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***Re-Writing the City: Postmodern  
Observing in the Imaginary Londons of  
Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses and  
Iain Sinclair's Downriver.***

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## **Re-Writing the City: Postmodern Observing in the Imaginary Londons of Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses and Iain Sinclair's Downriver.**

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In this paper I propose to discuss issues relating postmodern definitions of the city to the representation of the urban environment in two British postmodern novels, Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses and Iain Sinclair's Downriver. The particular issues I want to discuss in relation to these two novels are: i) specific definitions and characteristics of the postmodern metropolis; ii) relationships between space, time and social discourse as registered in the city; and iii) discussion of the point of observation from which the city can be viewed. I will argue that these two texts offer a new way of recording the urban experience, a "postmodern observing" of the city.

### **Wandering through the theoretical space of the postmodern city**

Before looking at what could be said to constitute the postmodern metropolis, I want to discuss some relevant models of the city that help to distinguish between modernist and postmodernist constructions of the urban environment. Raymond Williams in his 1973 book, The Country and the City defines the city in opposition to rural habitation in terms of location, lifestyle and sense of identity. He suggests that the country/city dialectic is a recurring trope in English literature from the beginning of the industrial revolution to the middle of the twentieth century. This dialectic continues to interest English novelists even when the majority of Britain's population were living in urban environments, for example in Hardy's novels of the late 1890s, Lawrence's Nottingham novels, and Forster's novels of the first decade of the twentieth century. All these writers represent the city as an unnatural environment, one that is seen to be encroaching upon the

traditional culture and lifestyles of the newly urbanized population.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, postmodernist lifestyle evades this dialectical opposition by rejecting the rural environment outright; postmodernism exists in a constant cityscape, having no recourse to organic notions of an idyllic rural area. As David Clark (1996: 100) argues, urban lifestyle is now hegemonic. Whether you actually live in a city or in the country, everyone is exposed to urban attitudes and values through telecommunications, the mass media and easier travel. This is a Westernized view of the pervasiveness of urban values, but one which is significant in terms of British fiction.

This relationship between the urban and the rural also engages with post-colonial discourse. Williams, in the chapter "New Metropolis," from The Country and the City, extends the country/city dialectic into colonial terms by suggesting that the processes of urbanization in nineteenth century Britain correspond to the processes of colonization from the 1880s onwards. In his model, the colonizing country, Britain, is equated to the city, while the colonized state represents the country, developing a model of the city as a centre opposed to the periphery of the colony. Movement from rural to urban environments, a feature of industrialization, is here extended to the migration of immigrant communities into the centre: the colonizing country. In Britain this is accentuated because most of the immigrant populations of the twentieth century moved into Britain's city areas; demographically, it is still the case that the majority of immigrant communities reside in the larger conurbations and relatively few live in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> This process of immigration from the periphery to the centre has particular significance to the nature of the postmodern city in terms of hybridity and fragmented social worlds within a particular urban area.

David Harvey recognizes this in The Condition of Postmodernity when he describes the postmodern city as, "necessarily fragmented, a "palimpsest" of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a "collage" of current uses" (66). Here, Harvey stresses the postmodern city's multiple functions, its heteroculture, and its multiracial character. He goes on to define the postmodern city as unplanned and

that postmodern architects view the space of the city as independent and autonomous. This is in opposition to the modernist notion of space as something to be manipulated for social purposes, as subservient to a master conception of the uses of an overarching project. Modernist cities are thereby international in character, and tend towards homogeneity, while postmodern cities, Harvey suggests, have architecture that responds to local conditions and needs, and are therefore responsive to particular spaces and communities. This notion of the city as unplanned, and essentially uncontrollable, links in with older constructions and myths of the urban landscape as dangerous and unpredictable. In these older constructions the urban environment represents spaces where crime and the darker sides of human existence can run rampage, an observation especially recognized, as Williams (1992) notes, by the alienated modernist observer. Postmodern theories have expanded this notion of the uncontrollable nature of the city to develop a metaphor of the urban environment in terms of a living organism. Charles Jencks (1996) in a recent article develops this into what he calls "fractal cities" that survive by constantly changing their shape and structure. These postmodern cities are amorphous and protean and repeatedly renew themselves by jettisoning dead tissue to allow new tissue to thrive, an image which allows him to go on to suggest that cities survive without external planning, and left to itself an individual city naturally selects its future forms.<sup>3</sup> Jencks goes on to suggest that the fractal city develops logically, abiding by undiscoverable laws of fractal geometry, but that the possibility of predicting what sort of configuration will be produced is impossible, therefore the attempt to plan cities becomes futile.<sup>4</sup> The postmodern city is seen as a beast that is best left to develop independently, a dangerous animal, which, although unpredictable, will nevertheless survive and grow without overarching master plans to prefigure that growth.

