



Nicholas Spencer

After Utopia

The Rise of Critical Space
in Twentieth-Century
American Fiction

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for Edith Spencer

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After Utopia

Introduction

Over the past decade the study of textualizations of space has become one of the most widespread and influential trends in many areas of cultural criticism. For some observers, the popularity of spatial critique is an unwelcome sign of faddishness.¹ However, it is, I think, more appropriate to regard the extent of contemporary spatial analyses as the sign of a legitimate sharing of concerns. Critical assessments that simply repeat existent conclusions or fail to develop their outlook in any depth should, of course, be accorded limited acclaim. But rather than striving to curtail spatial analyses in the belief that such endeavors are now passé, critical culture is best served by building upon existing spatial critique and creating new frameworks and contexts for investigations into cultural space. In this book I seek to accomplish both these goals. *After Utopia* mobilizes the concept of “critical space” to reorient scholarly perspectives on twentieth-century American fiction. The critical paradigm that is articulated in the following chapters is rooted in one of the most influential theses of contemporary spatial critique. Speaking of early-twentieth-century culture, Michel Foucault argues, “Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic” (“Questions” 70). In a related argument Foucault claims “that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time” (“Of” 23). In other words, Foucault perceives in late-twentieth-century culture a reversal of the dominance of temporality over spatiality that he attributes to the earlier part of the century. Taking Foucault’s theorization as its starting point, *After Utopia* examines the function of

spatiality at several points in the course of twentieth-century American fiction. Unlike the work of spatial theorists such as Edward Soja and Fredric Jameson, which reconceptualizes Foucault's pronouncement as a distinction between modernism's obsession with history and postmodernism's preoccupation with spatiality, this book identifies a continual process of transformation in fictional spatiality.² In turning away from the monolithic terminology of modernism and postmodernism, I hope to provide a nuanced account of the rise of critical space in twentieth-century American fiction. *After Utopia* does argue that late-twentieth-century American fiction is dominated by spatial concerns. However, such dominant spatiality takes heterogeneous forms and must be viewed as a transformation of the spatial thematics of radical American fiction of the early decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, I argue that in such early-twentieth-century American fiction, models of history are coarticulated with notions of critical space. In the later American fiction assessed in the following chapters, textualizations of critical space reinscribe and then supersede principles that are central to the dominant historicity of the earlier fiction that I discuss.

The argument of this book encompasses five distinct moments in the rise of critical space in twentieth-century American fiction: the naturalist fiction of Jack London and Upton Sinclair; the 1930s trilogies of John Dos Passos and Josephine Herbst; the midcentury novels of Mary McCarthy and Paul Goodman; the 1970s fiction of Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis; and novels by Joan Didion and Don DeLillo from the final decades of the twentieth century. In each chapter I discuss perspectives in critical theory that illuminate, problematize, or mirror the concerns of the fictional texts that I discuss. In so doing, I highlight conceptions in twentieth-century critical theory that correspond at key places with examples of American fiction. In these theoretical analyses, I posit that struggles among ideas of history and spatiality inform the developments involving Marxism and post-Marxism that we see in the fiction and theory discussed in this book. By arguing that similar transformations regarding the rise of critical space take place in twentieth-century American fiction and continental theory, I hope to demonstrate that these cultural forms constitute a transnational and transgeneric textual field. As part of

this project, I point out the insistent presence of critical space at many points in trajectories of Marxist and post-Marxist theory. In *Postmodern Geographies*, Soja argues that the collapse of the Paris Commune in 1871 signaled the victory of historical over spatial critique in the radical tradition. The newly dominant historicity was, according to Soja, “stripped of its more geographically sensitive variants (such as the utopian and anarchistic socialisms of Fourier, Proudhon, Kropotkin, and Bakunin [. . .])” (31). Soja concludes that spatial critique remained largely dormant during the modern period, but his account underestimates both the role of utopian spatiality in Marx’s social theory and the legacy of such utopianism in the spatial concerns that play a prominent role in much Western Marxist theory of the early twentieth century.³ In pursuing readings that are informed by the spatial concerns of Marxist and post-Marxist theory, I do not undertake an “application” of theory to fiction. Brian Massumi criticizes the application of scientific theories in the humanities because, he argues, such an approach either turns theoretical authority into “a form of imperialist disciplinary aggression” or reduces theoretical concepts to the status of “metaphor” and “exotic pet” (19). As an alternative to application, Massumi advocates “treating the scientific concept the way any other concept is treated” (20). Similarly, I seek to bypass the uncritical and ad hoc qualities that are endemic to theoretical application, and I strive to analyze the critical space of both theory and fiction through their interrelation.

