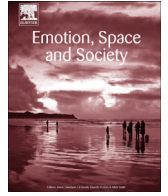




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Vicarious vertigo: The emotional experience of height in the science fiction city

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1. Introduction

In March 2016 *High Rise*, the film adaptation of JG Ballard's 1976 novel set in a 40 storey tower in London's Docklands, had its premiere screening in London. In the same month that this retro-futuristic vision of high-rise urbanism was aired, *New London Architecture* updated its comprehensive review of the current status of high-rise development (*New London Architecture*, 2016). It details the 436 tall buildings currently in the pipeline in London; a dramatic enough figure in isolation, it also revealed that 119 of these were new developments submitted for planning permission in the preceding 12 months. Alongside the well-documented iconic heights of buildings such as the Burj Kalifa, which at 163 storeys high dwarfs the vision of Ballard, this abundance of high-rise development in cities such as London demonstrates the extent to which vertical urbanism and the experience of living at height are rapidly becoming ubiquitous and inescapable parts of everyday urban reality.

This surge in construction of new high-rise developments has led to a vital body of criticism. Studies such as those undertaken by urban geographers *Lees et al.* (2009) and *Watt* (2009) delineate the dizzying spatial inequality inherent in the construction of towers that maximise inner city land value, alongside the privatisation and demolition of existing social housing. These texts draw much needed attention to these developments, creating a body of resistance against this insidious spatial segregation. However, in focusing on the economic or social implications of these processes, the emotional affect of these spaces is often overlooked.

Within the fields of planning, geography and urban studies,

Brown and Pickeril (2009, p. 33) state it is necessary to “overcome the fear among some activists that to engage in emotional reflexivity is narcissistic and time-wasting, instead making explicit the link between understanding our emotions and prefiguring social transformation.” Ansaloni and Tedeschi (2016, p. 15) note that this requires an appreciation of “affect and emotion as politically crucial subjects for understanding socio-spatial processes in urban contexts”.

This paper builds on debates around the role of emotion and affect in the co-production of space, which underpin its critique in the design of urban environments (for example: *Anderson*, 2009; *Johnson*, 2011; and *McGaw and Vance*, 2008). I argue that there is scope for greater consideration of the role of emotion in the co-production of urban space within the fields of urban design, planning and architecture. There is critical work being done in this field, such as the projects of *Sandberg and Rönnblom* (2016), who gather and examine emotional narratives around urban transformation. However, *Baum* (2015) decries the fact that this aspect of design remains overlooked by practitioners who focus on the “rationality” of planning.

While Thrift's statement that “generally speaking, to read about affect in cities it is necessary to resort to the pages of novels,” (2004, p. 57) may no longer be true, this paper argues that science fiction (sf) novels can continue to form a critical part of discussions into the emotional impact of the future city. Novels such as *High Rise*, written during a period of similarly untrammelled vertical construction, explicitly address the emotional experience of living at height. As many cities grow upwards into the heights that were previously the realm of sf, these novels provide their readers with ways to both imagine and empathetically experience the emotional impact of the built environment. Critically, these novels also provide architects, designers and planners with a space to reflect on the emotional implications of the cities currently under construction.

2. The experience of vertigo

Throughout this paper I use the term ‘vertigo’ to refer to the symptoms of ‘height-vertigo’ or ‘distance-vertigo’ (*Guerraz et al.*, 2001). It is a term commonly conflated with acrophobia or fear of heights, the psychological desire to avoid environments where the sensations of vertigo might be provoked. *LeBlanc* (2011) describes

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how, through reading Sartre, vertigo can be understood as the as a fear of an external threat that becomes internalised as existential anxiety. For those who are susceptible, vertigo can be both physically and emotionally destabilising, as LeBlanc summarises, “vertigo prompts serious questions about the nature and stability of one’s self” (2011, p. 2). While these severe responses are rare, the sensations of vertigo itself are an innate biological response to distance or height (Walk et al., 1957 cited in Brandt, 2003, p. 422). As such, the experience of vertigo can be considered as a common embodied response to the built environment.

The sensation of vertigo is characterised in neuroscientific study by feelings of dizziness, loss of balance, disorientation and sensations of movement or rotation (see Brandt et al., 1980; Whitney et al., 2005). These sensations are created by an inter-sensory conflict, as visual information regarding relative stability is at odds with the other sensory inputs. When, as described by Brandt, “the distance between the observer’s eye and the nearest visible stationary contrast becomes critically large” (Brandt, 2003, p. 418). In this way, it is distance rather than direction which provokes height-vertigo, and in the context of the built environment it can be created by either a downwards glance to the streets below, or upwards gaze towards the looming heights of the tower.

Critical to the understanding of the use of vertigo in fictional representations of the city is the appreciation that, as a physiological reaction, it can be considered a universal experience. It is a fundamental human response to our embodied sense of self within our environment, which is overlaid with potent emotional or existential connotations. Within the vertical cities of sf, the experience of vertigo offers an opportunity to consider the role an embodied sense of location plays in our emotional appreciation of place.