A second discourse in which the postmodern city has been defined is related to the way we view the spatiality of the city. Edward Soja (1989) argues that space and spatiality, throughout modernist discourse, have been viewed with less importance than time and temporality. He cites many examples of this

privileging of time over space, including Bergson and Marx, (122-7).<sup>5</sup> He subsequently calls for a new postmodern interpretation of the city that stresses the theoretical importance of space as well as time. He offers the model of a "trialectic" of history/space/society as a development from the Marxist dialectic, and argues that spatiality, like history, is culturally produced, and therefore subject to theories of discourse in terms of power relationships (6). Space, in Soja's terms, can be distinguished between physical space and mental or discursive space. What becomes interesting here is that if you begin to merge Harvey's theory of the postmodern city and Soja's postmodern geography you arrive at a model of the city that has several discursive spaces in a single physical space. The spatial discourses can overlap, producing not only a palimpsest of past functions, as Harvey argues, but also a palimpsest of present functions. The space of a city becomes different depending on which discourse is being engaged at any particular time. Or to go one step further, in terms of time, several discourses are taking place, at several co-existent "times," at the same physical place. Time, space and discourse are therefore multiple in all three components. Although this can be seen as a general postmodern model of the relationship between time, space and social discourse, it is in the city where these discourses clash most prominently.

One way to negotiate this multiple model is to consider the point of view of the observer, or rather those engaged in the process of observing. Williams (1992) discusses the modernist (and pre-modernist) city-observer as an isolated stranger swamped by a sea of unrecognized faces. This inevitably leads to a feeling of alienation on the part of the observer, and Williams suggests, this alienation is part of the process of the creation of the modernist metropolitan artist, a figure who is usually a migrant to the city, and engages in society through an alienated community of artists. This modernist conception posits the artist as an isolated individual who has a unitary consciousness that observes the city from a point of detachment. Once confident of its position, this artist/observer becomes the

detached flaneur or flanneuse receiving the city's various messages, but not engaging with the city on an emotional level.

Another model of the city-observer is supplied by Michel de Certeau (1993). In fact, he discusses two ways of viewing the city. The first he identifies as a voyeur placed above the city, ideally on top of the city's tallest building, where, Icarus-like, one can view the city in its entirety without being subsumed in the Daedalus labyrinth below. At this vantage point the observer makes the city "readable," but in doing so, observes not the real city, but an image of the city: its simulacrum. To really engage with the city, Certeau argues, you must walk its streets. By doing so the observer is only allowed to read the city's signs as they are presented to her/him, the observer therefore becomes the writer of the city as s/he travels through it, s/he is no longer in the privileged position of the reader. This results in a multiple, semiotic creation of the city in the gaze of the observer. Again this retains the notion of the observer as a singular unified entity, but now the city becomes multiple, it can be written differently by different observers.

This leads us to a different notion of the observation of the city in terms of a multiple observer, or subject, as well as a multiple object. In her essay, "City Limits: Women, Cities, Postmodernism," Elizabeth Mahoney calls for a view of the city from a multiple perspective. In this way the postmodern city is not to be read simply as a multifarious object, but also multi-layered in terms of a multiple point of observation. She argues that most modernist and postmodernist observations of the city have maintained the singular viewpoint, and she calls for multiple viewpoints in terms of gender, class, race and age. According to Mahoney, the city is a different place depending upon the subject's status in these terms. In terms of fiction, the postmodern narrator is multiple, offering several viewpoints, some of which will inevitably be contradictory. This returns us to Harvey's model of the city as a palimpsest, but now in terms of the observing subject as well as the observed object -- the city. This "postmodern observing" of the city multiplies both subject and object, resisting the fixity of either, and results in a fluidity of readings across temporal and spatial discourses.

