MICHAEL O'BRIEN

"Tunnel Visions": Space, Transience and Escapism in Geoff Ryman's *253*

"A turbine grinding out human beings on all sides."[1] This is how Stein Eiuler Rasmussen describes Piccadilly Circus tube station. The London Underground, in its size, history and complexity, does indeed, function like a machine. Taking the Underground during its early morning and afternoon peak times can be a demoralising and exhaustive experience. Rasmussen's above quotation, while highly perceptive, inevitably focuses upon the London Underground when it is at its busiest, during the daily commute. Commuting, in the sense of an ordered, chronological movement of a large number of people around a city is a distinctively modern phenomenon. Baudelaire's summation of modernity as being characterised by 'the transient, the contingent and the fleeting,'[2] is embodied and performed by the behaviour of London's commuters on a daily basis.

writing often overlooks the theatricality and culture exhibited by its travellers: “Great was my joy with London at my feet – / All London mine, five shillings in my hand / And not expected back till after tea!”[4] The Underground, like London itself, is not a homogenous entity, but a cluster of separate spaces which are helpfully demarcated by the coloured lines on Harry Beck’s famous map. My paper is not concerned then with the idyllic world of the Metropolitan line embodied in the verse quoted above, but centres around the magnetic spaces of the key train hubs in Central London: namely Victoria, Waterloo, Piccadilly, Euston and Kings Cross St. Pancras. The mythology of London’s spaces, as they appear on the tube map, gives way to a deeper series of mythologies played out within numerous stations across the capital. This paper is principally concerned with the physical act of commuting. It aims to bring alive the subjective and idiosyncratic nature of the average tube journey, and the ability of the individual to construct within their brief train ride, a narrative. I will do this through an examination of Geoff Ryman’s internet novel, *253*, by working from the premise that each of the characters Ryman presents to the reader exists within a spatial and temporal void, in the sense of being in a liminal state between home life and work life. This paper engages with the cerebral experience of riding on the tube, interrogating what Lefebvre calls ‘mental spaces’[5] within the individual’s conceptualisation of the city around him or her. Such ‘mental spaces,’ are, I argue, bound up with all that is imaginative and playful within one’s thought processes, and are awoken within the physical confinement of the commute.

The London which emerges in the work of Iain Sinclair represents a city which transcends the iconoclastic image of London as the political and economic centre of Britain. Sinclair’s London reflects a multiplicity of spaces, which run into one another, and do not follow the linear movement of history. Similarly, one feels compelled to regard the London Underground as an extension of the London above ground which is sprawled across the pages

of the work of Sinclair, Ballard or Self. While the London Underground is frequently written into the history of Victorian London and the city's wartime and post-wartime culture, key questions regarding the contemporary cultural role of the Underground remain. One question I wish to engage with in this paper is the potential of the modern Underground to disorientate and estrange the crowds which pass through the network on a daily basis. In viewing the entrance to the tube stations (in Central London at least) as occupying a liminal space, between light and darkness; fresh air and dead air; openness and confinement; the process of estrangement can be deconstructed from an analysis of the crowd's passage through these liminal spaces. I argue that what characterises this process of disorientation lies within the recognition of the Underground journey as a spatial and temporal void. That is to say, the space of the commute exists *between* working, family and social life, enacted above the ground. Indeed, the disorientating quality of the tube ride is exacerbated by spatial disorder encoded within the mapping of the London Underground. The tube is essentially a mythic representation of London, reproduced through the distorted, but easy-to-follow sequence of spaces, which are colour-coded on the tube map. Cultural critic, Janin Hadlaw, posits the following analysis of Beck's reproduction of the London Underground's network of spaces:

> The misrepresentation of distance in Beck's map quite accurately represents modern capitalism's notions of time. The distances between stations are arranged in more or less uniform intervals, a strategy more typically employed in the representation of time than of space. Despite the pervasiveness of the idea that "time is money," we know that, in reality, not all time is valuable. Time spent working is valuable and is scrupulously accounted for by employer and worker alike. Leisure time is valuable to those who must rest from their labors and to the leisure industry which profits from the time spent pursuing entertainment of all kinds. But time that is used for neither work nor leisure, such as time spent commuting, is really time without value. As such, not recognizing its duration in representation is completely logical. More important was the speed with which the Underground transported individuals to sites of production and consumption. It permitted the rapid circulation of workers and consumers, and their transformation from one into the other. Lefebvre observes that "[t]transportation grids exemplify productive consumption [...] because they serve to move people and things.[6]

Hadlaw positions the London Underground from the spatial perspective of a critic such as Lefebvre, who regards transport systems as a means through which capitalism transports ‘workers and consumers’ towards spaces of ‘production and consumption,’ respectively. He draws a distinction between the Underground as a means of facilitating work, and as a means of stimulating the pursuit of leisure, principally through the London Underground’s connection with the tourist industry. I argue that both of these desired ends – for production and consumption – are predicated upon an entirely separate space in time, where travelling *through* London becomes an end in itself. The representation of commuting as ‘time without value’ needs to be taken further.