In the first chapter I argue that the fiction of London and Sinclair inverts key aspects of the American utopian fiction that flourished and quickly subsided in the late nineteenth century.⁴ Utopian novels such as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* are dominated by depictions of idealized social space. Representations of historical process play a crucial role in these texts, but they are secondary in importance to spatial descriptions. For example, in *Looking Backward* there are two arcs of naturalist evolutionary process that support the laying out of utopian space—the transition from Bellamy’s own time to the imagined world of 2000, and the movement beyond the year 2000 into the utopian future. Unlike the idealized space of the novel, these historical arcs are both portrayed in uncertain and inconsistent terms. In contrast to Bellamy, London and Sinclair prioritize the representation

of naturalist process in their fiction. The naturalism of these authors is governed by versions of socialist theories of dialectical struggle and deterministic history. The totalized and monolithic utopian space that we see in novels such as *Looking Backward* is transformed into a set of spatial representations that express a utopian impulse. Subordinate to the naturalistic history that London and Sinclair prioritize, these utopianistic spaces are localized models of social practices and relationships that serve to inspire the dialectical struggles of history. Like the arcs of history in *Looking Backward*, the social spaces represented by London and Sinclair are usually flawed and incomplete. The details of London's and Sinclair's narrative conjunctions of utopianism and naturalism differ greatly, but for both authors the relation between models of history and representations of spatiality is filled with tension, conflict, and instability. In order to unpack these varying elements, I analyze conflicts within and between London and Sinclair in relation to models of history and spatiality articulated by the Marxist theories of Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch. The novels of London and Sinclair are *not* examples of utopian fiction, because they do not privilege the depiction of fully realized ideal societies. Nevertheless, the critical spatiality that is articulated in these novels exhibits tendencies that exemplify the influence of late-nineteenth-century utopian fiction.

With reference to Gramsci's writings on hegemonic processes of transformation and the complex landscape of social space, the second chapter demarcates key issues in the trilogies of Dos Passos and Herbst. In the fiction of Dos Passos and Herbst, the general characteristics of London's and Sinclair's textualizations of history and spatiality are reiterated. All these writers prioritize the representation of historical process and assign social space a related but lesser role. However, the certainties of deterministic history that are at times expressed by London and Sinclair have, in these later writers, given way to diffidence. The problematic of history remains central in these trilogies of the 1930s, but London's and Sinclair's promotion of singular visions of history is replaced by Dos Passos's and Herbst's exploration of various possible ways in which social transformation can be imagined. Also, the role of critical space is more prominent in the work of Dos Passos and Herbst than in that of London and Sinclair.

As strong teleological convictions give way to variegated and open-ended conceptions of societal change, spatial representations become an increasingly important source of social analysis and critique. The forms of social space that interest Dos Passos and Herbst are distinct in nature, but they share the characteristic of being less utopian and more critical than the spatial aspects of the work of London and Sinclair. In Dos Passos and Herbst we witness a key moment in the rise of critical space in twentieth-century American fiction because these authors narrate the point at which the analytical significance of spatiality often appears to be greater than that of historicity.

Two varying theoretical analyses are discussed in chapter 3. After reading Mary McCarthy's *The Oasis* in light of Hannah Arendt's conceptualization of social and political space, I assess Henri Lefebvre's reflections on the social space of everyday life as part of a reading of Paul Goodman's *The Empire City*. In the section on McCarthy, I argue that *The Oasis* represents the abandonment of the general critical model that London, Sinclair, Dos Passos, and Herbst fictionalize. That *The Oasis* takes the form of a satire on utopia indicates the dominance of spatiality in this text. In other words, *The Oasis* represents a further advance in the rise of critical space beyond the position that spatiality occupies in the fiction of Dos Passos and Herbst. Yet McCarthy's satirical intent means that spatiality in this novel is used to critique bourgeois capitalism, utopianism, and theories of history associated with Marxism. In challenging the opposition between capitalism and radicalism, McCarthy's enfolding of historicity into critical spatiality strives to discredit the spatial and historical critiques that are featured in the work of London, Sinclair, Dos Passos, and Herbst. As an analysis of the divergence of social space in midcentury American fiction, the third chapter contrasts the spatiality of *The Oasis* with that of Paul Goodman's *The Empire City*. Like *The Oasis*, *The Empire City* negates models of history and thus further suggests the departure from Marxist models of temporality in midcentury fiction. Goodman's novel also shares McCarthy's dual articulation of a preoccupation with spatiality and a critique of utopianism. Such similarities demonstrate the validity of locating these two novels at a distinct moment in twentieth-century American fiction. But whereas McCarthy's novel liquidates the spatial and historical tendencies that