**London: Imaginary City**

Salman Rushdie has described The Satanic Verses as, "so much about transformation" (Appignanesi 1989: 8). One aspect of this transformation involves the migration of both the central characters from India to Britain, and more specifically to London. This migration, in Williams's model, can be thought of as a move from the country to the city, and involves a transformation of Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta that is not only psychological, but manifests itself as a physical transformation: the former into Shaitan, the latter into angel Gibreel.<sup>6</sup> Symbolically, the transformations explain something about the process of migration, about the changes inflicted upon the self when moving from one culture to another, and the metamorphosis of Saladin in particular can be read as a parody of the way he is viewed by white English authority as an alien. The policemen who arrest Saladin as an illegal immigrant after his fall onto English soil mock his unusual appearance and beat him repeatedly. He is eventually taken to a hospital that contains many metamorphosed bodies, reflecting the perceived status of the immigrant. A figure in the shape of a manticore, a mythical creature from Indian legend, tells Saladin, "There are businessmen from Nigeria who have grown sturdy tails. There is a group of holiday makers from Senegal who were doing no more than change planes when they were turned into slippery snakes" (168). The manticore goes on to explain that these metamorphoses are part of the process of identity-construction by the English authorities: "They describe us...That's all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct;" (ibid.). This alienation comes as a shock to Saladin who has always regarded England and London as his spiritual home, "This isn't England,' he thought, not for the first or last time. How could it be, after all; where in all that moderate and common-sensical land was there room for such a police van in whose interior such events as these might plausibly transpire?" (158).

But the London to which Saladin is moving is not represented as a 'real' place, as Rushdie emphasizes the imaginary aspects of the city, and these aspects are

created not through actual physical description, but through certain observing discourses. Saladin's London is an imaginary construct, as his upper-class English wife Pamela explains, "Him and his Royal family, you wouldn't believe. Cricket, the Houses of Parliament, the Queen. The place never stopped being a picture postcard to him ... I was bloody Britannia. Warm beer, mince pies, common-sense and me" (175) Saladin's love of London, and the English, is based upon the "stories he has been told" 7 about England. Cricket, the queen, warm beer: all these stand metonymically for England itself for Saladin. This culturally produced image of England is emphasized by the representation of London as an imaginary place, and the imaginary nature of cities is a theme that underpins The Satanic Verses. Rushdie has said of his novel, "I suppose I was writing about a sense of the city as an artificial, invented space which is constantly metamorphosing" (Appignanesi 1989: 9). This can be seen in Gibreel's description of London as he first travels in it:

And even though he did not have any idea of the true shape of that most protean and chameleon of cities he grew convinced that it kept changing shape as he ran round beneath it ... more than once he emerged, suffocating, from that subterranean world in which the laws of space and time had ceased to operate, and tried to hail a taxi; not one was willing to stop, however, so he was obliged to plunge back into that hellish maze, that labyrinth without solution, and continue his epic flight (Rushdie 1992: 201).

Here, the city is described in mythical terms, "protean," "hellish", and as a "labyrinth," echoing de Certeau's reference to the city as a kind of Daedalus maze. The imaginary is repeatedly privileged over the real in this text, and in this sense, Rushdie's representation of the city corresponds to Charles Jencks's view of the city as a fractal that is fluid and constantly changing.

Rushdie also suggests that character is fluid, as he has said in interview, " ... the sense of a homogenous, self-contained character is something I can't accept



anymore" (Appignanesi, 1989, 9). This suggests that not only the city-object is multiple and protean, but also the subject-observer is fluid and changes its perspectives. Therefore, not only is the city constantly in the state of flux, but the observer is also changing its perspective, or reading, of the city, similar to the way de Certeau describes the process of writing the city as you walk through it. This sense of the semiotic nature of the city is also registered in Rushdie's text, "The city sends him messages' (458). But these messages are refracted through the observing eye, "How hot it is: steamy, close, intolerable. This is no proper London. Airstrip One, Mahogonny, Alphaville. He wanders through a confusion of languages. Babel: a contraction of the Asirian "babilu;" "The gate of God;" Babylondon." (459). Here we have a semiotic reading of the city, but one particularized through the nature of the observer, intertextually constructed from various literary and cultural sources, formed in that final hybridized connection of the real and the imaginary, "Babylondon."

