
In *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies* (part of Palgrave Macmillan’s Hispanic Urban Studies series), Benjamin Fraser delineates a relatively new field of interdisciplinary inquiry: urban cultural studies. Fraser does this by demonstrating a model for merging the fields of urban studies and cultural studies through a reading of Henri Lefebvre’s theoretical framework. Through Lefebvre’s work, which Fraser argues ‘yields a loosely organized but cohesive framework for understanding urban culture’ (1), this text seeks to illustrate a method for scholars to engage in urban cultural studies. Deeply rooted in a complex understanding of multiple fields of inquiry, the text strives to resolve potential conflicts within interdisciplinary studies. The introduction to the text re-examines the longstanding cultural studies debate between Charles Percy Snow and F.R. Leavis before concluding that Leavis’s ‘global attack on the notion of isolated cultures’ (9) aligns closely with Lefebvre’s rejection of specialised fields of knowledge and his assertion of a singular culture. However, Fraser asserts, ‘Lefebvre’s work suggests that this one culture that envelops all others is, significantly, an urban culture’ (11).

Fraser’s detailed and nuanced readings of Lefebvre’s entire oeuvre, consisting of various theoretical subjects over several decades, delineates Lefebvre’s often neglected importance as a cultural critic. *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies* is composed of two parts. Part I: Theoretical Ground consists of three chapters that seek to provide a roadmap for an understanding of this new field of ‘urban cultural studies’. Part II: Textual Variations, building upon the framework established in part one, consists of four chapters of readings that exemplify the urban cultural studies approach. These chapters contain interdisciplinary readings of literature (Chapter 4), film (Chapter 5), music (Chapter 6), and digital spaces (Chapter 7). While these chapters are all exemplary of the type of interdisciplinary scholarship that Fraser advocates through Lefebvre, the fourth chapter is probably of greatest interest to scholars of transnational literature.

Part I of Fraser’s text outlines urban cultural studies as a burgeoning field. Fraser notes in Chapter One that his book, ‘is indeed a first of sorts – in that it constitutes an attempt to begin a more overt, consciously scholarly discussion of the opportunities urban studies offers to unite the humanities and social sciences through discussion of the urban problematic’ (26) and that drawing from Lefebvre’s work provides a perfect model for this type of inquiry. Essentially, Fraser’s reading of Lefebvre’s work contains within it the embryo for an urban cultural studies approach through Lefebvre’s insistence on totality and his examination of works of art and cultural products. The second chapter deals largely with what Fraser sees as Lefebvre’s revision of the Marxist concept of alienation and its usefulness for an urban cultural studies method. Lefebvre saw that, ‘Marxian thought needed to be reformulated in order to become more closely attuned to the spatial character of contemporary capitalism and to the pernicious “colonization of everyday life” that was so essential to understanding postwar urban society’ (46). This spatial character meant that Lefebvre’s particular version of alienation differed slightly from Marx’s. For Lefebvre, alienation permeated everyday life, and his writings illustrated ‘the modern triumph of the city as exchange-value over the use-value of urban spaces’ (48). Fraser claims that Lefebvre’s work seeks to reclaim lived space from its concealment by the alienating effects of conceptualized space, urbanism, the ‘colonization of everyday life’, and forms of knowledge in which static, fragmentary, and specialized/compartmentalized views have obfuscated an apprehension of movement and process. (51)

Furthermore, Fraser argues that ‘the task of the urban cultural studies critic is thus to venture across and outside of the boundary of the individual work of art to grapple at once with the realities of urbanization and its alienating effects’ (66). The third chapter examines the role of the work of art in Lefebvre’s thinking and the difference between Lefebvre and more traditional Marxist views of art. Fraser explains that, ‘The advantage of Lefebvre’s Marxian theory of art is that it notably reasserts the powerful potential of art while in effect dissolving the border between aesthetic matters and contemporary urban life more broadly considered’ (70). For Lefebvre, the work of art can be disalienating. Throughout this chapter Fraser details the differentiation in Lefebvre’s work between the product and the work (which mirrors the distinction between exchange value and use value) through the artist’s ‘creative capacity’.

Part II of the text moves towards investigation of particular genres and specific examples of cultural products. Chapter Four, the chapter of most interest to the scholar of literature, examines the concept of ‘urban dominant’, derived from Russian Formalist Roman Jakobson notion of the dominant, and the parallels between the ‘urban dominant’ and Lefebvre’s theorisation of everyday life. Fraser discusses Lefebvre’s affinity for James Joyce’s Ulysses for its depiction of the everyday and, while this chapter doesn’t directly discuss many novels, Fraser outlines what the examination of literature through an urban cultural studies method may look like and he extends the discussion of possible analysis to various world cities. He writes that,

much may come (much has already come) of the reconciliation of specific cities that are, to use Lefebvre’s wording, ‘enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about’ in literature with their extraliterary referents (e.g., Madrid, Paris, Berlin, Beijing, Buenos Aires, etc.). (116)

Fraser continues his chapter by explaining what an urban cultural studies method of literary analysis would look like through the lens of Lefebvre’s work.

Throughout the remaining chapters of the text Fraser continues into the interdisciplinary nature of the urban cultural studies method. In Chapter 5, Fraser examines recent scholarship on cinema and geography and performs an urban cultural studies reading of Biutiful by Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu. Chapter 6 focuses on an urban studies method for looking at music, with special attention paid to Lefebvre’s work in Rhythmanalysis, and an analysis of the work of Basque post-punk band Lisabó. The last chapter of the text examines the potential benefit of expanding the urban cultural studies method into the digital world of video games and digital humanities.

Fraser’s text offers a wide-ranging perspective on the development of urban cultural studies as a method. Throughout the text, the challenge of establishing a new field of inquiry is met with detailed and insightful readings of texts (both literary and theoretical) and interdisciplinary fusions that allow the work to be of value to scholars in multiple fields. Indeed, one of the primary goals of the text is an attempt at negotiating disciplinary boundaries. Additionally, throughout the work Fraser examines cultural texts from a variety of nations and urban environments, emphasising the transnational contributions of the text and the potential in the burgeoning field of urban cultural studies.

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