animate radical fiction of the early twentieth century, *The Empire City* revivifies the critique of social struggle through fictionalized spatiality. Goodman achieves this end by assigning to his representation of social space the principles of dialectical struggle that, in the fiction of London, Sinclair, Dos Passos, and Herbst, are foundational to representations of historical process. In its replacement of utopian space with spatial dialectics, Goodman's novel establishes critical space as a primary means of articulating social struggle in fiction.

In my discussion of Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis in chapter 4, I assess the ways in which these authors enlarge the spatial dialectics of Goodman's novel. Lefebvre's theorization of the production of space and the urban revolution provides a framework for the discussion of these authors. Whereas *The Empire City* focuses on localized struggles on the social terrain of New York City, the novels of Pynchon and Gaddis depict larger patterns of transformation within urban and social space. Both Pynchon and Gaddis fictionalize the coming of what Lefebvre describes as "abstract space" (*Production* 49). For Lefebvre, abstract space refers to the homogenization and fragmentation of social space that is associated with the practices of neocapitalism in the post-1945 era. In Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, the events at the conclusion of World War II facilitate the emergence of abstract social space. For much of this novel, the formation of abstract space struggles against "lived space," which Lefebvre defines in terms of autonomous social spaces that oppose abstract space (*Production* 39). Along with its negation of models of history, the novel's treatment of spatial dialectics exemplifies its reworking of principles that are central to the pre-1939 fiction studied in this book. The dialectic of abstract and lived space in *Gravity's Rainbow* culminates in the representation of the urban space of Los Angeles. In these final scenes of the novel, Pynchon's descriptions of the urban infrastructure of southern California in the 1970s evoke the seemingly decisive confrontation between abstract and lived space. The threat of the colonization of lived by abstract space with which *Gravity's Rainbow* concludes is realized in Gaddis's *JR*. In this novel, abstract space takes dominion in the urban environments of New York, and the possibility of oppositional lived space is eradicated. As the narrative of a failed dialectic, *JR* represents the terminal point of textualizations of

dialectics that play a vital role in the rise of critical space in American fiction.

The fifth chapter analyzes the novels of Joan Didion and Don DeLillo as fictionalizations of dominant critical space that depart from dialectical models. The first section of this chapter considers the novels of Joan Didion in relation to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theorization of spatiality and territoriality. Didion's extraordinarily reiterative novels depict fluctuations of social space in the context of opportunistic networks of economic and political power. Conceptions of history and utopianism are absent in these novels. The struggles of social space, which are of major concern to Didion, take the form of various flows and blockages of movement and communication that circumscribe behavior and agency. Through the conflicts of social space, Didion conducts a critique of American capitalism that is as integral to her writing as a similar critique is in the novels of Sinclair and Dos Passos. However, the critical spatiality of these novels is devoid of the binary oppositions and mediated syntheses that characterize representations of dialectical conflict. In the second section of this chapter, I analyze Don DeLillo's *Underworld* as an engagement with technological concerns that are central to the writings of Paul Virilio. DeLillo's novel describes how media and military technologies serve to eradicate social space. The speed of these technologies means that spatiality enters a critical condition, a condition characterized by the possibility of the disappearance of critical space. As a result, *Underworld* involves both a critique of transformations of social space and a commentary on the technological erosion of the significance of distance. By concluding with an analysis of the crisis of critical space, *After Utopia* emphasizes the heterogeneity and precariousness of forms of spatiality in late-twentieth-century American fiction.

While the chapters of *After Utopia* analyze chronological transformations within American fiction, they do not constitute what Stuart Elden terms a "spatial history" (6). History is a totalizing concept that makes a definitive and unifying claim on temporal narrative and often implies progress and continuity. Instead of history, this book identifies a genealogy of the discontinuous "emergence" of dominant spatiality in American fiction (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 148). As