The Satanic Verses offers a range of perspectives on the urban environment and multiple viewpoints both in terms of different characters, but also within the same character. Both Gibreel and Saladin observe the city from two perspectives, they observe two different worlds. This connects with Brian McHale's definition of postmodernist fiction as concerned with the ontological dilemma of different coexisting worlds in which the reader is forced to repeatedly ask: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (McHale 1987: 10). The multiple nature of both city and observer engages multiple discourses of the city in terms of time and space. Gibreel and Saladin's perspectives of the city are not the only ones we are presented with; we also have the rationalized reading of events supplied by Hanif Johnson: "What has happened here in Brickhall tonight is a socio-political phenomenon. Let's not fall into the trap of some damn mysticism. We're talking about history: an event in the history of Britain. About the processes of change""(Rushdie 1992: 469). Here the text supplies a rational view of the events in terms of an unproblematic notion of history; but this is one of the many perspectives we are offered by the text, non of which privileged

above the others. We are also presented with the artificial observer, the TV camera, which supplies its own particular discourse of the city:

This is what a television camera sees: less gifted than the human eye, its night vision is limited to what klieg lights will show. A helicopter hovers over the nightclub, urinating light in long golden streams; the camera understands this image. The machine of state bearing down upon its enemies. (ibid. 454).

This multi-perspectivism is indicative of the nature of the postmodern urban environment as different discourses are engaged at the same time and in the same physical space. The Satanic Verses employs multiple and unstable characters, and imaginary and intertextual cities to represent the nature, and the experience of being in the postmodern city.

Iain Sinclair's Downriver is a text that comprises twelve loosely connected stories, all of which are set in the city, and more specifically, in East London. As typical of a postmodernist text, the cityscape is inevitable and inescapable, and the modernist country/city dialectic is rejected as a basis for location. The only occasion on which the narrator is removed from the city is on his quasi-fictional visit to Peter Riley in Cambridge to research the late poet, Nicholas Moore. This of course is an escape from London, but not an escape from an urban environment, rather an adventure into a different type of urban experience. Sinclair, the complex fictional narrator of the text, travels to Cambridge by train, ostensibly bypassing the rural experience, only observing the rural as he passes through it at high speed. Cambridge represents an alternative urban experience, that of suburbia, and exemplifies a move from a country/city dialectic to an opposition of central city/peripheral city. But suburbia is not represented as an escape, in fact, it appears more frightening than the metropolis, both to Sinclair, and in the writings of Nicholas Moore: "Feebly, I aim for the highest ground and shuffle into one of Nicholas Moore's nightmares: unlittered streets, clean cars, safe margins of grass, lace curtains that twitch faintly as I pass, like the flicker of

breath in an oxygen tent" (319). Here, suburbia is represented as stultifying and unnaturally ordered, representing a kind of death for the narrator as opposed to the life, vitality and provocative dangers of the capital. Sinclair feels despair in this environment, a feeling that can only be relieved by escaping back to London, "The only hope lies back towards the city" (ibid.) This is in complete contrast to Williams's representation of location in modernist and pre-modernist fiction, where the city is the area from which the narrator desires to escape (although usually frustrated in that desire). In this text, and in most postmodernist fiction, it is the city that represents the desirable location, despite its dangerous and fragmented paranoid spaces, and a sense of stultifying agoraphobia is induced once the cityscape is removed.

As in The Satanic Verses, there are real and imaginary representations of the city in Sinclair's text. London is never simply an objective location. In Downriver, the textuality of the city is foregrounded, a process which inevitably leads to the questioning of the representations of the urban experience, and the nature of any "reality" of the city. The narrator, who is provocatively called Iain Sinclair, is a complex construct that is and is not the author of the text, and it is through this complex narrator that we read the city. Downriver represents the fragmented nature of London; there are different worlds within the city, which are at times presented realistically, but at times as fantasy, "Mother London herself was splitting into segments, the overlicked shell of a chocolate tortoise. Piggy hands grabbed the numbered counters from the table. The occult logic of "market forces" dictated a new geography" (265). Exemplifying Brian MacHale's definition of the ontological preoccupations of postmodernist fiction, the reader of Downriver is constantly forced to ask in which world is he or she is located at any particular moment.

