

Text and Image in the City

Text and Image in the City:

*Manuscript, Print and Visual
Culture in Urban Space*

Edited by

John Hinks and Catherine Armstrong

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INTRODUCTION

TEXT, IMAGE AND THE URBAN

JOHN HINKS

Textualizing the city creates its own reality, becomes a way of seeing the city – but such textuality cannot substitute for the pavements and the buildings, for the physical city. Before the city is a construct, literary or cultural, it is a physical reality with a dynamics of its own...¹

The essays in this collection discuss how the city is ‘textualized’. They address many aspects of how texts and images are written and produced in, and about, cities. They demonstrate how urban texts and images provoke reactions, in city-dwellers, visitors, civic and political actors, that, in turn, impact upon the shape of the city itself. Many kinds of urban texts – both manuscript and print – are discussed, including chapbooks, periodicals, poetry, graffiti and street-signs. The essays derive from a range of disciplines including book history, urban history, cultural history, literary studies, art history and urban planning.

The essays may be wide-ranging but the cohesion of the collection as a whole is achieved by addressing some key questions in urban cultural history, including the relationship, changing over time, between text, image and the city; the function of the text or image within an urban environment; how urban texts and images have been used by those in positions of power and by those with little or no power; the ways in which urban identity and values have been reflected in ‘street literature’, graffiti and subversive texts and images; and whether theories of urban space can help us to understand the relationship between text, image and the city. These essays add to our understanding of the nature of urbanism from a historical perspective, the creation and representation of urban space, and the processes of urbanization. They explore how the creation, distribution and consumption of urban texts and images actively affect the shaping of

¹ Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: an intellectual and cultural history* (Berkeley, California UP, 1998), 291.

the city itself – a symbiotic process whereby text, image and city create and sustain each other.

Text, Image and the Urban

The critical perspective unifying this volume enables histories of the material text and image to begin to challenge established conceptions of urbanism, and to bridge textual practice and theoretical perceptions concerning the city. This collection opens up a valuable and original dialogue between disciplines, enabling the development of a new critical approach to ‘textualizing the city’: an exploration of the longstanding, but continually evolving, symbiotic relationship between text, image, urban life and landscape.

Section One, ‘Cities in the Margin’, focuses on textual and writing spaces in the city for marginalized and subversive practices. It comprises essays by Caroline Archer, on *Paris: Text and Image Underground*, by Jack Mockford, on *Confusing the ‘Schema’: Flash Notes and Fraud in Late-Georgian England* and by Rathna Ramanathan, on *London’s Little Presses*. The section explores how the city provides space in which new kinds of document (using the term broadly) can be created, and, conversely, how the production of new texts and images creates spaces that form emancipatory, temporary or subversive practices to occur. The notion of ‘the margin’ connects text, image and city, and the essays in this section consider textual and urban boundaries, and their mutual exploitation.

Section Two, ‘Textual Topographies: Urban Space in Manuscript, Print and Visual Culture’, discusses the production, imagination and politics of city space and place, in essays by Rosa Smurra, on ‘*Studium*’, *Manuscript Books and Urban Landscape: Bologna, 13th/14th centuries*, by Daliah Bond, on *Defining the Scottish Chapbook: a description of the ‘typical Scottish chapbook’*, by John Hinks, on *The Urban Context of Eighteenth-Century English Provincial Printing*, and by Geraldine Marshall, on *Birmingham’s Graphic DNA: reading the ‘word city’ through signage, architectural letter forms and the typographic landscape*. From the spatial geography of scribes of medieval romances, to the urban nature of most pre-industrial European print, this section highlights historical space and urban formations that allowed the growth of textual culture.

The Literature of the ‘Urban’

A survey of the vast corpus of relevant literature soon reveals an underlying problem of definition. Scholars from several disciplines, especially (but not only) in the USA, tend to use ‘city’ and ‘urban’ to refer only to large metropolises, while others – including many who would describe themselves as urban historians – routinely extend the concept of ‘urban’ to include towns of all sizes (anything larger than a village), many of which have been especially significant, economically, culturally and socially, particularly in European history. As Peter Borsay rightly observes, in an essay on the creative potential of urban space, while there are obvious differences between large and small towns, the smaller ones should not be written off ‘as sterile backwaters’, as the evidence of much historical research indicates that ‘they were a remarkably buoyant group of settlements, perfectly capable of absorbing and contributing to the processes of change going on around them’.² So long as we are clear about what a particular writer means by ‘urban’ and ‘city’, the problem is not insuperable, though it is essential to be constantly aware of it. Perhaps a more important and more interesting question is why *urban* spaces are so important historically. Peter Hall, writing about the ‘golden ages’ of great cities, asks:

