damansara, 52200 Malaysia



Key Knowledge Generation

Publication details, including instructions for author and subscription information:

<http://kkgpublications.com/social-sciences/>

Being in the City: A Postmodern Reading of Paul Auster's City of Glass

SARAH YOON

Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korea

Published online: 18 June 2016



CrossMark

To cite this article: Yoon, S. (2016). Being in the city: A postmodern reading of Paul Auster's City of Glass. *International Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 2(3), 98-100.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.20469/ijhss.2.20002-3>

To link to this article: <http://kkgpublications.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/2/Volume2/IJHSS-20002-3.pdf>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

KKG Publications makes every effort to ascertain the precision of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, KKG Publications, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the content. All opinions and views stated in this publication are not endorsed by KKG Publications. These are purely the opinions and views of authors. The accuracy of the content should not be relied upon and primary sources of information should be considered for any verification. KKG Publications shall not be liable for any costs, expenses, proceedings, loss, actions, demands, damages, expenses and other liabilities directly or indirectly caused in connection with given content.

This article may be utilized for research, edifying, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly verboten.

BEING IN THE CITY: A POSTMODERN READING OF PAUL AUSTER'S CITY OF GLASS

SARAH YOON *†

Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korea

Keywords:

City of Glass
Postmodern Detective
Dominant Capitalist
Ontological

Received: 28 February 2016

Accepted: 07 April 2016

Published: 18 June 2016

Abstract. Paul Auster's "City of Glass" (1985) has been widely described as a postmodern detective novella. The work has provoked debate about postmodern literary devices such as metafiction, fictional worlds, and the economics of language and signified meanings. My reading on postmodernism in "City of Glass" focuses on how the novella departs from modernism, particularly within the urban setting of New York as a depersonalizing site of dominant capitalist signs. Simmel (1971) famously said that the city dweller develops a "protective organ" in the metropolitan environment, which was also echoed by his student Benjamin (1968). I will emphasize that while the protagonist Daniel Quinn does not exhibit Simmel's blase attitude, he constructs a sense of self or Being in the context of the city in opposition to a criminal other. Auster draws particular focus on the dyadic relationship through the investigator and criminal figures that are comparable to a Sartrean notion of the other, essentially characterized by conflict and a will to appropriate/exterminate the other. "City of Glass" raises interesting implications for how Being is constructed amid the plethora of urban stimuli and crowds within a postmodern framework. "The other is of interest to me only to the extent that he is another Me, a Me-object for Me, and conversely to the extent that he reflects my Me" (Sartre, 1956).

©2016 KKG Publications. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

In describing the essential difference between modernist and postmodernist fiction, Brian McHale said that while the dominant concern of modernist fiction is epistemological, that of postmodernist fiction is ontological. "That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what I am it?... What are the limits of the knowable? ... postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (9-10). Postmodernist fiction posits a plurality of selves and realities, and the author himself refuses to become the locus or provider of meaning. Consequently, postmodernist fiction widely employs "frame-breaking" devices, such as metafiction, which blur the boundaries of "fictional" and "real" worlds (197). Metafiction in Auster's work is one of the most salient postmodernist features. Such literary techniques "paradoxically relativizes reality... it only destabilizes ontology further... the supposedly absolute reality of the author becomes just another level of fiction, and the real world retreats to a further remove" (197-198). Metafiction necessarily throws into question the role of language, particularly names in works such as *City of Glass* where the author himself appears as a character.

Daniel Quinn is the protagonist in *City of Glass*, a writer of

popular detective novels. One day he receives a phone call requesting Paul Auster the detective. Daniel Quinn decides to masquerade as Paul Auster, thereby entering an ontological maze represented in the urban labyrinth of proliferating signs where he agrees to follow Peter Stillman's father, who, confusingly enough, is also named Peter Stillman. "In other words, a kind of glorified tail job," says Quinn (34). When he loses track of Stillman, Sr., as well as the entire Stillman family, Quinn withdraws to write in his red notebook of investigative clues. The only trace remaining of him at the end are his final written words, "What will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?" (157). He is reduced to a mere question mark, amid the floating signifiers in the city.