It is the narrator that has to interpret the different worlds, who acts as the guide through the labyrinth, but more often than not the narrator is lost: "the townscape would not settle into any recognizable pattern. Disturbingly, everything was almost familiar - but from the wrong period. I was navigating with a map whose

symbols had been perversely shifted to some arcane and impenetrable system" (51). This represents the experience of traveling through the postmodern city as "arcane and impenetrable," but the narrator is still forced to "write" the city as he passes through it, like Michel de Certeau's model city-observer. The text we are reading is the product of the narrator's writing of the city and the process of reading is thus made more complex than a modernist epistemological reading. Reading here is not discovering meaning, but it is spontaneous, it is uncontrolled and what it reveals is not a hidden pattern, but a creation in itself. It represents the act of writing. The narrator, as he walks or travels through the city, is constantly making associations of place and text, and he is stimulated, through semiotic readings, into numerous digressions that are in fact reproduced as the writing of the text itself. Because of the intellectual nature of the narrator (a journalist, researcher and ex-bookseller) the allusions and associations thrown up by the city are intertextual and literary: "I knew what the Isle of Dogs meant. An unlucky place, anathematized by Pepys; and identified by William Blake with the Dogs of Leutha, whose only purpose was to destroy their masters" (269). This produces the illusion that the text we are reading is being generated, spontaneously, by association with other, previously written stories, both fictional and non-fictional (this text explodes the distinction between the two). Hence we have multiple references to Heart of Darkness, to the sinking on the Thames of the Victorian pleasure steamer "Princess Alice" to Alice in Wonderland, to the Ripper murders: all of which are suggested by specific places and which link together into a vast intertextual web which lies below the surface of the novel. The city therefore becomes a palimpsest of previous texts, stories and legends, reminiscent of Harvey's description of the postmodernist city.

The nature of the narrator-observer therefore becomes crucial. The narrator initially appears as the modernist observer, the *flanneur* who walks through the city recording his experiences and observations. Called Iain Sinclair, the implied narrator is questionable in terms of its distance from Iain Sinclair the author, and his duty as impartial observer though initially accepted, is gradually questioned as

the text moves forward. Whilst describing the fantastic events on the "Isle of Doges" the narrator states, "I was beginning to have some slight misgivings about my oft-stated policy of witnessing anything and everything, taking whatever was put in front of me. Those excuses would stand no longer ... We have to take full responsibility for what we choose to see" (292). Here we are moving from a modernist objective narrator to a narrator which foregrounds its perspectivism. As the novel progresses the narrator's reliability is further undermined:

my story was pure fiction. And my fiction was corrupted by its desire to tell a story. Lies, all lies. The text was untrustworthy ... But still I shouted BELIEVE ME! I developed, on the instant, a theory of the shunting of place by time ... The validity of received emotion migrates through all civil and temporal boundaries. (357)

Here then, although the narrator is questioned, it recurses to the "validity of received emotion" as a securer of the validity of the narration.

These recurring metafictional occasions in the text begin to implode the role of the narrator. Sinclair, the narrator, becomes less and less confident of his role as the text proceeds, as the story he is writing gets increasingly out of control, just as the London he is writing about is becoming more and more unfathomable and fragmented. Eventually the narration of the novel is taken over by one of Sinclair's fictional characters, Joblard, a move which self-consciously foregrounds the metafictional nature of the text: " ... now he wants me Joblard to collude in this cheap trickery (this dreary post-modernist fraud) by writing as if I truly were that person he has chosen to exploit ... I will write my version of him writing as me" (380). Here we have the typical postmodernist technique of the creation of narration within narration, to the point where the story and the narrator implode into a recognition of the artificiality of the construction of the text and the impossibility of recourse to an objective reality. All the text can do is offer a particular discourse of the city, a particular writing of the urban landscape. What Sinclair, the author, is representing here is a breakdown of the authorial voice,

whilst alluding to that breakdown as a postmodernist ploy, itself part of an established literary practice. All things are reduced to the text, and the textuality of the text, including the representation of the city. The novel is metaphorically out of control, as the metropolis is out of control, as it is no longer possible to have an authoritative plan, or conception of the city, presented metaphorically by the imploded narration. What is left is a multiple narration of multiple discourses that are generated by particular spaces within the metropolis. Again this text emphasizes the multiple nature of the temporality, the spatiality and the social discourse of the city, and goes on to suggest that the point of observation is also multiple, no longer unitary.