Why should the creative flame burn so especially in cities and not in the countryside? What makes a particular city, at a particular time, suddenly become immensely creative, exceptionally innovative? Why should this spirit flower for a few years, generally a decade or two at most, and then disappear as suddenly as it came?³

The innovative power of the city lies in several spheres, not least economic, social, political and cultural. Examining the city in its cultural context implies, as Agnew, Mercer and Sopher suggest:

... an emphasis on the practices and ideas that arise from collective and individual experiences, and that are constitutive of urban life and form. The practices and ideas are not themselves uniquely urban but derive from

² Peter Borsay, ‘Invention, Innovation and the “Creative Milieu” in Urban Britain: the Long Eighteenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Cultural Economy’ in *Creative Urban Milieus: Historical Perspectives on Culture, Economy, and the City*, ed. Martina Hessler and Clemens Zimmerman (Frankfurt, Campus Verlag, 2008), 91.

³ Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization: Culture, Innovation and Urban Order* (London, Phoenix, 1998), 3.

the social, economic and political situations that have shaped group and individual existence. In turn the practices and ideas – in short ‘culture’ – have shaped urban worlds.⁴

The same authors further comment:

In their form and in the lives of their inhabitants, cities have reflected the working of dominant, residual and emergent cultures. To study the city in cultural context therefore requires us to acknowledge that cities are cultural creations and that they are best understood as such.⁵

Of course, there are many differences, not simply increased scale, between the city of the past and the modern city. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift comment:

The city is everywhere and in everything. If the urbanized world now is a chain of metropolitan areas connected by places/corridors of communication [...] then what is not the urban? Is it the town, the village, the countryside? Maybe, but only to a limited degree. The footprints of the city are all over these places, in the form of city commuters, tourists, teleworking, the media, and the urbanization of lifestyles. The traditional divide between the city and the countryside has been perforated.⁶

They also make the important point that modern urban sprawl does not ‘negate the idea of cities as distinct spatial formations or imaginaries’.⁷ The naming of places is still important:

The place called London, for example, has been fashioned and refashioned through commentaries, recollections, memories and erasures, and in a variety of media – monumental, official and vernacular, newspapers and magazines, guides and maps, photographs, films, newsreels and novels, street-level conversations and tales.⁸

Writing his song ‘London Pride’ in 1941, Noël Coward eulogized not only the determination of Londoners to carry on more or less normally during the Blitz but also the way in which the city itself acted as a powerful memorial text: ‘Cockney feet mark the beat of history; every street pins a

⁴ John A. Agnew, John Mercer and David E. Soper (eds.), *The City in Cultural Context* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1984), 1.

⁵ Agnew, Mercer and Soper, *City in Cultural Context*, 8.

⁶ Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (London, Polity, 2002), 1

⁷ Amin and Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, 2.

⁸ Amin and Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, 2.

memory down'. Paul Du Noyer comments: 'A folk song with the cadence of a church hymn, "London Pride" begins amid the "coaster barrows" and expands into a meditation on the city's collective memory, preserved by tradition, imprinted in the very streets'.⁹ As Kevin Lynch observes, 'Every citizen has had long association with some part of his city, and his image is soaked in memories and meanings'.¹⁰ Dianne Chisholm notes that 'Memory is possible because it is collective. An individual knows herself or himself as a being of enduring, if evolving, character because she or he possesses memories that are collectively articulated, revised, and confirmed.'¹¹

Despite memory, collective and individual, urban change on a considerable scale seems to be inevitable:

... the fabric of a city is not only always in process of changing, and not only is this change normally visible, but even when it is not, it becomes part of collective memory both informally and in the written and rewritten official and unofficial histories of cities. In cities change is continual, and the city changing through time has been likened to a palimpsest...¹²

Maiken Umbach's work on the historical significance of urban architecture is relevant here. Reflecting on how cultural historians used to aim to identify *causes* but now prefer to seek for *meaning*, she writes:

Meaning is by definition fluid: traditions invented, remembered, half-forgotten; identities tried out and half-discarded; futures imagined, planned, defended, half-abandoned. In shedding light on this shifty terrain lies architectural history's potentially greatest contribution to history at large.¹³

The visual history of the built urban environment helps us, just as does the broader cultural history of the city, to identify both continuities and discontinuities. The past is complex and the nuanced memories recorded

⁹ Paul Du Noyer, *In the City: a Celebration of London Music* (London, Virgin, 2009), 53.

¹⁰ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1960), 1.

¹¹ Dianne Chisholm, 'The City of Collective Memory', *GLQ: a Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 7 (2001), 195-243 (196).

¹² Elizabeth Wilson, 'Looking Backward: Nostalgia and the City', in *Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memories*, edited by Sallie Westwood and John Williams, (London, Routledge, 1997), 129.

