

Guide books and guided tours; distant cities and the imagination

Lucy Harrison

At the moment of arrival, the place that was left behind becomes imaginary, frozen at that time until it is revisited. Those who have left their homeland decades earlier often speak their own language in a curiously old fashioned or immature fashion. The memory of ‘home’ becomes embellished by the imagination, by desire, by those moments recorded in photographs.

At that moment, the place of arrival is also imaginary, built up from influences of fiction, film, television, the internet and anecdotes from others. Gradually, over the days and weeks of inhabiting a city, the imaginary version will recede, instead being replaced by the perception of a resident, with only fragments of the other being retained. However well we think we know a city, it will always be subjective, open to other influences, coloured by what others tell us. Perhaps my perception of London is only as reliable as that of someone who has just arrived.

The calypso music legend Lord Kitchener wrote as he sailed from Trinidad in 1948 that he had the “wonderful feeling that I’m going to land on the mother country... to touch the soil of the mother country”.. Kitchener, who was named after an English military hero, recorded his most famous song ‘London is the Place for Me’ for the newsreel cameras, a positive face for the first big wave of Caribbean immigration, the tribute to “sociable”, “pretty” and “comfortable” London played over the top of footage of black West Indians arriving with their suitcases.

*I’ve been travelling to places years ago
But this is the place I want to know [1]*

Other calypso songs of the same time included Young Tiger’s “I Was There (At the Coronation)”, where the lyrics speak of “looking on rapturously” as the crowds cheer on the new Queen. However, also in 1952, Lord Kitchener recorded “Sweet Jamaica” in which his view of the UK had shifted slightly.

*I regret the day I leave Sweet Jamaica
If I had wings like an aeroplane,
I would fly to that blessed country again [2]*

There is an anecdote which may or may not be true, that when Kitchener later sang “London is the Place for Me” to a crowd of Caribbean immigrants in London, he was booed off the stage. What is true is that, disillusioned with London and the UK, with the unfriendly reception many black immigrants received, with the cold weather and high levels of unemployment, Kitchener returned to Trinidad in 1962.

Although not in the way described by angry tabloid newspapers, asylum seekers and “economic migrants” who decide to try and make it to London in the 21st century may often have a particular view of the city as a haven, an image which could be shattered on arrival.

Colonial images of the UK were evident among the respondents, particularly those from Sri Lanka and Somalia. Colonial heritage makes the UK an attractive destination through the notion of linguistic and cultural similarity, the belief that a strong bond remains between the UK and former colonies and the belief that the UK has a duty to look after citizens from its ex-colonies fleeing persecution....

For respondents who continue to have a choice of possible destination countries when all the above factors are taken into account, decisions are taken on the basis of images and perceptions already held, and usually casually acquired. Respondents spoke of images gained from film, music, sport, novels and contact with Britons overseas. [3]

The attraction of London has caused the northern part of France, around Calais, to become a place for waiting - waiting for a chance to somehow enter the UK, through the Channel Tunnel, clinging to the bottom of a train, in the back of a lorry. Thermal imaging devices and vibration monitors so sensitive they can detect the heartbeat of a mouse are used to uncover these stowaways. Some, of course, do get through, then there are the incidents such as that in 2000 when 58 dead Chinese men were found amongst a container of oranges arriving at Dover.

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For those travelling for reasons of leisure, to return home whenever they please, other people's experiences are packaged into glossy books, complete with maps and photographs, Bars and restaurants are suggested, important buildings pointed out. No matter what the experience of each individual, there are certain elements of major cities that we all know of. Maps and guide books become an essential part of the weekend away, the short break.

London in 2004, a city of many different cultures, would be impossible to properly describe in one book. The Turkish community near where I live, for example, would no doubt describe other important places, other histories, from most guide books. My London has not yet been described in any book; in order to be truly accurate, there would be as many guide books to London as inhabitants. The question with city guides is always: whose vision is this? Whose eyes are we looking through?

While in Tallinn in June, Christiane Baumgartner and I found an old Russian guide book to the city. Concentrating hard to remember her school Russian lessons, Christiane deciphered tours around the monuments of the city, from Linda statue to Lenin standing outside the Communist Party headquarters. Using this book as our guide, we attempted to find those places - some easier than others, sometimes finding a piece of rock we suspected could be where a statue was, sometimes wandering around empty squares and gardens unable to find the places described.

The guidebook is essentially a guide to a city that no longer exists - although some of the buildings can still be seen, so much has changed that it is almost as if a new city has been transplanted into the same place. Although the name of the city is the same, it is almost like the Situationist action of orienting yourself in a city by using a map to a different one.

