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Les savoirs narratifs a partir de l'espace urbain Le cas de Nantes

Mansfield, Charlie

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Chronique Sociale

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About the Author: Dr Charlie Mansfield leads the Masters Programme in Travel Writing at Plymouth University, UK.

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Dans le texte j'essaie chercher les narratifs de Nantes qui lui donne un valeur pour ses visiteurs et au même temps que pour ses écrivains. Tout le temps dans mon travail je cherche une méthodologie qui conte, ou raconte la ville.

Narrative Knowledge of Urban Space - A Case Study on Nantes

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Conceptual Framework, Theoretical Positions

This paper investigates potential new practices in place-making through narrative. It treats life stories and published autobiography as a possible resource for place-making. It attempts to situate travel writing from place-making in a professional context, aligned with the intellectual concerns of tourism studies and the creation of tourism knowledge. In a commercial environment place-making may be used to increase competitive edge for the city tourist office but for the individual visitor, at least through critical theory, it is linked to emancipation, freeing them to a fuller, more accomplished life.

Exploring the Existing Travel Literature & Place Writing on Nantes

Rather than undertake literary criticism on the works that present Nantes in biography and travel literature, a process of seeking out the potential catalysts for toureme moments (Mansfield 2015) offers the researcher a more economical and focussed approach to finding locations that have narrative value for the writer, and may thus create value for the visitor to a new urban space. In addition, the more literary urban travel stories are examined for their

allegories, conceits and sub-texts, that is the mystery set up by the author to be solved by the readers as part of the pleasure of the text. In a place-writing workshop day in Torquay, for example, a play on the words ‘quay’ and ‘key’ was introduced along with a more mysterious allegory that the resort contained a hidden treasure if readers could only pick up the clues, like keys to a lock; this was then added to the travel piece as an underlying theme (Mansfield 2014). Patrick Modiano’s city stories, for example, build up to a mystery, often focussed on one character that the narrator-hero feels compelled to solve, taking the readers along on an exploration of urban space. Providing an underlying theme for readers of the travel piece to discover, acts like plot and rewards continued reading. The pleasure comes from the revealed knowledge as the theme is understood, perhaps later as the reader reflects on the piece when they are on their visit or after. One such theme might be that although the French town is designed today for the motor car, beneath the surface an earlier, horse-drawn world exists. The theme could also be a new idea, a new way of thinking about space, society or nature and the reading slowly builds up to reveal that new way of thinking.

The Nantes-born Paul Louis Rossi has two autobiographical books on Nantes. One, *Régine* (1990) includes the narrative element of a potential heroine that could lead to plot, but, much like his *La Voyageuse Immortelle* (2001), the writing remains strongly autobiographical, factual and hence non-causal or without plot. Modiano has produced a similar autobiography, *Un Pedigree* (2005), and it is telling that the audio version of the book is abridged by the voice actor and producers, an abbreviation of the text that is not done in the audio books of Modiano’s fiction. It leaves the reader thinking that this life-writing without a plot can be cut with no concern for its integrity because the producers consider it (i) tedious for the readers, or (ii) unnecessary to any points that the writing wishes to develop later. Is this a genre definition in disguise? Plotless texts, for example life stories, biographies and travel writing can be cut without loss of integrity or mystery. Whereas if the theft scene is cut from a detective story then the whole point is removed making the text unviable.

More detailed reading of the place writers of Nantes is given in the Literature Review section below.

Narrative Mapping of the Urban Space

'Nantes : peut-être avec Paris la seule ville de France où j'ai l'impression que peut m'arriver quelque chose qui en vaut la peine, où certains regards brûlent pour eux-mêmes de trop de feux (je l'ai constaté encore l'année dernière, le temps de traverser Nantes en automobile et de voir cette femme, une ouvrière, je crois, qu'accompagnait un homme, et qui a levé les yeux : j'aurais dû m'arrêter), où pour moi la cadence de la vie n'est pas la même qu'ailleurs, où un esprit d'aventure au-delà de toutes les aventures habite encore certains êtres, Nantes, d'où peuvent encore me venir des amis, Nantes où j'ai aimé un parc : le parc de Procé.'