¹³ Maiken Umbach, 'Urban History: What Architecture Does, Historically Speaking...', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 65 (2006), 14-15.

in text and image do more than resonate *in* the present, they actually connect *with* the present. Amin and Thrift argue that the authentic modern city was 'held together by face-to-face interaction whose coherence is now gone. If the authentic city exists, it is as a mere shadow of itself, one that serves only to underline what has been lost'.¹⁴ However, this argument fails to take sufficient account of the contribution of the culture of text and image, with its potential to preserve or recapture some of what has been lost, as well as its power to reflect, to stimulate and to reinforce new connections and interactions.

'Reading' the City

Turning this around, can the city itself be 'read' in something like the same way as a text or image? Amin and Thrift discuss the 'legibility of the city'¹⁵, as does (from a somewhat different angle) Kevin Lynch¹⁶, while Peter Fritzsche offers a persuasive case study of 'reading' Berlin during the years either side of 1900:

This book is about the 'word city', the accumulation of small bits and rich streams of text that saturated the twentieth-century city, guided and misguided its inhabitants, and in large measure, fashioned the nature of metropolitan experience. In an age of urban mass literacy, the city as place and the city as text defined each other in mutually constitutive ways.¹⁷

To complicate matters, as Maiken Umbach observes, 'What can be "read" almost by definition allows for multiple readings. And what is derived from real history, as opposed to a universal ideal, acknowledges the contingency of meaning, in the future as well as the past'.¹⁸

In addition to the possibility of 'reading' the city itself, through its built environment and, in a different way, through its cultural self-expression, the city produced, notably during the long eighteenth century, a variety of information systems equally capable of being read in a more literal sense: 'street numbering and naming; printed directories; guides;

¹⁴ Amin and Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, 32.

¹⁵ Amin and Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, chapter 1.

¹⁶ Lynch, *Image of the City*, 2-3.

¹⁷ Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard, 1996), 1.

¹⁸ Maiken Umbach, 'Memory and Historicism: Reading Between the Lines of the Built Environment, Germany, c.1900', *Representations*, 88 (2004), 26-54 (31).

urban histories; two-dimensional maps and prospects; the circulating library; the newspaper and journal press'.¹⁹

A tendency in recent years has been to 'decentre' the city, examining particular neighbourhoods within the urban area rather than treating the city as a whole:

... much recent academic work on cities has concentrated upon specific localities *within* cities using ethnographic fieldwork data in order to elaborate narratives of city life that no longer claim to represent 'the urban' but, instead, are *stories* from the city.²⁰

The collection of essays edited by Westwood and Williams specifically aims to disrupt the 'real/imagined' binary, in order to provide 'novel ways in which theorisations of the city may be developed in the future'.²¹ The step from urban fieldwork 'stories' to imaginative literature about the city is a short one. Much has been written about the city in books and other media; Westwood and Williams comment that 'novels and films are instructive and offer us another language in which to pose key questions and to search for answers'.²² In a rich field, Richard's Lehan's *The City in Literature* is outstanding²³, as is the wider ranging work of James Donald:

... I focus on the city as an attempt to imagine not only the way we live but above all the way we live together. That is only in part a sociological question. The city has always stood not only for the vanities, the squalor and the injustice of human society, but also for the aspiration to civilized sociation.²⁴

Donald rightly identifies both the tension between 'the city' as a metaphor of urban life and specific stories about specific cities or neighbourhoods, and the way in which writing about the city actually helps to shape the city itself, at least in the imagination:

My city is at the same time abstractly conceptual and intensely personal. It is *the* city, not *a* city. It is an imaginary space created and animated as

¹⁹ Borsay, 'Invention, Innovation...', 79.

²⁰ Sallie Westwood and John Williams (eds), *Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memory* (London, Routledge, 1997), 7.

²¹ Westwood and Williams, *Imagining Cities*, 16.

²² Westwood and Williams, *Imagining Cities*, 13.

²³ Lehan, *City in Literature*.

²⁴ James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xi.

much by the urban representations to be found in novels, films, and images as by any actual urban places. [...] for me to write about the city is inevitably to invoke London.²⁵

The relation between novel and city, then, is not merely one of representation. The text is actively constitutive of the city. Writing does not only record or reflect the fact of the city. It has its role in producing the city for a reading public.²⁶

So, the city is simultaneously the producer and the product of cultural creations including texts and images. The role of the city or town in manufacturing urban knowledge is a key one, as Peter Borsay explains:

Towns were the engines of the knowledge system, creating, collecting and circulating ideas and information. It was to the town that people came to trade not only in goods, but also knowledge.²⁷

The Spatial Turn

Many scholars recognize a recent ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities. The concept is particularly useful in cultural history and urban history:

Recent works in the fields of literary and cultural studies, sociology, political science, anthropology, history and art history have become increasingly spatial in their orientation. From various perspectives, they assert that space is a social construction relevant to the understanding of the different histories of human subjects and to the production of cultural phenomena.²⁸

Historians of the book – or, more broadly, of text and image – have responded positively to the ‘spatial turn’ in cultural history and in the humanities as a whole. A recent collection of essays explores many diverse facets of ‘the geographies of the book’, indicating ‘how deeply geography is involved in the production, distribution and consumption of

²⁵ James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999), x.