3. The city and the imagination: a conceptual role for sf

This paper follows urban geographers Hewitt and Graham’s (2015, p. 925) call for greater study of the “vertical and volumetric nature of the urban environment and experience that is at the core of contemporary urbanism”. They identify an embedded horizontalism in urban research which is unable to respond to the radical reshaping of the vertical and volumetric built environment (see also: Elden, 2013; Harris, 2015; Hewitt and Graham, 2013; McNeill, 2005). As described by Graham (2016a, p. 41) the “flattening effects of both geographic and urbanistic traditions work to seriously undermine the emergence of a fully three-dimensional understanding of these crucial transformations”. The existence of what Harris (2015, p. 601) has referred to as “a vertical blind-spot” across contemporary urban theory restricts our conceptualisation of the city and fails to reflect the multi-layer urban reality which we are beginning to inhabit.

Ireson (2000) argues that a shift in perspective is required to examine and critique vertical urbanism, to develop an appreciation of different levels as distinct contexts, each creating specific patterns of architectural design, or types of interaction. The need for this conceptual shift is reflected in the lived experience of multi-layer vertical urbanism in Hong Kong, where stacked and overlapping malls, skyways and towers create a multiplicity of planes on and between which city life occurs. Here, ground level is no longer the predominant site of public lived experience, leading to a description of Hong Kong as a ‘city without ground’ (Frampton et al., 2012; Shelton et al., 2014; Steyerl, 2011). This ‘loss of ground’ is a fundamentally destabilising act, literally undermining traditional modes of mapping and navigating the city.

In response to the rapid pace of change within urban development, and the embedded horizontality of traditional modes of urban studies theory and critique, Hewitt and Graham (2015) have

argued that sf provides a site for the potential reconceptualisation of the city. Within geography, planning and urban studies, extrapolative sf is predominantly considered as either a prediction of the future of cities, or as a vehicle for critique of the city contemporary to the time of writing. I argue for an extension to this reading, drawing on work that examines the ways fiction and contemporary theory can be co-considered, to critique current theoretical understandings of the city (Abbott, 2007; Collie, 2011; Davis, 1992; Gold, 2001; Hewitt and Graham, 2015; Kitchin and Kneale, 2002; Lewis et al., 2008). Kitchin and Kneale (2002, p. 9) extol the value of this “privileged site” of sf in particular as creating a tension between reality and fantasy, between science and fiction, “from which to contemplate material and incursive geographies and the production of geographical knowledges and imaginations.”

Sf theorist Suvin (1979) considers this potential to create a new site from which to contemplate the real alongside the imaginary as the defining characteristic of sf. Through his conception of ‘cognitive estrangement’ he identifies a process of critical detachment for the sf reader. For political theorist Jameson (2005, p. 99) this estrangement through idea acts both on the fiction being presented and the reality from which the reader views it, and he describes sf as presenting “messages of otherness, but transmitted in the past”. The cognitive estrangement of sf comes from its ability to make the reader ‘other’, to view both the real and imagined alongside one another, and provide a detached and elevated perspective on the trends and concerns of the everyday present.

For Jameson, imaginative freedom is the critical factor which differentiates sf from other forms of literary expression. This is in part rooted in the genre’s ‘pulp’ character, its self-definition as existing outside of high art (Bloom, 1996; Fisher, 2014). As Jameson states it is only in sf that there is the “capacity to relax that tyrannical ‘reality principle’ which functions as a crippling censorship over high art” (2005, p. 270).

Following Suvin and Jameson, I argue that the value of sf in relation to the built environment is twofold. Firstly, the radical imagination of an environment which is entirely ‘other’ allows the reader to imaginatively inhabit and experience place. Secondly, through this othering, the reader gains critical distance from the built environment as it is currently known, to examine their own emotional experience of space.

4. The vertical city in sf cinema

While the vertical has been overlooked in urban theory, Graham (2016b, p. 382) describes how “the image of the radically verticalised cityscape has so dominated science fiction as to be almost a cliché.” This is certainly the case across science fiction film, where, as argued by Barlow (2005, p. 43) “the ‘standard’ version of the city of the future now comes from the Los Angeles that Scott and his ‘visual futurist’ Syd Mead created for *Blade Runner*.”

While the vertical city may be considered as a ‘standard’, its metaphorical role is far from constant. In her analysis of the city throughout the history of sf film, media theorist Sobchack (1988) details how these representations offer a situated glimpse into the symbolic role of the vertical city. How it has been transformed; from a utopian space in films such as *Things to Come* (1936); *Lost Horizon* (1937) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) to a “symbol of modern civilization’s aspiration and pride” (1988, p. 10). As noted by Sontag (1964), these buildings became the focal point of sf cinemas dominant “aesthetic of destruction,” used to denote civilization in ruins. Sobchack (2014) goes on to chart how this association of verticality has become synonymous with; an asphyxiating oppressiveness in films such as *Soylent Green* (1973) and *Logan’s Run* (1976), through the “dense, complex and heterogeneous” spaces of *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Brazil* (1985), and the bottomless

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