During the rush hour, the Underground is indeed the locus of an 'unlimited multiplicity [and] unaccountable set of social space'. The ability of these spaces to 'interpenetrate' or 'superimpose' one another, is most visible during the opening and closing of the sliding doors, accompanied by the soundtrack of 'mind the gap,' as the availability of space momentarily increases then decreases, and different associations with space enter and leave the train accordingly in the form of commuters. Lying within the Lefebvre discourse concerning the interplay between different social spaces is the paradox that as the physical space within the train itself begins to contract during the morning and afternoon rush periods, what he calls 'mental space' becomes more apparent to the subject, as he or she feels compelled to escape into the novel they are carrying, or to ruminate upon the outcome of the day's events, before and after the tube journey. Conrad Williams evokes this paradox by stating 'The tube seems to warp London, make it less real. Less reliable than it already is. London shrinks on the Underground time becomes this vampire that attaches itself to the back of your neck, tapping you of energy and the ability to relate space to movement.'[9] The unreliability of the tube, especially when it is busy, is perhaps the most infuriating aspect of underground travel. What his words suggest is that one's heightened irritability exists beyond service-related issues within the network, and is in fact connected to the unreality of the tube itself, and its ability to 'warp' ones understanding of the external reality of London. He proposes that, 'London shrinks...on the Underground'. The remainder of this paper, therefore, turns toward the effect of the perceived contraction of physical space and the extension of imaginative spaces in the mind, by evaluating the liminality of the London Underground through its ability to both confine and liberate those who travel within it.

Fictional Narratives of the London Underground frequently present commuting by tube through a contraction of physical space – a movement of crowds from an open space above ground, to an oppressive space onboard the train. Such writing also engages with the

disorientating nature of the tube ride, where time, in the tunnels at least, becomes ambiguous and fluid. Geoff Ryman's important book (first published in hypertext format online)[10] *253*, literally builds the structure of a narrative, into the experience of a single, 7 minute tube journey on the Bakerloo line, between Embankment and Elephant and Castle. The effect of this structure is through the omniscient narrator's negation, enabling the reader to enter the chronotope of the text, allowing them to move around the train, transferring their reading of the text from character to character, continually shifting their perspective on this particular train journey. What gives the reflections of each of the commuters in the narrative such intensity, is the author's use of prolepsis, revealing to the reader that the train will ultimately crash at the Elephant and Castle, prior to the story beginning:

imaginative processes of the commuters are activated. Ryman’s novel acknowledges the paradox of the tube, recognising it as intrinsically antisocial, whilst representing it as a space for subjective contemplation on the limited exteriority of the train and platform spaces, or simply the passenger positioned beside us. Ryman informs us, ‘nothing happens in this novel’. Incidentally, nothing very much happens on *any* tube ride. However, Ryman’s narrative presents the tube as being a space which is at the intersection of ‘mysterious patterns’ which constitute the wide array of collective thoughts contained within an average morning tube ride by its passengers. Other than the fact that the train crashes, there is nothing

sexual act.'[15] It may be argued that most of the characters – Mannochi and Potluck for instance – use the tube as a way of defining their own relationship with London. The tube is particularly helpful in this respect given that it effectively *reproduces* modern London in space and time, physically connected to the actual city, but also intellectually distinct from it. Others identify in the physical structure of the tracks, dividing lines, which cut across the city space, separating individuals from one another. Deirdre Hidderley uses her space in the narrative to convey her memory of the 1989 London Underground strike:

> Everyone walked to work. It was summer and London was suddenly a festival of people. The streets, instead of being deserted, bustled. Even the evenings were better: the shadows long, the sun golden. People said what the hell and went to the pub. They walked in chains with hands on each other's necks...you saw faces everywhere, and the message of those faces over time was this: we are for the most part hard-working, decent, pleasant people.[16]