²⁶ James Donald, ‘Imagining the Modern City’, in Westwood and Williams, *Imagining Cities*, 187.

²⁷ Borsay, ‘Invention, Innovation...’, 86.

²⁸ Barney Warf and Santa Arias (eds.), *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London, Routledge, 2009), 18. A useful review essay on the ‘spatial turn’ is Ralph Kingston, ‘Mind over Matter: History and the Spatial Turn’, *Cultural and Social History*, 7 (2010), 111-121. On the ‘construction’ of space see also Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991).

books, and how that makes a difference to the ways in which books and their histories should be understood'.²⁹ The work of Charles Withers and Miles Ogborn exemplifies this geographically inflected history of books and texts.³⁰ The history of the book – a wide and naturally interdisciplinary field of study – has, in the wake of the spatial turn, drawn closer to urban history, which has served to refocus the work of a number of historians, myself included³¹, on the role of the city and town in producing and distributing both informative and imaginative texts and images which shape the understanding and image of the urban:

The city is conceived less as something found or simply 'out there' and more as something constituted partially through representation and discourse and as a site of interlocking and conflicting meanings of cultural, political and economic relations. The wholeness of the city (often presented uncomplicatedly in conventional urban studies, using geographic boundaries to demarcate and define) is viewed not only as a physical entity but also as a narrative device and as a plethora of signs and symbols infused with power relations.³²

This collection of essays aims to explore the intriguing ways in which texts and images interact with, and help to explain, the nature and meaning of urban space.

²⁹ Miles Ogborn and Charles W.J. Withers (eds.), *Geographies of the Book* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2010), 5.

³⁰ Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007); Charles W. J. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007).

³¹ See for example: John Hinks, 'The Book Trade in Early Modern Britain: Centres, Peripheries and Networks' in Benito Rial Costas (ed.), *Print Culture and Peripheries in Early Modern Europe* (Brill, 2013), 101-126; John Hinks and Catherine Feely (eds.), *Historical Networks in the Book Trade*, (London, Routledge, 2017).

³² John Eade and Christopher Mele, *Understanding the City: Contemporary and Future Perspectives* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002), 11.

PART 1:
CITIES IN THE MARGIN

CHAPTER ONE

PARIS: TEXT AND IMAGE UNDERGROUND¹

CAROLINE ARCHER

Janus would feel at home in Paris. The two-headed Roman god of doorways, passages and bridges would surely delight in the city with its thirty-seven river crossings and extensive labyrinth of little known entrances and tunnels buried below the boulevards, which give a fascinating and unique expression to the capital. At street level Paris is particularly Janus-faced. It is one of the world's most multifaceted and diverse cities, a public and private metropolis made of reality and illusion, fact and mythology expressed through politics, art and architecture. It is a city of passion, of bloody histories and turbulent regimes that have produced a lifetime of stormings, terrors, revolutions, sieges, communes, occupations and liberations that have shaped it both physically and spiritually. The allure of Paris is so absolute that great men have been moved to great declarations: to secure the French throne Henri IV changed his religion for her; Napoléon Bonaparte proclaimed her the most beautiful city in the world; and Hitler would have had her burn rather than outshine Berlin. But it is not just emperors, kings and dictators that have influenced the complexion of Paris. The French capital, perhaps more than any other metropolis, has had a persistent and profound association with the development of art, literature and music, and arguably more text and images have been generated in, by and about Paris than any other city. Artists including Monet, Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec have contributed to the Parisian illusion with work that is familiar the world over; writers from de Beauvoir and Colette, to Hemingway and Orwell have all added layers to the myth. Music has successfully perpetuated the fable: Piaf provides

¹ This article is based on research into the art of the Paris underground carried out by the author between 2003 and 2005 and which culminated in the publication: Archer, Caroline and Parré, Alexandre, *Paris Underground* (New York, Mark Batty Publishers, 2005).

countenance to the passion of Paris, the Folies-Bergère gives expression to its uncontrollable exuberance and the Moulin Rouge more than hints at the simmering sexuality of the French capital. But above all Paris is a city of romance and has hosted great love affairs from Héloïse and Abelard, to Napoléon and Josephine whose adventures with amour have been immortalized by the point of a pen or the stroke of a brush.