The postmodern use of metafiction necessarily draws attention to the arbitrary nature of signs. As Waugh (1990) wrote in her famous book *Metafiction*,

Quinn exhibits a fascination with language, as constituting his identity, early on in the novella an ironic twist, since Waugh (1990) points out that characters inhabit fictional realms that are verbal constructs. Quinn observes Private eye. The term held a triple meaning for Quinn. Not only was it the letter "i," standing for "investigator," it was "I" in the upper case, the tiny life-bud buried in the body of the breathing self. At the same time, it was also the eye of the writer, the eye of the man who looks out

*Corresponding author: Sarah Yoon

†Email: joyful.sarah4110@gmail.com



from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him (9-10).

Within the disorienting framework where signs point to the inherent unknowability about the external world, situated in the context of the city where they are all the more profuse, Quinn struggles to discover himself and find meaning for his existence. He has already lost both his wife and son, constructing fictional worlds (to the second degree) through his act of writing. He momentarily discovers a sense of purpose and confidence, an inner change he is not unaware of, by becoming Paul Auster the detective and solving a case. In his 1999 critical analysis of Paul Auster's works, Herzogenrath (1999) noted, "By committing a crime, the criminal creates the detective: the detective is made possible because the criminal exists" (19). Auster strips the detective genre of its classic moral overtones to the basic dyadic relationship in which "the one is necessary for the existence of the other" (Herzogenrath 1999). Herzogenrath (1999) also argued that classic detective fiction was a genre deeply influenced by the metaphysical Hegelian discourse and a rationalist understanding of the world, which has since collapsed, as observed in Auster's postmodern detective fiction (Rowen, 1991).

Detective fiction has necessarily undergone a profound change. Whereas the classic detective based his investigations on the reading and decoding of symbols, with their assumedly natural, fixed relation to the referent, between cause and effect, crime and corpse, going backward (reconstruction of the crime) and forward (solution) in time on a straight and logical line, the postmodern detective is faced with the arbitrariness of the sign and its endless proliferation, based on the profound split between sign and referent as well as between signifier and signified (25).

Detective Fiction

Auster's detective fiction is essentially postmodern because it raises issues of ontology, challenging the inherent instability of the self in an unknowable world despite its excess of signs, he while refusing to omit the pressure to decode it. Writing precedes and entails the "mystery" at the heart of *City of Glass*, which places focus on the dominance of the sign, despite its detachment from any referent or signified. The novella has invited poststructuralist readings, due to its preoccupation with language as failing to signify reality. Lacan (1972) highlighted that there is "an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (297) in language, while Derrida (1982) wrote, Is it not evident that no signifier, whatever its substance and form, has a "unique and singular reality?" A signifier is from the very beginning the possibility of its own repetition, of its own image or resemblance. From the moment that the sign appears, that is to say from the very beginning, there is no chance of encoun-

tering anywhere the purity of "reality," "unicity," "singularity" (Derrida, 1997).

Baudrillard (1996) also compared the "hyperreality" of signs to the murder of reality in his work *The Perfect Crime*, which makes employ the detective fiction genre to highlight the arbitrary nature of signs.

Quinn writes to exist in *City of Glass* and literally disappears once he ceases to produce signs, however unstable their signification. Once he loses sight of the criminal other, this production of written signs becomes more linked to his livelihood than ever. In his analysis of *City of Glass*, Dimovitz (1990) paired a Sartrean existentialist reading with psychoanalysis, saying, "In order to see oneself, one needs another who watches and objectifies the self" (625). When Quinn loses his criminal (and also client) other, his other becomes the reader. As Derrida (1997) noted, One writes in order to communicate something to those who are absent. The absence of the sender, the addressor, from the marks that he abandons, which are cut off from him and continue to produce effects beyond his presence and beyond the present actuality of his meaning, that is, beyond his life itself, this absence... belongs to the structure of all writing and I will add, further on, of all language in general (Derrida, 1982). Writing functions even in the radical absence of its author and addressee, as seen in the disappearance of Quinn's body at the end of the novella.