André Breton 1928 *Nadja*

The Lettrist International movement emerged from Surrealist thinking that the marvellous could and should be encountered in the urban space through activities and situations), including

taking specific walking routes through cities. These would bring pleasure and emancipation for the active participant, an idea taken up by Phil Smith (Smith 2015) in his radical art walking and mis-guided group walks. Please see plate 1 below:



Plate 1 Radical Walking Artist, Phil Smith mis-guides a group through an urban space being newly created on the banks of the River Dart. The Trojan traveller, Brutus founded Britain here; Troy is remembered accidentally on the steel plate at the guide's feet. Totnes Sunday 20th September 2015 2:26pm, photo: Dr Charlie Mansfield, author's own fieldwork.

In the stories of Geoffrey of Monmouth (1100-1155), Brutus and the Princess Ignoge landed on the shores of, what came to be called Britain, here in Totnes in 1115 BCE (Thompson & Giles 1842, 21-23); mythogeographer, Phil Smith leads his visitors, or audience through a new building site on Baltic Wharf, tied with light rope to members of the group like a mountain explorer, and re-tells these stories of the River Dart, its banks and quays to unlock critically what is happening in current town planning or urbanism.

Marc Vachon (2003) documents the life of the Montreal Lettrist, Patrick Straram. Straram's walking routes across Montreal are a construction of a critical, yet emancipatory reading of the city. Straram does this by the appropriation of spaces where he finds value through social life, and found objects, along with posters that he takes back to his apartment, This re-use of other art productions is termed, *le détournement*, in the theory of *la dérive*, the planned, yet drifting

urban walk. Monique Proulx explores this process further in her novel set in Montreal. Proulx creates a character who is a street artist, Flore Cristal (Proulx 2002, 339) who works to reveal the strata of the past heaped up on each street corner. She hopes to be invited to foreign cities to unveil the ambience on street corners. Together with Smith, above, she suggests that urban space has a rich archaeology of stories that can be excavated and shared by deep mapping. Sharing these stories enriches the experience that tourists will have when they engage more fully with the places they are visiting.

These three authors' projects were combined into an activity for fieldwork in Nantes which takes the form of keeping a spoken journal of a walking mission to find the Parc de Procé, loved by Breton, whilst preparing a guided walk for re-use with visitors or for future fieldwork students of heritage tourism, this fieldwork is documented elsewhere. This cultural walking tour could be presented in the format proposed in *La bande flâneuse, a guide for visitors* (Mansfield & Maior-Barron 2015). This is a 6-cm wide strip for storage and for a more legible display than traditional PDFs on mobile smart phones, please see plate 2 below:



La bande flâneuse
A Guide for Visitors

This guide may be downloaded to your smartphone for use as a guide when visiting heritage sites. The guide can be stored on your phone in case you later lose wifi connection.

<https://appsto.re/gb/PWh9I.i>

<https://appsto.re/gb/63Zht.i>

To download the WORD version of this document and more recent updates, please visit the web-page below, and scroll down <https://goo.gl/CBDhc3> or scan this QR code:

Plate 2 *La bande flâneuse*

Intentions, Expectations, Proxemics & Leadership through Tourism Knowledge

Making micro-decisions about what to do next when holidaymaking can be seen set in a larger frame of the intentions tourists have formed for their whole visit to a city, how these intended

activities are modified by expectations about the weather and the facilities and how the mobility of the visitors plays out on the geography of the streets during the stay. Taking the urban space of Nantes to illustrate this, it may be that the visitor has only the Parc de Procé and the elephant machine in mind as intended micro-destinations or attractions to experience but the choice of hotel, length of stay and rain may force a choice between the two. How will the micro-decision be made? Places need to be named in order to be added to and held in the intentions of the visitor.

Existing Development and Branding Projects for Nantes

Under the direction of Jean Blaise, a public company was formed in 2011 to manage a tourism and cultural promotion project called ‘Le Voyage à Nantes’ with an annual budget of 27 000 000 euros and 260 full-time equivalent employees (Nantes.Tourisme 2015).