The physical face of Paris is provided by the grandiose architecture of the great city planners from Phillippe Auguste, Louis XIV and Haussmann to Mitterrand's *Grands Projects*. There is a homogeneity to the city's buildings, many of which have been constructed from locally excavated limestone, but despite architectural harmonization there is also diversity: the great Gothic structure of Notre-Dame; the red brick and stone of the sixteenth-century Place des Vosges; the sumptuously Baroque seventeenth-century Eglise de Val-de-Grâce; the grandly neo-classical Place de la Concorde; and the emphatic Eiffel Tower. The twentieth century has also added its touch to the city with Nouvel's Institute du Monde Arabe and Perrault's Bibliothèque Nationale. The history of Paris is written, quite literally, on the face of these mansions and monuments, from the sonorous architectural letters incised in the stone of its civic buildings, to the spirited Art Nouveau fascia signs created by Hector Guimard for the Paris metro, and the quirky stencil letters of Therenon & Cie, used across the city to create improvised public notices of varying degrees of competence. Text and image not only contribute to how Paris works, they also influence how it looks. Whilst history, architecture and city planning shaped the structure of the French capital, the words and images on the streets are the most prominent detail of the City of Light. However, Paris is also a City of Shadows and there exists an alternative narrative which is discreet, subdued and hidden from view, a little known visual chronicle that is integral both to its physical structure as well as its spiritual being. It is Janus in introspective mood.

Paris sous les rues

Below the graceful boulevards lie miles of dank, subterranean passages; they are a result of city planning every bit as impressive as that above the surface. These underground passages make their way through limestone and gypsum quarries that lie below the street of the capital. The excavation of these quarries began in about the twelfth century when they provided the raw material needed to build the city. Extractions were made indiscriminately and when a quarry had been stripped of its contents it was abandoned and vacuums developed below the city that caused potential

danger to the people and buildings on the surface. In 1774 the inevitable happened: one of the city streets collapsed. The empty quarries threatened the stability of Paris and the Inspection des Carrières [Quarry Inspectorate] was established to explore, map and make safe those that were in bad condition. It was a colossal job. To do the work, inspection galleries had to be constructed that would allow the quarrymen to explore the basement and so a complex network of subterranean passages were built that extended approximately 285 kilometres across the city.²

It is forbidden to enter the underground without the permission of the Paris authorities and any violation can result in fines or imprisonment.³ However, this has not stopped either the tenacious or the curious from descending illegally and for more than 300 years these surreptitious visitors have marked the underground walls with a remarkable collection of words and images, which have been produced as evidence of their descent. Today the inspection galleries and abandoned quarries contain an extraordinary, incalculable and ever growing collection of visual material that has been amassing on the walls for over three centuries. And just as the cognoscenti have immortalized street level Paris in text and image, so *Paris sous les rues* has been the muse of Everyman, hundreds of thousands of unrecognized, undocumented individuals who have recorded their presence in, and response to the underground.

The writing on the wall

From the beginning, the desire to mark the underground with a name and date was a common urge amongst labourers and visitors alike and the walls of the quarries read like a guest book that has been created in stone

² There are a number of excellent books detailing the history, geology and making of the Parisian quarries from their formation up to and including the work of the Inspection des Carrières. The majority of these books are published only in French, the foremost of which is Emile Gérard *Paris Souterrain* (Paris, 1908). An excellent history of the catacombs (the Municipal Ossuary) is given by the second Chief Inspector of the Quarries, Héricart de Thury with Louis Etienne François, *Description des Catacombes de Paris* (Paris, 1815). The story of the Paris underground has been brought up-to-date with the publication of Alain Clementand & Gilles Thomas, *Atlas du Paris Souterrain: la doublure somber de la ville lumiere* (Paris, Parigramme, 2001).

³ In the course of this research, I made several forays into the underground: firstly, as an 'illegal' visitor under the care and direction of the quarries' most avid guardian and careful historian, Gilles Thomas, and latterly with the full permission of the Paris authorities, without whose approval the publication of this research would not have been possible.

and signed with a chisel or brush. The oldest entry bears the name and date of ‘Noe Camar, 1671’: his motivation for commemorating his presence can only be guessed at, but by signing the walls of the underground Noe Camar (and all subsequent visitors) followed a practice as old as lettering itself, when stone rather than paper was the common substrate and when writing on the fabric of a building was encouraged, not prohibited.⁴ But it is not just signatures that can be found on the walls; the underground is also home to many other genres of visual and audial art, which include paintings, sculptures, mosaics, cartoons, sketches, directional signs, art installations, graffiti, tags, printed tracts and music and performance. Some of the work is barely visible, whilst the largest paintings are in excess of sixty-five feet long. The topics are diverse: representations of quarrymen at work; observations of topical events; religious symbols or esoteric ciphers whose significance has faded with the years; some of the images are pornographic; others are politically motivated and made by generations of young Parisian agitators; whilst yet more are simply flights of fancy.