### **In conclusion**

First, the city is the paradigmatic arena or setting for postmodernist fiction. Urban values have become hegemonic for Western culture, and this is represented in the fiction produced in those countries by its stories taking place in a total cityscape. There is no longer recourse to the traditional country space as an escape from the city, nor is there a manifest desire for such an escape. Second, the complexity of urban space is reflected in fiction in terms of the pluralization of the notions of spatiality, temporality and social discourse. A single physical space is registered as having multiple meanings, dependent upon multiple social discourses, each of which offers multiple genealogies and histories. Third, fictional representation or observation of the city has become more complex as the pluralized and fractured "writer" of the city has replaced the unitary modernist "reader." The alienation of the modernist observer has been replaced by multi-perspectival observers offering heterogeneous representations of the experience of city-dwelling. Hence the recent theoretical model of the city as a living organism which cannot be fully understood in terms of its structure or development and cannot be fully rationalized by a single point of observation.

### **Endnotes**

1 Specific examples here would be Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles, which plots the move from country to city as emblematic of the gradual decline of the central

character to the ultimate murder she commits in the city, although the final death of Tess at Stonehenge represents a partial return to the idyllic rural landscape; Lawrence's Sons and Lovers, where the realistic first section of the novel takes place in urbanized Nottingham, whilst the second, more symbolist section, is largely set at Miriam Leiver's farm; and Forster's Howards End, which clearly sets London against the idyllic rural environment of the house of the title, but ends with London ominously creeping towards the house (Forster, 1941: 329).

2 See Holmes 1988: 285.

3 Unfortunately, Jencks's theory does not address the dead tissue in human terms, i.e. the consequences of the changing industrial components of the city, and the expansion of the city's underclass, who are the victims of this lack of social planning.

4 It is not difficult to see a correspondence here between laissez faire consumer capitalism and the rejection of modernist social planning as envisioned by traditional Marxist thinkers.

5 Soja argues that Bergson was predominant in the nineteenth century devaluation of spatiality in relation to temporality: "For Bergson, time, the vital realm of *durée* was the carrier of creativity, spirit, meaning, feeling ... Space is thus seen as pulverizing the fluid flow of duration into meaningless pieces and collapsing time into its own physical dimensions," (Soja 1989: 123). Soja accepts that Marx discussed issues related to a socio-spatial dialectic but, nevertheless: "The spatial contingency of social action ... was reduced primarily to fetishization and false consciousness and never received from Marx an effective materialist interpretation" (ibid, 127).

6 Rushdie is purposely equivocal as to whether these changes are imaginary or real in the context of the novel. While Gibreel's transformation could be related to his diagnosed paranoid schizophrenia, and it is hinted that Saladin's metamorphosis into a cloven-hoofed devil could be part of genetic engineering on

the part of the British authorities, their changes are received by other characters in the novel as actual and not purely imaginary.

7 Here I am deploying Alan Sinfield's notion of cultural history as "stories we are told" through various cultural, social, political and educational apparatus (Sinfield 1989: 23-6)

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### **First Response**

Accounts of the representation of the postmodern city have been of central interest for some years. This intelligent and well-judged essay builds on the work of Raymond Williams, David Harvey, Charles Jencks, Edward Soja, Michel de Certeau, and Elizabeth Mahoney to present an account of the postmodern city as unpredictable, unfixed, and dispersed, open to readings as multiple as the multilayered and fluid subjects who move through its spaces. This attentiveness to the instability of viewpoints in an environment which is itself radically unstable makes for an illuminating position to examine the representation of London in Rushdie's and Sinclair's texts. Both are seen in terms of the presentation of the multiperspectival nature of the experience of the postmodern cityscape, with its overwhelming demand for interpretation from equally fluid and unstable subjects. In making the case that both the postmodern city and the postmodern self are best seen as palimpsests of possibilities, the author produces a sophisticated platform from which to view his selected texts. His agreement with the argument that there is no longer any

escape from the urban provides the starting point for this convincing piece of work