

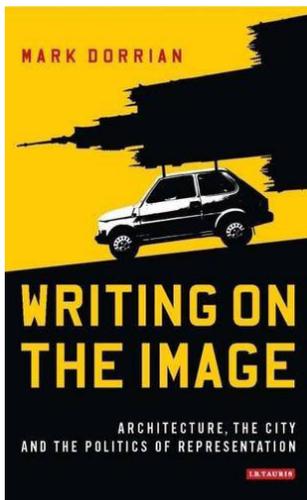
review / SARAH TREADWELL

Mark Dorrian

Writing on the Image: Architecture, the City and the Politics of Representation

London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015

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In *Writing on the Image: Architecture, the City and the Politics of Representation*, Mark Dorrian brings a specific shaping of language to bear on some memorable and strange urban events and objects (Dorrian, 2015). Each essay in the brightly yellow volume observes and articulates objects framed as spectacles through language. According to theorist Paul Carter, “all the objects in Dorrian’s book are spectacles in a double sense: they draw attention to themselves in order to bring into focus a new ideological reality.” (Dorrian, 2015: xviii). The essays delivered as seminars, articles, and those newly written for the volume, have a wonderfully wide reach—from clouds to Ferris wheels via vertigo, transparency, miniaturisation and utopia on ice—the essays look from above, from within, and obliquely. Written over a twelve year period, they are mostly attentive to Northern and Western conditions and the urban.

Paul Carter observes the anti-totalising structure of the book that allows the essay to reclaim “a public space that is no longer the projection of powerful interests but that retains a dissident topology of its own” (Dorrian 2015: xix). Each essay, he suggests, is conceived of as a “new viewing platform” looking at objects which are often themselves concerned with the act of looking. (Dorrian, 2015: x). The small, grey and somewhat dingy photographs in the book seem to stand as indeterminate markers of the objects, and it is rather the corporeal and sharply astute qualities of the writing that bring physical material to the reader. *Writing on the Image* is a sort of anti-picture book where the language is at once complex, poetic and explanatory, catching at the history and reception of images, while the grey photographs deny any correspondence to the world evoked through the writing.

It would be easy to see a perhaps thwarted material maker at work in the writing, itself formally adroit and structured by the object under consideration. While producing many of the essays, Dorrian was working in the architecture department at the University of Edinburgh and his research atelier Metis. *Mêtis*, as Ann Bergren has pointed out, is a transformative intelligence associated with architecture and weaving (Bergren: 1993). Poets are said to be weavers of words and Dorrian’s essays practice writing as a form of weaving, a compelling web of architecture and urban politics. The afterword by Ella Chmielewska confirms the architect at work when she writes, “in their oscillations between detail and

overview, scales and perspectives, Dorrian's essays construct and perform complex architectural drawings" (2015: 198).

In some ways, the book is a companion to an earlier and memorable collection of essays on the visual, *Seeing from Above: The Aerial View in Visual Culture*, which Dorrian edited with Frédéric Pousin (Dorrian and Pousin: 2013). Both volumes trace connections between the observer, technology and socio-political conditions. In its attention to viewing, the book also has a lineage in earlier work such as Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1990)—which considers the historical construction of the observer—and Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought* (1993)—which also considers how images are produced, seen and understood. Both were written at the end of the twentieth century at a time of robust engagement with theory, and Dorrian's books offer contemporary accounts in a similarly complex field.

As well as addressing the form of writing he employs in the "open, provisional, speculative and non-totalising" essay, Dorrian also comments on his writing as having other trajectories than those initially intended (2015: 2). He acknowledges a sensitivity to the effects of his subjects, and this is an absorbing aspect of the book. The collection of essays is shaped in a sequence, constructing the collection as a developing argument with the first four chapters historically oriented, commencing with "Falling Upon Warsaw: The Shadow of Stalin's Palace of Culture", a paper delivered by Dorrian at Auckland University of Technology in 2015.

The objects of history and the contemporary world are interpreted critically and with wonderfully wilful play in the swinging analysis of each essay as connections are made and elaborated upon, as in his piece analysing transparency and vertigo. The arguments progress in unexpected ways across a discussion on the "Blur Building" by Diller and Scofidio, described as pioneering a "new kind of environmental commodification" (2015: 8). He extends this idea in the essay *Utopia on Ice: The Sunny Mountain Ski-dome as an Allegory of the Future* in studying a glass-domed ski resort intended for the deserts of Dubai. Each chapter has a specific quality with "Voice, Monstrosity and Flaying: Anish Kapoor's Marsyas as a Silent Sound Work" being particularly harrowing.

The essay "Adventures on the Vertical: From the New Vision to Powers of Ten" exemplifies techniques employed in the volume. Dorrian starts by paying close attention to the familiar scene on the picnic rug, noting the proliferating clock faces and titles of the books abandoned by the sleepers. He then suggests links between the scene of the sleepers and Goya's sleep of reason, "a monstrous sleep of reason" or perhaps a "4-dimensional nightmare—it pictures a kind of vertiginous, abyssal collapse of everyday reality" (2015: 74). In the "Power of Ten in Cold War, Corporate and National Contexts", Dorrian points out how it can be understood "in terms of the domination and control of the domains that it pictures" (2015: 74).

In an era of surveillance, questions of the politics and poetics of the visual field and its observers have grown compelling, making this a valuable and entertaining book. Visual theorist Martin Jay suggests that "perhaps the real task these days is [...] to probe the ways in which the sense of 'looking after' someone is just as much a possibility as 'looking at' them in *le regard*, and 'watching

out for someone' is an ethical alternative to controlling surveillance" (2002: 89). Dorrian's writing is richly engaging throughout, with unexpected revelations and insights across its negotiations between spectacle and detail, providing opportune evidence of a quietly political and benign criticality.

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