Once Quinn ceases to produce signs, he is ultimately absorbed into the inundating excess of signs in the metropolitan context of New York. He, like Stillman Snr., becomes "a speck, a punctuation mark, a brick in an endless wall of bricks" (109). Quinn says, "It was as though he had melted into the walls of the city" (139). Auster certainly conceived of New York as a depersonalizing space of lost meanings. In an early handwritten draft for an unpublished story, Auster wrote, "New York, a city of impenetrable facades... Everywhere it eludes the grasp... The redundancy of its parallels and intersections... The city... reduces its inhabitants to objects" (qtd. in Torfimova 132). In *City of Glass*, Quinn says, "New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well" (4). Quinn is a self-reflexive investigator and the loss of his criminal other forces him to turn his gaze inwards at a painfully fragmented identity.

Metropolis and Mental Life

Simmel (1971) recognized in his influential 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" that the metropolitan site rep-

resents a depersonalizing force, but argued that city dwellers develop a “protective organ” and become blase individuals to counter the sheer influx of stimuli (326). The blase city dweller protects his interior self from the inundating excess of urban signs through a “mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness” (326). All things and entities encountered in the city “appear to the blase person in a homogeneous, flat and gray color,” influenced by their economic value (330). Simmel (1971) was student and another well-known critic of metropolitan life, Benjamin (1968) agrees, saying that “consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli” to prevent experiences from becoming formative (163). Yet these observations subscribe to a modernist discourse, where it was thought rationality could salvage one’s sense of meaning analogous to the classic detective genre earlier discussed. Brown (2007) critical analysis of Auster’s works, Paul Auster, the detective novel is the most urban of texts. The complexity of the labyrinthine streets, the density of the population and the anonymity of the individual in the crowd make it the ideal

place to commit a crime, and the most unpromising of environments for its solution. This metropolitan environment is one dependent on reading and interpretation. In the city, evidence is everywhere, but concrete significations are in short supply. The detective mystery too requires the identification and deciphering of encoded information, in the form of clues (59-60).

CONCLUSION

Being in the city is comparable to a postmodern detective story, since city dwellers are forced to decode and filter which signs are truly relevant. Simultaneously, we are engaged in the activity of producing signs. “In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable,” says Quinn (9). In a postmodern urban setting, the metropolis forces its inhabitants to reflect on the nature of signs, names and their references. *City of Glass* suggests that being in the city is no less tenuous than the verbal constructs in which its characters appear, navigate and from which they gradually fade.

REFERENCES

- Auster, P. (1990). *The New York trilogy*. New York: NY, Penguin Classics.
- Baudrillard, J. (1996). *The perfect crime*. UK: Verso.
- Brown, M. (2007). *Paul Auster*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1968). On some motifs in baudelaire (Trans. Harry Zohn). In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 155-200). New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Derrida, J. (1982). *Margins of philosophy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. (1997). *Of grammatology*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Dimovitz, S. A. (1990). Public personae and the private I: De-compositional ontology. In P. Auster (Ed.), *The New York trilogy*. New York: NY, Penguin Classics.
- Herzogenrath, B. (1999). *An art of desire: Reading Paul Auster*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Lacan, J. (1972). The insistence of the letter in the unconscious. In R. T. De George (Ed.), *The structuralists: From Marx to Levi-Strauss* (pp. 287-323). Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Rowen, N. (1991). The detective in search of the lost tongue of Adam. In P. Auster (Ed.), *City of Glass*. New York: NY, Penguin Books.
- Sartre, J. P. B. (1956). *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology*. (Trans. Hazel E. Barnes.) New York: NY, Philosophical Library.
- Simmel, G. (1971). The metropolis and mental life. In D. N. Levine (Ed.), *G. Simmel: On individuality and social forms; selected writings* (pp. 324-339). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Waugh, P. (1990). *Metafiction: The theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*. UK: Routledge.

— This article does not have any appendix. —