

# Transgressions

A Journal of Urban Exploration



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## Reviews:

### *The City of Collective Memory:*

*ITS HISTORICAL IMAGERY AND ARCHITECTURAL ENTERTAINMENT*

by M. Christine Boyer, 1996, London, MIT Press

Gordon Brent Ingram

Christine Boyer's tome on historical imagery, on the city's constantly re-edited collective memory, is bound to be highly influential for the present generation of architectural theoreticians. In contrast, the implications for community activism in these fine scholarly essays are myriad but not always easy to recognize.

Boyer illustrates how the uses and meanings of imagery in the city have been constantly invented and reinvented, particularly in the transition to modernism and to today's saturation of meaning and lack of meaningfulness in the city. *The City of Collective Memory* is probably architecture and urban design's first, truly authentic post-modernist manifesto, at least in its recognition of late capital's addictions to imagery, historicization and re-invention. The departure point of *The City of Collective Memory* is the cannibalization of older public places by consumerism and touristic and voyeuristic service economies. In Boyer's lucid vision, we all are living in what are being redrawn as tacky, over-marketed touristic quarters on the peripheries and at various distances from distant centres. Collective memory, with all of its vantage points and imperfections, is both the casualty and our salvation. In this lifeworld, the urban landscape increasingly is formed around various contradictory collective experiences and "memory crises" (pp.28-29).

Early on, Boyer questions notions of the "sense of the real" (p.32) and seeks an expanded theory of representational forms by charting the history of the "panoramization" (p.41) of the city. She highlights how the twentieth century city was carefully designed and propelled into being the "City of Panorama" and "City of Spectacle" (p.46). *The City of Collective Memory* is peppered with mentions of Guy Debord and situationism and represents the most extensive exploration of the theory of "the spectacle" for urban history and design.

Boyer's innovative use of the notion of "topoi", as a series of sites where images, memories, and interpretations are embodied, as the matrix of the city, is bound to be particularly influential. Chapter Five on the surveying gaze and travelogues, largely an expansion of Foucault's notion of the panopticon, is especially useful in understanding mechanisms of domination through architecture.

The most powerful chapter is the one that deals with the invention and subsequent marketing of tradition in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The chapter that follows, on gentrification and tourism in New York City, is a less resolved elaboration if only because the forces at work are more contradictory. At the end it is evident that Boyer's framework for understanding the city as "radical artifice" draws more from the vision of Walter Benjamin than from Debord. The power of Boyer's scholarship is derived from

her charting the connections between architecture, art, and technology in the context of cultural and political economy. Her approach embodies an increasingly articulated, largely 'post-Marxist' vision but few have done it as carefully and as powerfully.

## *Irene's Cunt*

by Louis Aragon, 1996, London, Creation Books

Arthur Askey

This book was first published, anonymously, in 1928. It was written by the French surrealist and communist Louis Aragon. The present edition represents its first unexpurgated publication in English (it also contains a useful introduction by the translator, Alexis Lykiard).

*Irene's Cunt* is, according to Albert Camus, "the finest of all works touching on eroticism". Less straightforwardly, Georges Bataille noted that "In this little book, eroticism is plainly shown as opening directly out upon a certain vista of anguish, upon a certain lacerating consciousness of distress". Yet such plaudits tend to obscure the book's central problematic: is non-bourgeois pornography possible? It is precisely Aragon's struggles with the genre that give this work its urgency. It is a shame that throughout he remains wedded to a naturalistic vision of sexuality. Sex is presented as something that exists as a primal urge, pressing in on consciousness. It is something that squeals at us from inside our heads, something that is elementally transgressive. This typically surrealist assumption strikes a dated note today. Aragon's writing is repeatedly formulated as a "stream of consciousness": tumbling, spurting, from some pure place in his brain:

Arses droppings vomit queers queers rotten swine horse-chestnuts brine of urine excrement bloodflecked spittle menses ugh sweat of caterpillars glue snot slobber you you pus and stale spunk abominable sanies swellings burst bladders musty cunts shitty lungs garlic-belches. (p.24)

The mind of *Irene's Cunt's* male narrator is thronged with reminiscences, and fantasies, about the genitalia of his fictional lover. His swooning, intoxicated, accounts are, however very much cock centred ...

Squeeze my prick till tears came ... clad in skimpy linen underpants, I felt myself achieving mythological volume. An old woman who was there, wearing a rosary adorned with numerous religious medallions, stuffed my member in her mouth, and I awoke with the greatest embarrassment. (p.28)

As this last reference to embarrassment suggests, unlike 'normal' pornography, Aragon's narrative persistently draws sexuality into contact with everyday, social relationships. He is not interested in evoking a paradise of nubile submissive beauties. The monomaniacal attempt to exclude all other thoughts, to take a holiday in sex and stupidity, that characterises bourgeois pornography, is overturned. One of the ironies of this work — and maybe of all politically alert surrealism — is that it is far less fantastical, and far more realistic, than the genre it engages.