

Marc Augé (2004) *Oblivion*. Trans. Marjolijn de Jager. London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 0-8166-3567-6.

Les Roberts

Marjolijn de Jager's translation of Marc Augé's *Oblivion* follows on from other recent translations of French theoretical texts that share something of a family resemblance with Augé's work. In *The Dialectic of Duration*, Bachelard challenges the Bergsonian notion of time as duration (*durée*), arguing that lived time is essentially fractured, interrupted and 'teemed with lacunae' (2000: 19). As with Lefebvre's late writings on rhythmanalysis (2004; Lefebvre and Régulier 2003), Bachelard posits a dialectical temporality made up of rhythms and discontinuities. Having only recently been made available to Anglophone readers, these works – by authors more prominently known for their writings on space rather than time – invite certain comparisons with Augé's dialectic of memory and oblivion. Indeed *Oblivion* may be looked upon as a 'mapping', of sorts, of precisely the temporal lacunae and discontinuities of which Bachelard speaks. My use of a geographical metaphor here is intended on the one hand to bring to the fore some of the spatial implications of Augé's thesis – and in this regard comparisons with his earlier work on non-places (1995), or his more recent *Le temps en ruines* (2003) prove instructive –, and, on the other, to counter the (a)spatial essentialism of the Bergsonian *durée*, in which space is subordinated to a temporal logic of flow and continuity; an instrumental logic that informs the radical deterritorialisations of the 'rhizome' and 'nomad'.

For Lefebvre, these critical tendencies serve to reduce the dialectics of space and time to little more than 'superimposed fluxes' (1976: 34). As products of what arguably amounts to an abstract space (Lefebvre 1991) of 'ungrounded' displacement, the open and contingent 'mobilities' of anti-foundational epistemologies of the subject are secured at the cost of a closed and static idealisation of the spatial: 'an absolutist spatial ontology... provides the missing foundation for everything else in flux' (Smith and Katz 1993: 79). Coming from a social anthropological perspective, Augé's observation that 'it is the relations between space and otherness that should be addressed and analyzed today if we are to point up some of the contradictions of our modernity' (1998:97) points to similar concerns in respect of the failure to adequately

problematise or scrutinise metaphors of space and mobility in much contemporary theoretical discourse. For Augé, otherness is less a question of hybridity (located, for example, within a rhetorical ‘third space’ of discursive abstraction) than one of proximity: ‘the category of syncretism is running in neutral today because we let it explain anything... it is no longer operative because it depended on an effect of distance whose disappearance is precisely what characterizes contemporaneity’ (ibid: 122). One of the contradictions to emerge from this collapse of distance is a concomitant overabundance or excess of space, which, alongside the acceleration of history and the individualisation of consciousness is characteristic of what Augé describes as ‘supermodernity’. Developed initially in *Non-places* (the book for which Augé is most widely known), yet running through much of his subsequent work, these ideas embrace a notion of coevality that effectively draws out some of the spatial contradictions that have emerged in an era of globalisation and increased de-localisation of social, cultural and historical referents.

As a self-proclaimed anthropologist ‘for contemporaneous worlds’ it is thus the proximal status of the ‘other’ within contemporary societies – the coevality of otherwise distant social, cultural and symbolic spaces – that underpins much that is at the heart of Augé’s concerns. As a spatial conflation of self and other, presence and absence, the collapse of distance inherent in the notion of contemporaneity has its logical extension in the category of the ‘non-place’, conceived as a negation or emptying of ‘anthropological place’: an organic sociality localised in space and time. While critics have all too often ascribed an ontological fixity to the spatial binarism of *Non-places* (reproducing, by default, Castell’s dualistic logic of ‘spaces of flows’ and ‘space of places’), the negation of place which forms the basis of Augé’s diagnosis does not presuppose a valorisation of flows, transit and deterritorialisation over more stable and sedentary geographies of place (discussions on the chronotopicality of airport spaces are a good illustrator of this). It is more instructive to acknowledge the spatial contradiction at the core of his argument, thereby forcing a greater recognition of the essentially dialectical and ‘productive’ nature of place and non-place. I mention this here partly to provide a background context to *Oblivion* (as well as pursuing links between Lefebvre’s writings and those of Augé), and partly to provide a spatial foundation to Augé’s temporal dialectic which, although not developed in *Oblivion* itself, necessarily invites correspondence with the earlier work. What the former omits