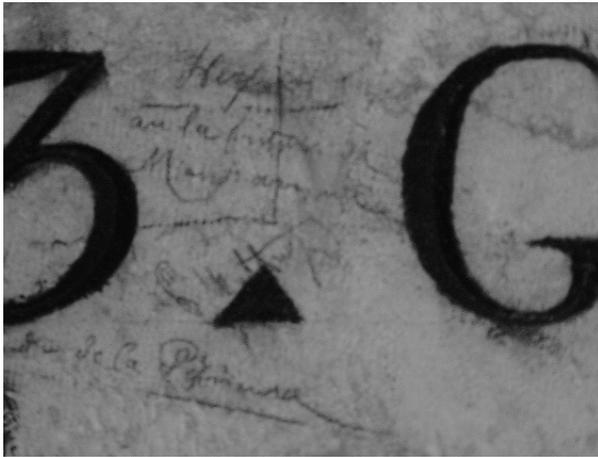


Fig. 1: When a quarry was consolidated a record of the work was carved on its walls. A figure indicated the chronological order of the reinforcements, and letters specified the engineer responsible for the work. ‘G’ indicates it was the work of Charles-Axel Guillaumot, the first engineer of the quarries. (Figures 1-13: photography © Alexandre Parré.)

⁴ Fleming, Juliet, *Graffiti and the writing arts of early modern England* (London, Reaktion Books, 2001).

The earliest marks were made by the quarrymen of the seventeenth century, and in the eighteenth century labourers working for the Inspection des Carrières added to these signs with thousands of instructional inscriptions necessary for the execution of their work: technical engineering marks and topographical indicators created with the aim of dating, referencing and directing the labour.⁵



Fig. 2: The quarry works responsible for producing much of the official underground lettering were unfettered by preconceived notions of letter-carving. Word and letter spacing frequently caused problems and line lengths were often misjudged forcing the carver to render excess characters in a smaller size or place them indiscriminately on the stone.

In addition they created an abundance of street nameplates (which corresponded with the street names above ground) to indicate the location and orientation of the passages, and commemorative plaques by which to remember significant moments in the development of the quarries. Whilst most of these inscriptions are crudely rendered with little understanding of form, the lettering is not without charm and their sheer volume cannot fail to impress. These official marks are of great historical importance, an integral part of the quarries' heritage and, for those interested in letterforms, a

⁵ Chardon, R., *Inspections et graffiti dans les carrières de Paris* (Paris, Editions Sehdacs, 1987).

curious gallery of vernacular interpretations on the Roman alphabet.⁶ But the quarrymen did not simply make marks of necessity; they also made marks of fancy. ‘Liberty birds’ were drawn on the underground walls as rather poetic means of indicating exit points: the way the bird was facing showed the way out. The notion of the ‘liberty bird’ came from the early navigators who longed for the sight of a bird to indicate the approach of land and as many of the quarrymen were ex-seamen, they adopted this symbol to indicate the exit from the underground and thus freedom from the quarry.



Fig. 3: A quarry-worker’s plaque commemorating the internment of the remains of over six million people who were removed to the underground from the overflowing Paris cemeteries in 1786.

In the beginning there were few visitors beyond the workers of the Inspection des Carrières, because the underground was unknown, unmapped and uncharted. But as knowledge of the quarries spread, the number of illicit visitors increased and the underground began to provide a secure and welcome apparel for many covert actions and illegal events:

⁶ A useful commentary on, and collection of images relating to the quarrymen’s lettering can be found courtesy of French typeface designer Jean-Francois Porchez in his online article *Parisian Type Underground*: <https://typofonderie.com/gazette/post/parisian-type-underground/>

criminals, cutpurses and bootleggers used the underground to hide from the authorities, and smugglers availed themselves of the network to transport contraband. The quarries also afforded physical and mental refuge to those in need, and a protection to fugitives seeking sanctuary from turmoil. War, revolution and siege have all played a major part in Parisian life and, whilst the city was ravaged above ground, the underground provided a shelter to many victims of war, death and destruction. Amidst political upheaval, text and image flourished in the quarries as those seeking sanctuary recorded decisive moments on the subterranean walls: the storming of the Bastille, 1789; the Grand Terreur, 1794; the declaration of the Republic, 1792; the Prussian siege, 1870; the Commune, 1871; the German occupation, 1940; the liberation of 1944; and the student riots and workers' strikes of 1968.⁷

