

**Cultural and Literary Geographies of the City in the Fiction of Martin Amis**  
**Krisztina Nagy, University of Bristol, 2006**

(Diss. Supervisor: Prof. David Punter; Ext. Examiner: Prof. Patricia Waugh;  
Int. Examiner: Prof. Andrew Bennett)

The primary objective of this dissertation is to place the fiction of Martin Amis within the framework of novel developments in the fields of cultural geography and urban literary studies. It aims to show that images and narratives of the city form a so-far unexplored subtext, or urban geography of Amis's fiction. Secondly, the thesis proposes to make a contribution to current scholarly debates on literary representations of the city. In particular, critical attempts at attending to the so-called 'space of literature' are pursued in order to create new methods of originating spatially-engaged readings of literary works.

The thesis mainly surveys rhetorical novelistic accounts of urban landscapes; that is, it specifically constructs and sustains a critical model of urban sensations rendered through the medium of language, as opposed to embedding the inquiry into a socio-historical frame. Crucially, through the author's voluntary assertion of the status of these literary texts as mere artefacts, or pieces of fantasy and literary imagination, wide-ranging philosophical questions can be raised regarding the uncertain actuality of these urban locations. The topics addressed by the individual chapters are read as literary enactments of the metropolitan experience to which Martin Amis's writing particularly appears to respond. Repeatedly in the dissertation, concepts and theories from the related disciplines of psychology, philosophy and human geography have been examined and deployed.

Through broadly considering leading cultural theorists and human geographers who have advocated for a 'soft' reading of place and space, the introductory chapter advances the case for interdisciplinary research on human beings' experience of their environs and urban

habitats. Human geographers' recognition in the 1970s that the construction and indirect analysis of urban landscapes have been long present in literary texts, prompted social scientists to address in their studies the implications of the oftentimes metaphorical or imagistic origins of geographical names. In turn, the critical affirmation of space in cultural theory has drawn much attention to the previously neglected role of place in literary works.

A focal point in the emergence of the field of cultural geography is Steve Pile's note in *The Body and the City*, suggestively claiming that psychoanalysis and geography share the *terrae incognitae*, or unknown territories of people's thoughts and emotions. Pile's concept derives from Freud's remarks in *Civilization and its Discontents*, applying the historically rich and multi-layered architecture of Rome as a spatial correlate of psycho-cognitive activities. Freud's ideas then are presented as having essentially uncovered the city to be an important visual archetype of the functions and processes of human imagination. Furthermore, the argument that the city of imagination and the 'real' city are shifting towards a point of erasure has recently gained increasing relevance in evaluating urban modes of existence. An early example of conflating the geographical city with the imaginary one could be James Joyce's *Modernist Dublin*. Likewise, more recently, prominent literary critics in the United States and Britain have argued for a close relation between the novel as an art form and the various stages through which world cities have evolved, thus generating stimulating book-length studies on the multi-faceted relation of contemporary novels and millennial cities.

In the second chapter, the thesis embarks on exploring Martin Amis's urban writing by interpreting the extensive chronicles of bodily exploits in Amis's first novel, *The Rachel Papers*. Another vital context for the research is the city's close link to theatre and the theme of spectacle and performance. The chapter argues that the affected character of the protagonist who, not

incidentally, writes a journal in the novel similarly entitled ‘The Rachel Papers,’ is representative in several ways of postmodern urban identity.

The third chapter looks to Amis’s second novel, *Other People*, and explores the ethical concerns of a phantasmagoric journey of self-exploration through the dark recesses of the contemporary city. The stray figure of the protagonist, called Mary Lamb, is cast in the role of a literary geographer drawing a mental map of London by aimlessly wandering through the city. However, she repeatedly loses her way, so her quest for mastering the urban landscape is time and time again disrupted. The thesis claims that Mary Lamb’s perception of the city is symbolic of a blurred urban aesthetic, comparable to the Impressionist painters’ rendering of cityscapes. Much the same as the Impressionists, the novelist abandons conventional forms of representation, thus raising questions about the necessity, or even the potentially deceptive nature of exact realistic depictions in art.

The fourth chapter reads the recurrence of urban themes in the novel called *The Information* as corresponding to the aesthetic category of the uncanny. Double characters, split identities, and repetitive scenes, locations and place-names are assembled in the urban fabric of this novel. Additionally, the literary text registers the disjointed and fragmented shape of contemporary urban sites. Central to the novel’s literary map is the address 49E Calchalk Street, a non-existent place located at the intersection of Ladbroke Grove, Portobello Road and Kensington Park Road in Notting Hill, London. The artistic technique of blending the actual and fictional locations emphasizes that literature habitually inscribes new topographical referents to an already existing urban map, and in the process stretches the limits or borders of the real metropolis. More importantly, in opposing merely realistic descriptions, the novel evokes

dreamlike and phantasmal visions and ambiguous resolutions—correlatives that Freud famously attributed to uncanny encounters.

The penultimate chapter reads *London Fields*, and argues that the book signals an elusive and a typically postmodern style of writing the city. The chapter demonstrates this through turning to the concealed complexity of the name ‘London Fields,’ which is the title of the novel on the one hand, and a component of London’s topography on the other, referring as it does to a real park situated in a borough of East London. As an urban place-name, the title, strictly speaking, indicates a discrepancy on a linguistic level: London is a city and in this respect the juxtaposition of ‘field’ is contradictory. So, it is immensely suggestive that upon closer consideration the title of the novel turns out to be a semantic *field* that simultaneously denotes the urban and the rural. Consequently, the title represents a point of ambiguity in the text for it is no longer possible to return to London as a field; should one have the desire, this part of the city would have to be destructed or disfigured. The chapter then draws a parallel between the embedded metaphorical device that ultimately unfolds the authorial intention of decomposition as well as the need of the contemporary writer to find an adequate literary device to portray the violent cityscapes of the turn of the millennium.

The last chapter investigates the presence of American cultural themes in Amis’s essayistic writing, before moving on to study the formation of an Anglo-American metropolitan identity in Amis’s most accomplished novel entitled *Money*. While the novel features the protagonist’s relentless jet-setting between London and New York, the narrative responds to the constant motion entailed by these travels through utilizing fast and abrupt language. Moreover, long and absurd lists of words comprise the pages of the book, reproducing, in effect, urban life itself inasmuch as a list can be taken to denote an abrupt, dense and inconsequential linguistic

phenomenon in terms of semantics. The frantic rhythm and mental experience of the city are amply conveyed in lengthy depictions of street clamour and urban din that cause the protagonist to suffer from constant tinnitus. In summary, analyzing the narrative function of acoustic discord is one of the many ways through which the thesis compellingly demonstrates that Amis's *oeuvre* masterfully illustrates the intoxicating fullness of urban life, and ultimately betokens a new understanding of the unique literary qualities of Amis's novels.