in terms of space and place (e.g. geographical or psychogeographical landscapes of memory and oblivion) the latter complements in its apparent disregard for time (the constitutive temporalities of non-places – their affective dynamics of stasis and transition, abstract and lived, quantitative and qualitative, etc.). In their latent form, both of these texts can be traced back to Augé's first attempts to develop an 'anthropology of the everyday', *La Traversée du Luxembourg* (*The Crossing of the Luxembourg Gardens*, 1985) – described by Tom Conley as 'a blueprint for many of the books Augé has since written over the past two decades' (2002: xxi) (still, incidentally, awaiting its English translation) – and *In the Metro* (2002, originally published in 1986), an 'auto-ethnographic' study of the Paris metro which, following a quite literal 'train of thought', can be likened to a form of literary *derivé*: its 'mobilities' of time and memory contingently grounded in everyday socio-spatial practice. By comparison, *Oblivion* assumes an altogether more sedentary mode of reflection, indicative, perhaps, of the gradual supremacy of the writer over the ethnographer – and of time over space.

Yet, having said that, look again and *Oblivion* is not quite as unconcerned with place or landscape as might otherwise be assumed. In so far as '[e]very story is a travel story – a spatial practice' (de Certeau 1984: 115), Augé's richly evocative prose lend time and memory an almost palpable sense of place and form. He achieves this partly by invoking geographical or organic metaphors which, in turn, prompt reflection on the 'writing back' of these same tropes within everyday spaces of travel and memory. Take, for example, the metaphor of the garden:

Remembering or forgetting is doing gardener's work, selecting, pruning. Memories are like plants: there are those that need to be quickly eliminated in order to help the others burgeon, transform, flower. Those plants that have in some way achieved their destiny, those flourishing plants have in some way forgotten themselves in order to transform: between the seeds or the cutting from which they were born and what they have become there is hardly any apparent relationship anymore. In that sense, the flower is the seed's oblivion. (17)

In order to remember it is necessary at the same time to forget. The process of remembrance – the 'flowering' of the past in the present – is thus as much a process of negation as it is that of retrieval or selection. What is lost in oblivion is not the past

(which is already absent) but the traces of its remembrance (its rendering as present), leaving other traces – other remembrances – to flourish and take root in their wake. Tending time and memory in this way is of course literally manifested in actual ‘gardens of remembrance’, landscaped monuments to personal and collective memory in which oblivion is ritualised in the symbolic and performative context of everyday practice. In this respect, as a work of philosophical anthropology, *Oblivion*, like *Non-places* before it, sets out a theoretical framework that provides ample scope for the productive development and grounding of these ideas empirically. In the same way that the earlier work brought non-places (e.g. airports, motorways, shopping complexes, mass transit systems) within the methodological purview of ethnographic practice, *Oblivion* brings a similarly oblique perspective to debates on heritage, cultural memory and the social construction of time that warrants closer ethnographic and, as I am proposing, geographic scrutiny – to rethink oblivion in the context of place.

In terms of its ‘staging’ or ‘implementation’ (34) (i.e. as a social and spatial phenomenon) oblivion plays a key role in hermeneutic constructions of life narratives, or what Augé prefers to call ‘fictions’. Oblivion, he argues, “molds” time in life itself in order to make a kind of tale out of it that those who live it tell each other at the same time that they are living it’ (34). Time becomes the malleable product of oblivion and memory from which narrative fictions are constructed and enacted in the present. These fictions (of selfhood, nation, etc.) are symbolically inscribed on geographic and cognitive ‘maps’ of identity that order time, sifting our remembrances from those that are to be forgotten. Mapping traces of remembrance thus simultaneously invokes the temporal (and, by extension, geographical) lacunae from which they are dialectically construed, a relationship Augé likens to that between life and death:

The definition of death as the *horizon* of every individual and distinct life, while obvious, nevertheless takes on another meaning, a more subtle and more everyday meaning, as soon as one perceives it as a definition of life itself – of life between two deaths. So it is with memory and oblivion. The definition of oblivion as loss of remembrance takes on another meaning as soon as one perceives it as a component of memory itself. (15, emphasis added)