During the Revolution, those fleeing persecution left sketches of that most evocative symbol of their time: the guillotine. During the 1870 siege of Paris, invading Prussian soldiers made use of the quarries on the city's southern periphery. Some of those soldiers, far from home and in a foreign land, left both textual and pictorial records of their visit: 'E. Bochon, Potsdam, 18.11.70'; 'Sachmeir 1879'; 'Von fels zu Meer, L Baus I Comp 47 Reg, November 13, 1870'; or the exultant 'Vive la Bavière'. Alongside the textual records are scarcely visible pictorial images of soldiers marching in their helmets, or civilians fleeing invasion. During the same period, the defending French Commune fighters established transport links in the quarries and their graffiti can also be seen: the simple 'guérilla 1870'; or the romantic 'souvenir des Communards' [in memory of the Communards]; and the defiant 'Les Prussiens ne passeront pas' [the Prussians will not pass]. The occupation of 1940-4 saw both French and German forces take refuge in the underground. The Germans converted an old quarry in the north of the city into a civil defence shelter (now known as 'Bunker Allemand'), located below the Lycée Montaigne, from which access passages were built linking it to the Senate used by Luftwaffe staff. The Germans equipped their bunkers with telephones and electric lighting and marked the walls with orderly and well-executed signs, which indicated entrance and exit points, and included directions and commands such as 'Rauchen verboten' [no smoking] or 'Ruhe' [silence]. The signs had a uniformity of presentation that created an instantly recognizable, cohesive political identity. Evidence of these marks is still visible today.

⁷ Horne, Alistair, *Seven Ages of Paris: a portrait of a city* (London, Macmillan, 2002).



Fig. 4: One of many signs left in 1940-44 by occupying German forces. They are among the most methodical and considered signs in the quarries.

Whilst the Germans requisitioned the northern end of the underground, the Free French of the Interior (FFI) found sanctuary in the south of the network just below the Place Denfer-Rochereau in a shelter (now known as 'Abri FFI'), which was fully furnished and equipped with all the material necessary to sustain a long-stay headquarters. It was from here, in 1944, that Rol-Tanguy, Head of the FFI of the Ile-de-France, directed the liberation forces. In the same year, the Inspection Générale des Carrières was instructed to convert another area of the quarries into habitable safe-houses for the collaborators Pierre Laval, Fernand de Brinon and Heinrich Otto Abetz. Posthumously named 'Abri Laval', the area was completed just days before the liberation and never gave shelter. However, the rooms of the Germans, the FFI and the collaborators still stand and their crumbling furnishings remain as a testimony to the past and are bespattered with the political graffiti of the present.

Civilians also made use of the quarries during the War either to protect themselves from allied bombing and German patrols or to shield their nefarious dealings in black market contraband. In idle moments they too left words and images on the quarry walls: 'En souvenir d'une charmante alerte qui a eu l'audace de me faire rater mon train' [in memory of a charming siren that had the audacity to make me miss my train]. However, not all visitors descended into the underground with the intention of hiding, others went in search of hidden treasure but rather than finding bounty, the plunderers simply found beer and mushrooms. The Carthusian monks of Paris produced beer of legendary quality, which they

stored in the quarries below the Val-de-Grâce monastery, but during the Revolution the monks fled and abandoned their beer. In November 1793, Philibert Aspair, doorkeeper of the Val-de-Grâce, went in search of the cellar: he never reappeared. In the uneasy atmosphere of the Revolution, his disappearance caused little concern, but twelve years later his body was discovered and he was formally buried at the site where he died and a tomb was erected in his memory and an incised stone tells the story of his fate.⁸

The subterranean quarries have also been the gentle protectors of the *champignon*, and in the nineteenth century the quarry floor was transformed into mushroom beds when Monsieur Chambry, a market-gardener on the Rue de la Santé, realised their potential for fungi growing. The trade expanded, and Monsieur Chambry was joined by fellow mushroom growers all of whom appropriated the quarries for the cultivation of their produce and who marked the walls with their own particular symbols in order to record the stages in the development and harvesting of their extraordinary crop: evidence of the marks still remain. But not everyone found peace and tranquility; for many the quarries are full of fear, divorced as they are from life on the surface and detached from all references to time. It is not surprising, therefore, that many esoteric symbols can be found: stars of David, swastikas, yin and yan symbols, signs of peace and signs of the cross made to Christianize a godless place, to bring light into the dark, and provide protection to the visitors. There is some speculation that the quarries have been used as a rendezvous for secret societies such as the Knights Templar and there is evidence they have been used as meeting places for French Freemasons because on the quarry ceiling, under the Parc de Saint-Cloud, sketches can be found of traditional masonic symbols such as acacia trees and compasses, which are accompanied by the slogan ‘masson, 1838’.