Earlier this year, I attempted a similar task in Riga and used an English language Russian guide book to Riga from 1982, which was deceptive in its cheerful optimism about how

much the citizens of Riga loved the Soviet regime. This book had clearly outlined 'tours to the city', and I attempted to follow one of these.

This was not to be an easy task, as not only had many museums and recommended sights disappeared or changed so as to be unrecognisable, any street names which had been associated with the Soviet Union had of course been changed back to their original names - Kirova Street becoming Elisabets Street, Lenin Street now Brivibas Street. The Aeroflot building, with a proud Soviet aeroplane on the top, visible in the double spread of Lenin Street and the surrounding area, is now a bank. On the other side of the Liberty Monument is now a McDonalds which would undoubtedly be caught in any current tourist's photographs. Lenin himself can be seen in the same old photograph, with hand held aloft as he looks down the street which has been named after him.

One of my walks took me to Cesu Street, all the way at the top of Lenin Street, which should take "two hours, including a look inside any shops that may interest you". There, behind the church of St Gertruda, is the Lenin Museum. When I got there, I found a broken-down looking wooden house. A water pipe had broken nearby and a fire engine was attempting to keep the spurting water under control. The walls were peeling, and white paint had been daubed on the door. My guide book told me that:

The only surviving photograph of Lenin and Stucka, taken in 1918, is on show in one of the exhibition stands. The museum is equipped with an intercom which plays Lenin's favourite tunes. Old gramophone recordings enable one to hear his voice.

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In 'The Interpretation of Dreams', Freud writes of his recurring dreams of Rome, a city he had never visited.

I dreamt once that I was looking out a railway-carriage window at the Tiber and the Ponte Sant' Angelo. The train began to move off, and it occurred to me that I had not so much as set foot in the city. The view that I had seen in my dream was taken from a well-known engraving which I had caught sight of for a moment the day before in the sitting-room of one of my patients.

The book Fantastic Cities started with my asking several people to describe a city they had never visited, to use instead the version they held in their heads, using elements described by others, by television, film and fiction, or maybe even from dreams. Perhaps Freud's description of Rome would be a description of a hastily glimpsed engraving from his patient's house.

This book, then, is a guide to cities of the imagination, cities which do not exist; although they may bear the same name as 'real' cities in the world, and may bear a passing resemblance to their namesakes, these cities are fragmentary and may consist of only one element. My versions of Baghdad and Sarajevo, for example, consist only of war; this is the only thing I have seen of those cities in news reports.

The 'graphic arts', those mechanical and digital technologies that allow us to reproduce images and texts, to make one or to make a thousand, are a fitting way to make art in the world today. These formats allow us to make work that is portable, disposable, personal, able

to be stuffed into a suitcase and taken on a journey, reprinted, exchanged and sent around the world. My work should ideally be used in any way that the present owner sees fit, read on an aeroplane, rolled up in a pocket, used to keep warm (or to protect from attack, as shown in my vinyl pieces 'White Windows') or thrown away - more can always be produced. As a guide book, 'Fantastic Cities' is as useless as the Russian book we found in a second hand bookshop, or maybe as useful in enabling us to see these other perceptions of cities. Perhaps some copies will be left in another bookshop to be found some time in the future and used by someone else to make a tour to the writers' imaginations.

- [1] Lord Kitchener, London is the Place For Me, 1950
- [2] Lord Kitchener, Sweet Jamaica 1952
- [3] Vaughan Robinson and Jeremy Segrott, Understanding the decision-making of Asylum Seekers, UK Home Office Report 2003
- [4] Maria Debrer; Riga; A Guide, Progress Publishers 1982
- [5] Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams

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LUCY HARRISON (ed.)
Fantastic Cities; Guides to Unvisited Cities

Artists were invited to write about cities they had never visited.

Contributors:

David Bate, Ian Breakwell, Christopher Brown, Heather Connelly, Adam Dant, Moyra Derby, Lucy Harrison, Matthew Higgs, Mikel Horl, Susan Johanknecht, Sharon Kivland, Jane Lee, Marko Mäetamm, Bob Matthews, Simon Morris, Pete Nevin, Nina Papaconstantinou, Dominic Rose, Alun Rowlands, Heidi Schafer, Martina Schmid, Julia Spicer, John Strutton, Jessica Voorsanger and Christopher Wraith

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Lucy Harrison
<http://www.lucy-harrison.co.uk/>

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