One further area of extrapolation here, again prompted by a spatial metaphoric, is the spatialisation of oblivion suggested through the trope of the horizon. At the risk of being over-literal in my 'writing back' this metaphor into everyday cultural spaces, the relationship between life and death, memory and oblivion can to some degree be observed or 'staged' in the flat, empty seascapes of coastal resorts frequented by the elderly. The practice of 'taking in the view', in effect a gazing at nothingness sprawled out towards the horizon, becomes a ritual process of engendering remembrance from an oblivion that is given substantive and palimpsestic form (a 'non-place' in more absolute terms). A Lefebvrian take on this example – a rhythmanalysis of the beach panorama – would point to the cyclical, organic rhythms of the tide as connoting an authentic reclamation of lived time from the alienating temporalities of industrial capitalism, where time is quantified, abstract and linear and driven by the exigencies of production. A similar argument can of course be applied to the aesthetic pleasures garnered from watching the setting sun dip beneath the horizon. Yet as a trope of immanent (but measurable) absence, an image of both hopeful and reflective time, the horizon also lends a more symbolic dimension to social constructions of time in that fictions of temporal diegesis – everyday narratives of individual and collective selfhood – are honed and shaped by a temporal dialectic mapped onto – and from – real and imagined landscapes: 'Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea' (20).

These spatial practices of 'temporal cartography' are thus intrinsic to remembrances associated with the tourist and traveller (and, by extension, ethnographer), and this is most prominently illustrated in tales of 'return', the first of three 'figures of oblivion' which Augé sets out in relation to both literary and ethnographic spaces of fiction (the other two are 'suspension' and 'beginning' or 'rebeginning'). By forgetting the present or the immediate past continuity is established with a lost or ancient past in which the traveller or initiate dwells. As Augé notes, this may entail the cultivation and reservation of places expressly for the pleasures of the return: future pasts to be continued or completed; 'a few alternative presents' for later consumption (60). On one level this may take the form of tourists who return to the same resorts year after year, slipping back into (or at least endeavouring to) a past to which they've grown accustomed; a past rendered present through the sensations which evoke the remembrance – the 'smells and burns of the tropics... the familiar murmur of an

endless summer' (71). Yet this figure of oblivion can equally erase the present on a more diffuse and expansive scale, colonising the hermeneutic spaces of local and national fictions with a clamour of competing remembrances and mythic returns all jostling for attention, which, in the end, 'recount nothing more than the passage from [collective] nostalgia to solitude' (66).

Situated between what Augé describes as 'Proustian return' (remembrance as the inspirational font of the creative process – a past regained through the act of writing) and the 'existential return to the places themselves' are remembrances derived from the consumption of text and images – readers returning to a much-loved work of literature, or cineastes seeking to (re)establish an affective bond with remembrances associated with a particular film (72). For Augé, '[t]hese fictional scenes dive into our real life, slip in like remembrances in the same capacity as those we have lived' (73). Rather than constituting an overarching simulacrum of remembrance (the reduction of time to an ontological abstraction of textual narrativity), these imbrications of 'fictive' return are materially and symbolically embedded in the *lived* modalities of everyday practice, in which different fictions (individual, collective, mythic)¹ – and spatial ontologies (Lefebvre 1991) – are dialectically interwoven.

The second figure of oblivion, that of *suspense*, refers to the cutting off of the present from the past and future. In ritual terms this approximates to the separation phase (*rite de marge*) of Van Gennep's 'rite of passage', or Turner's notion of 'communitas' – an in-between state in which the oblivion of past returns and future beginnings shapes a temporary state of suspended present-ness. While ritually efficacious, the social and spatial liminality of suspension (typically oriented around tropes of the border or margin) can also be ascribed to the enforced oblivion of those for whom horizons of past and future times have collapsed in the stasis and uncertainty of the 'here and now'. Cinematically, this is powerfully illustrated in a scene from Theo Angelopoulos' *Eternity and a Day* (1998), in which the ghostly silhouettes of migrants and refugees hang in suspended time on a remote border fence between Albania and Greece. Enveloped by mist, time stretched by the melancholic strains of an unbroken chord spanning the duration of the sequence (itself part of 7-minute unbroken shot), its *mise en scène* is one of arrested narratives and suspended histories: a vision of Fortress Europe in which oblivion casts a shadow over all but the present.