The underground community

From the mid-twentieth century the number of illicit visitors to the quarries increased dramatically; they came through curiosity or a sense of adventure. The rise in underground explorers started in the 1950s when students from the Ecole des Mines de Paris produced hand-drawn maps,

⁸ *A la memoire de Philibert Aspair perdu dans cette carrier le III Novembre MDCCXCIII retrouve onze ans après et inhume en la meme place le XXX AVRIL MDCCCIV / In Memory of Philibert Aspair lost in the quarries 3 November 1793 found eleven years later and buried at the same place 30 April 1804.*

which were circulated to initiate friends.⁹ Gradually the number of initiates increased and an informal community of illicit visitors formed, which came together to smoke, drink, party and listen to music. A favourite meeting place was under the Val-de-Grâce, which was easy to access and spacious: an ideal venue for music festivals, which by the 1970s had reached their zenith. Gradually the explorations widened and the initiates discovered more of the network and began decorating the quarries and passages with paintings, mosaics, sculptures and unlikely art installations; hiding ephemeral paper tracts in the walls and filling the quarries with the sound of music.

Today it is estimated there are in excess of 8,000 clandestine visitors venturing below ground each year, generally at the weekend or at night: many make regular descents. This is despite the fact that entering the quarries is illegal, that access points are limited, and visiting the quarries is both dangerous and requires stamina. Descending into the quarries is akin to pot holing: there is a total absence of light; the floor is uneven and unpredictable and in some areas the roof is just a foot or two from the ground; the walls are rough and running with water, and sometimes the floor floods and is transformed into a swimming pool; the risk of contracting leptospirosis—a fatal disease transmitted by rats—is real; the ground is unstable, there danger from collapsing quarries, and it is easy to become lost in the frequently turning passages. The illicit urban explorers are known as cataphiles,¹⁰ they are young (about seventy percent of them are under twenty-five years old) predominantly male (an estimated fifteen percent are women) and many, but not all, are students.¹¹ Their reasons for exploring the quarries are diverse: some enjoy its history, its geology or architecture whilst less discerning individuals merely want to have fun, play music, drink and smoke in this novel party venue. Many cataphiles descend into the quarries to exercise their talents as artists whilst others derive spiritual sustenance and emotional balance from their underground

⁹ For many decades students from the Ecole de Pharmacie have, as part of their studies, legitimately raided the underground for skulls and bones, and students from the Ecole des Mines have accessed the quarries below their college whilst working on topographical projects. It is a custom for these graduating students to mark the quarry walls with elaborate, large-scale paintings celebrating the end of their studies.

¹⁰ For the purposes of this research I met and interviewed cataphiles about their reasons for descending into the quarries to make their art. To read more about this secret group of urban explorers, there are a number of cataphile-led websites, and a good starting point is <http://paris.catacombes.free.fr/liens.htm>

¹¹ 'Claustrophile', *La fille des carriers* (Paris & Montréal, L'Harmattan, 1999).

forays, for there is a peace and silence in the underground that provides a counterbalance to the rigours of the streets above. But whatever their reasons, it is the singularity of the place that is the greatest attraction and many cataphiles descend simply to ‘enjoy the ignored inheritance of Paris, which most people do not know exists and which few are privileged to have seen.’¹²



Fig. 5: A hand-painted sign, roughly executed, welcomes visitors to the Rats Bar, a small room used by cataphiles, and which derives its name from a popular group of cata-artists.

Cataphiles are anonymous and below ground they adopt pseudonyms borrowed from mythology or literature, which reflect their interest in the occult, or show anarchic sympathies: Caton, Cavage, Clustrophile, Gandalf, Golem, Misticatafille, Morthicia, or Titan. But amid the individuality there is also unity; once initiated into the quarries, the cataphile becomes integrated into an underground community with its own system of communication, codes of behaviour and meeting places. Cataphiles have been illicitly producing words and images in the underground since the early 1980s and their work is found all over the quarry network. It is an

¹² Anonymous cataphile, in interview with the author, 2004.

environment that encourages introspective and very personal paintings on subjects that are always extraordinary and frequently bizarre: monsters and beasts, phantoms and ghouls are favourites; futuristic topics recur; and politics, religion and sex inevitably find wall space. The painters produce work that is highly stylized and graphic and which has been inspired by many genres: some have adopted the manner of comic-book art; others have been stimulated by Egyptian hieroglyphics or North America Indian symbols; punk has had its influence; whilst classical art has shaped other paintings. Some of the art is purely decorative, and colourful geometric shapes abound. The sculptors and ceramicists choose gentle themes and are often influenced by architecture and produce work inspired by masons of an earlier age. Alternatively, fantastic and mysterious creations of the imagination result in whimsical castles or extravagant gargoyles. The mosaic artists create the most delicate work in the quarries and their small pieces of coloured glass and stone are used to produce charming birds, butterflies and flowers.



Figs. 6 & 7: Ceramic images of bird and butterflies are popular symbols in the underground: symbols of freedom in a confined and restricted space.