From her perspective, the tube embodies a negative aspect of London life, driving millions of commuters below ground each day, depriving them of any direct contact with the streets of London in the areas beyond the immediate locales of work and home. An irony which one may draw from the above rhetoric lies in the fact that she uses the temporal space afforded to her by the tube ride to arrive at such realizations about London life and her place within it. Deirdre's discovery that 'for the most part [Londoners are] hard-working, decent, pleasant-people,' is reinforced by Ryman's recognition of what the tube does to Londoners, serving to make them more aware of one another. In these narratives then, the act of commuting becomes ritualized around memories and impulses connecting individuals to a society which lives its life through the tube. *253* does not overlook the inevitable banality of sitting in an over-crowded tube train on the way to work. Indeed, it embraces this very banality, transforming the quotidian experience of sitting silently parallel a darkened window pane, as an opportunity for reflection and insight into the behavior of London and Londoners which

can be observed most nakedly through movement. At the core of this narrative, is an examination of the tube through the space of the human imagination, loo

> London. She spends weekends driving up and down roads, learning what they look like from all angles. She has to know every no-left-turning sign or one-way street. She can feel her brain becoming colonised. Sections of it feel weighed down as if lead were being poured into a filigree mould. At night, as she goes over the names, the streets spread in her mind like frost. Maryan will be one of the few people who know what London really looks like. She will never again stumble on anything new by accident.[19]

These two perspectives on reading time during the commute display different uses of the tube. Maryan regards the tube as a space for study. There is a clever irony in the fact that she chooses to use her time travelling to work to study for the Knowledge, given that she is physically passing through many of the streets in her book, but not witnessing them as she does so. Her experience of reading appears a little oppressive, as she can ‘feel her brain being colonised’ by the material she is consuming. What is significant though is the extent to which she is able to use literature to transcend the obvious limitations of her physical surroundings, and the tube itself appears to be little more than a backdrop to her own frenetic thought processes. In contrast, Susan uses the tube as a means of indulging her own rather idiosyncratic pleasure of reading about female weightlifters. Ryman is generally rather reticent concerning his position on these characters, but in his description of this character, his attention to detail regarding the numerous physical sensations and palpitations that Susan undergoes through reading on the tube, from being shocked (‘overcome with emotion’)[20] to the act of recommending the book to one of her fellow travellers, suggests that he identifies the tube as a unique space within London life, where one can read almost anything, with complete focus and without interruption. It is important to identify in such figures the fact that contrary to what one may expect, the tube journey does not inhibit the experience of reading and escapism, but largely facilitates and produces such an experience. The reader’s knowledge of the cataclysmic conclusion to the narrative appears somewhat anomalous when positioned next to the more probing discussion throughout the book concerning the freedom

the individual has to escape into their own thoughts for the length of the short journey. This novel problematises the boundaries between reality and fiction. Firstly, by introducing the act of reading into the narrative itself; and secondly, by producing through a stream-of-consciousness approach, into subjective readings of one's companions on board a tube train, the separate but often inter-related narratives which are produced by these subjects.

This essay began by citing Ezra Pound's poem, 'In a Station at the Metro'. This short poem presents an image of the New York subway as it is perceived within a single moment in time. Pound's connection between the commuters and 'petals' suggest that within the transients space of a subway system, these nameless figures in the crowd are to be swept along by the trains and each other, emotionally disconnected and unaware of one another. The overall tone of this piece, I argue, is decidedly negative, where the 'apparitions' are simply that: lifeless forms carried along with the crowd, but not distinguishable as individuals. In Pound's vision of the subway, underground rail networks dehumanise the human society that they profess to serve. During my paper I have tried to present the experience of commuting in London as characterised by a void – an empty space of time – within which, the individual is required to use their imagination, whether playfully or dubiously, as a means of extending their own spatial perspective and transcending the literal confinement of their surroundings. What writing on the underground achieves is the ability to destabilise and interrogate fixed notions of space and time, as they relate to London. Indeed, London as a homogenous city-space is systematically deconstructed, both in Ryman's work and in reality, given the imposed fragmentation of the city space into colour-coded zones and key positions in the city defined through station names, many of which signify elaborate and culturally symbolic aspects of London life, past and present.

Lower Marsh Market'. Writing such as this constructs a paradox around the high Modernist ideals

[10] The book was originally published as an online novel, still accessible via www.ryman-novel.com
[11] Geoff Ryman, *253* (London: Flamingo, 1998) p. 2
[12] Peter Howitt (dir.), (Intermedia Films, 1998)
[13] Ryman (1998) p. 84
[14] Ryman (1998) p. 37
[15] Ryman (1998) p. 339
[16] Ryman (1998) p. 296
[17] Mike Fell, Litro Magazine, http://londonist.com/2006/04/litro_original.php, accessed 10 May 2008
[18] Ryman (1998). 237
[19] Ryman (1998) p. 278
[20] Such rhetoric closely mimics William Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,' alluding to the paradoxical reality of urban travel within London, which represents a world that is simultaneously mechanistic and sublime.