The third figure of oblivion is that of the *beginning* or *rebeginning*, and refers to the ‘radical inauguration’ of future presents: the initiation of time as yet unfolded (57). Ritually, this equates to rites of aggregation or reincorporation in which the initiate undergoes a process of birth or rebirth, casting off (‘putting to death’) his or her former identity and past remembrances. Its geographic correlate is that of the journey where time harbours a potentiality of duration that is spatialised in tropes of the frontier, horizon and open road (all of which come together in the iconic vanishing point of the classical road movie). From this perspective, the ritualised ‘casting off’ of the traveller or initiate has ambiguous connotations in that it refers to both the act of departure (i.e. the spatial unfolding of temporal beginnings) and the past to be left behind (cast into oblivion). Its time is therefore relative, the product of a spatial dialectic of movement and stasis. (Re)beginnings mobilise future times not in the sense of their ever having arrived, but rather in the surety of that which they negate; a surety that is felt most acutely at the point of departure. Arguably then, the alluring potentiality of (re)beginnings – ‘the rare quality of those moments when the present is freed from the past without as yet letting anything shine through of the future that sets it in motion’ (81) – represents an affect of time most prominently associated with places – or non-places – of transit and waiting (such as air and seaports, railway stations, car parks, service stations, etc.): places where immanent futures take hold of the present. As heterotopias of travel these (non)places can also play host to the other two forms of oblivion: i.e. as chronotopic gateways to past remembrance, or, in so far as they are never left (Mehran Nasseri’s example of airport homelessness is an emblematic case in point), as liminal zones of suspended duration.

One of the strengths of Augé’s work, and in this regard *Oblivion* is no exception, lies in a brevity of form in which ideas are not exhausted in detailed empirical analyses or dense theoretical explication (his books rarely exceed 100 pages in length) but conveyed, or distilled, in an altogether more suggestive and elliptic fashion, allowing space for their on-going cultivation across a number of disciplinary fields (in this case those of history, anthropology, geography, psychoanalysis, as well as film, cultural and literary studies). By situating *Oblivion* within a broader framework of ideas pertaining to space, place and mobility, not least that which Augé himself develops in *Non-places*, I have considered some of the ways his ideas on time, memory and the

practice of forgetting might be critically applied in cultural geographies of travel, tourism and heritage and in ethnographies of everyday practice. Grounding the temporalities of return, suspension and beginnings in lived quotidian spaces presents us with a dialectic of time in which the performative, creative and ritualistic modalities of oblivion are brought to the fore. The symbolic spaces of temporal and historical selfhood thus crafted (e.g. the designation and maintenance of sacred/memorial places, the 'timelessness' or suspended presence of interstitiality, the inauguration of new collective imaginaries of place and nation) point to the embeddedness and affectivity of time in everyday constructions of place and identity. As such, while Augé's ideas pay considerable dividends in terms of the 'mapping' of symbolic landscapes of memory and oblivion, presence and absence, the temporal fictions thus produced remain epistemologically embedded in spaces of representation in which the material, spatial and embodied dimensions of everyday practice are not occluded by an ontological primacy that might otherwise be accorded to the visual and textual imbrications of time, place and identity (cf. Edensor 2002: 141).

If one of the characteristics of a supermodern condition is the excess of time – a case of 'history snapping at our heels', as Augé puts it (1995: 30) – then oblivion is arguably an indispensable commodity in the ordering or crafting of temporal maps of place and identity. Learning to forget is an increasingly necessary adjunct to the process of cultural remembrance. If nostalgia for the present (well-exemplified in TV pop historiographies which look back at a past that has caught up with the present) can be looked upon as a symptom of this overabundance of time, then oblivion is to some extent its cure. The case made for oblivion by Augé is therefore as much prescriptive as analytic:

Oblivion brings us back to the present, even if it is conjugated in every tense: in the future, to live the beginning; in the present, to live the moment; in the past, to live the return; in every case, in order not to be repeated. We must forget in order to remain present, forget in order not to die, forget in order to remain faithful. (89)

In an age where history and memory are fetishised almost to the point of abstraction there is much to be said for the art of forgetting, as indeed there is for the arguments put forward in this short but insightful book.

Notes

¹ As a study of, to paraphrase Lakoff and Johnson, the ‘fictions we live by’, Augé’s *The War of Dreams* (1999), written immediately prior to *Oblivion*, provides a fuller elaboration of these ideas, arguing that the myths, dreams and narratives that sustain collective structures of identity are being increasingly effaced by the ‘fictionalisations’ of the global media.

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Les Roberts is currently a part-time lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Middlesex University, where he has recently completed a PhD which examined cinematic geographies of travel and migration. This work has formed the basis of a number of publications on space, place and mobility in European film, and as well as working on an edited collection on the work of Marc Auge, he is currently conducting research into marginal spaces and non-places of otherness and transnationality in representations of coastal Britain.