‘Le Voyage à Nantes’ is une société publique locale (an SPL), a legal entity designed to make the management of public funds more competitive. The management and employees, at least in ‘Le Voyage à Nantes’, consider themselves free to commission artists and act as sponsors, rather like Renaissance patrons of the arts. This assumed role is interesting for the professional travel writer and this project since it offers a way of financing guided walks or commissioning the research, writing, packaging and distribution of pieces of travel literature or even of workshops or residencies around place writing in Nantes. However, the contractual process would need to be easy to understand by the SPL so that that travel writer could possibly re-use model contracts used for commissioning artists of the types of public sculptures seen in Nantes and out on the estuary of the Loire.

In town planning, or urban development, the SCOT Métropole Plan to create a polycentric urban space by public works and infrastructure building has been pursued to improve the urban space. SCOT, the acronym, is derived from the idea of city councils and local authorities combining to have a strategy to give coherence to a territorial space. Nantes as a city and Saint-Nazaire as a large harbour town are assumed under this project to lack coherence for residents and tourists.

Searching for Touremes in the Literature Review

Published travel writing and place writing on Nantes

Two twentieth-century writers are associated with Nantes for their non-fiction writing and their time living and growing up in the city, Paul Louis Rossi (b.1933, Nantes) and Julien Gracq (1910-2007). Two of Rossi’s autobiographical books can be considered as place writing for the city and suburbs of Nantes, *La voyageuse immortelle* (2001) and *Régine* (1990). *La voyageuse immortelle* deals with named places across the city in at least eight key passages in the text but these are strictly biographical, where Rossi reflects on his own insecurities in his life and relationships. An early episode in the book though, provides support for the travel writer who believes that visitors want to see the places associated with authors they admire. Rossi remembers some friends visiting and insisting on seeing the former Broussais military hospital in the Doulon district (Rossi 2001, 10), please see plate 3 below. Rossi supplies details from his friends, they believed that André Breton had stayed at the hospital in 1916 when he was a medical intern. Archive evidence later proves this location to be incorrect, but by then

Rossi has built his narrative of place around this building. His life story writing has provided a named location in the city that is of interest to cultural tourists.



Plate 3 Broussais Military Hospital from 1920s Postcard. The ink from the written message bleeds through suggesting that another life-story lies beneath the surface of the image.

A less powerful moment using a place in the city that could be found by tourists occurs as Rossi wrestles to remember a poem by Breton; the streets named are the rue d'Orléans and rue du Bois Tortu, which he explains means the twisted wood of the vines that used to grow where this narrow street now runs (Rossi 2001, 103). He begins a reverie which recalls a place with similar attributes to the land of Cockaigne, then shifts abruptly to the recollection of a piece of critical advice on story writing given him by Philippe Duverger (Rossi 2001, 106).

At an earlier point in the city centre, Rossi introduces and names one of his visitors, Anne Zamire, who played the dancer, Maggie in Jacques Demy's 1961 film, *Lola*, set and shot in Nantes. They appear at first to have a stated quest, which is to explore the most obscure and disgraced places in the port city and find a way of lending them charm and bringing them to life; and they do stop in front of the two towers of Lefèvre Utile. Here Zamire makes a comment but then Rossi's writing moves to another city and the quest is forgotten (Rossi 2001, 80). The visitor seeking some illumination on the obscure places of Nantes is left frustrated.

Finally, Rossi recounts how the painter J M W Turner (1775-1851) visited Nantes in October 1826. Rossi ponders over two pages how Turner rendered the drawbridge of the Château in his painting but in doing so provides the visitor with enough information to want to see Turner's paintings and to compare them with places in Nantes (Rossi 2001, 138-139). Overall, Rossi does not offer travellers a guide-book with his writing in *La voyageuse*, it is instead a text that would be of interest to his colleagues and friends over the years. For the travel writer trying to find historical background on Nantes the book does provide the thin seam of locations described in the paragraphs above. It does re-iterate the connection of André Breton and the

surrealist movement with Nantes, with some valuable new names and place connections, for example the Broussais Hospital.

Why does Rossi's writing *not* function as this type of place writing that this research seeks to create? The drive of the writing lacks purpose for the visitor-reader, even when a quest to give value to Nantes' disgraced places is introduced Rossi shifts direction to his own memoirs again. He does introduce characters, but no drama surrounds their lives, they are not undergoing any change that would provide a narrative drive for readers as the characters make their way through identifiable locations in the city. Finally, he rarely takes his readers indoors, so they are provided with no more knowledge of the city than that which they could have gleaned themselves by walking through the locations Rossi lists.

Julien Gracq's autobiographical reflections on Nantes in *La Forme d'une ville* (1985) do not provide a dramatic component, either, even though leadership-type characters are introduced. For example, Stendhal's stay in Nantes is recorded (Gracq 1985, 90) and associated with a place in the city which can be found today, and an additional character from history is mentioned, Jacques Vaché (1895-1919), but no story, no narration is added by Gracq to dramatise the moment for potential visitors. An example of this dramatisation occurs in an episode told by Roland Barthes in which he sees Nobel laureate, André Gide (1869-1951) in a café; Barthes recounts that he saw Gide eat a pear in the Lutétia brasserie, Paris (Barthes 1977). The introduction of Vaché is a potential opportunity to provide drama for the visitor-reader, since his stay in the Hôtel de France, on the Place Graslin in January 1919 is surrounded in mystery. The travel writer could speculate in the place writing on an episode from Vaché's life in the hotel or link it to a known spot today by walking between the two places.

Jules Vallès, a key figure in the Paris Commune, to which he was elected in 1891, turned to literary writing later in life, in exile in London (Fournier 2012). In 1879 he published *L'Enfant*, which relates the story of his childhood spent at times in Nantes (Fournier 2012). Analysis of his writings by Mauricette Fournier reveals how Vallès systematically creates a negative image of the urban space he has known as a child:

'C'est à l'échelle du roman une véritable dialectique spatiale qui se met en place. Les villes, le monde urbain, sont systématiquement décrits de façon négative tandis que les montagnes du Mézenc et du Velay sont idéalisées. L'évocation des paysages et des modes de vie des hautes terres est mise à contribution pour dénoncer *a contrario* l'enfermement quasi carcéral que subit l'enfant en ville, du Puy à Paris en passant par Saint-Étienne et Nantes [...] à Nantes il demeure « dans une vieille maison replâtrée, repeinte, mais qui sent le vieux, et quand il fait chaud, il s'en dégage une odeur de térébenthine et de fonte qui me cuit comme une pomme de terre à l'étouffée : pas d'air, point d'horizon ! ».'

(Fournier 2012, 2)

Although Vallès' life-story presents a challenge for the place writer of Nantes today to reclaim some of the beauty of the city it does provide drama. The 1879 text provides a rich resource of life in the city in the nineteenth century which could be combined with archive maps from the same period to give contemporary visitors a glimpse beneath the surface of today's pavements.

Conclusion

Narrative knowledge of urban space is accumulated slowly and organically by residents, methods of eliciting this knowledge are still emerging. One method is to use published life-stories from those who lived in the city. This work has looked at three key authors and demonstrated that their writing is a valuable starting-point for the practice of place-making. Places can be identified in the autobiographical works but often these places lack any plot or drama that would be provided by a novel set in the same location. Place investment is tentative in these autobiographies so much so that further archive work or fieldwork is necessary to fulfil a place-making project. Finding the marvellous in the city, or the exact spot where an event happened is a project with a long history, dating back at least to the 1920s and the surrealist movement.

From this initial reading of life-stories set in the city a project of experimental fieldwork was pursued in Nantes in April 2017. The project was called 'récits de voie' (waytales) and with a group of local participants it traced the possible route that André Breton may have walked between the hospital where he worked to the Parce de Procé. The military hospital was found in archives to be near the site of le Lycée Gabriel Guist'hau at 2, rue Marie-Anne du Boccage. Participants were briefed to stop at places along the route where they could respond emotionally to the sights, or to the gravity of the slopes of the streets around the valley of the little river Chézine. Each participant carried a voice recorder to capture their feelings. These audio recordings were analysed later as part of the research to find an authentic method of writing about the urban space for future visitors.

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