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Scripting the City

Barbara Buchenau, Jens Martin Gurr, and Maria Sulimma
Explore the Relevance of Storytelling for
Postindustrial Urban Futures

Barbara Buchenau / Jens Martin Gurr / Maria Sulimma (eds.): *City Scripts. Narratives of Postindustrial Urban Futures*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press 2023. 253 pp. USD 59.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1552-4

The volume *City Scripts: Narratives of Postindustrial Urban Futures* (2023), edited by Barbara Buchenau, Jens Martin Gurr, and Maria Sulimma, works in the tradition of the application of narratological concepts in increasingly broader contexts. While some have pushed back against this trend, arguing that narrative theory has, in its moves towards other forms of media beyond fiction and other disciplines outside of literature, moved past its own theoretical models (Walsh 2), *City Scripts* proves that the kind of work done by literary and cultural studies in the analysis of narratives can prove fruitful even when applied outside of what tends to be narrowly defined as a narrative. For this collection, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent years, as the editors argue, have made it clear that the various narratives, fictional and factual, attending to cities and their responses to the pandemic have become increasingly visible and increasingly important to how we imagine the futures of these urban spaces (p. 1). The collection emphasizes “political activism and urban planning” as “contrapuntal fields of urban practices” that operate through narratives and, as such, require “a methodological and conceptual framework to better analyze and understand such future-oriented storytelling” (p. 2). The concept of the city script, then, is proposed as the lens by which this understanding may be brought about and further explored.

For this volume, a city script is conceptualized as the “polysemic assemblages of narrative, media, and poetics” that “[craft] connective tissues between an emotionally charged past, a contentious present, and an anticipated future [...] in scenarios of massive deindustrialization and selective reindustrialization experienced in many second cities” (p. 3). The editors connect city scripts to the rise of narrativity in the methods of the many actors at work in urban spaces (p. 4), arguing that a transdisciplinary narratology takes into account the ways in which city scripts are uniquely tied to the urban spaces in which materials, media,

and communities live. At the same time, city scripts engage with and create historical pasts, describe a city's present state, and speculate on the future of the city (p. 9). For the critic, these scripts offer a way to understand the many narratives at work in the conceptualization of a particular city that attends to both fictional and nonfictional storytelling, complex assemblages of media and art, distributed authorship, and temporal and spatial juxtapositions (p. 11). While scripts themselves are not narratives, as they lack the conventional markers of narration such as narrators and plots, they do "reliably invite broadly distributed, sprawling storytelling for the city" (p. 11) and tend to emphasize "larger social, economic, and environmental challenges" (p. 14) faced by cities in the twenty-first century. These challenges include weakening labor markets and the loss of well-paying jobs, social polarization, and decreased livability as a result of climate change and other forms of environmental degradation (p. 14). City scripts, then, are a way of conceptualizing, theorizing, and attending to the variety of narratives that both construct and influence the ways in which citizens think about and experience the urban spaces in which they live.

To these ends, the volume is broken into three sections. The first, titled "Urban Spaces," includes articles that engage with nonfiction texts and artifacts like graffiti (Chapter 1: "Black Lives Matter Graffiti and Creative Forms of Dissent: Two Sites of Counterscripting in Denver, Colorado" by Florian Deckers and Renee M. Moreno), roads (Chapter 2: "Walking Down Woodward: (Re)Telling a City's Stories through Urban Figures" by Juliane Borosch and Barbara Buchenau), minimalist architecture (Chapter 3: "Tiny Architecture and Narrative: Scripting Minimal Urban Living Spaces" by Katharina Wood and Randi Gunzenhäuser), and neighborhoods (Chapter 4: "Narrative Path Dependencies in Sustainable and Inclusive Urban Planning: Portland's Albina Neighborhoods" by Elisabeth Haefs and Jens Martin Gurr). This section illustrates the ways in which the humanities, and particularly literary and narrative studies, are contributing to other areas of research focused on cities, such as the social sciences, architecture, and geography, in its application of city scripts to urban spaces. This affordance is especially well-indicated in chapter 1, where Deckers and Moreno analyze the graffiti left in the wake of BLM protests in Denver, Colorado in 2019 and 2020 in order to "establish a better understanding of the diverse aesthetics and functionalities of the creative forms of dissent and how they are applied in the process of counterscripting" (p. 29). Looking at artistic responses, in the forms of murals and tagging, in two locations in the city, the River North Art District and the Colorado State Capitol, Deckers and Moreno conclude that these forms of protest work towards rewriting US-American society in order to move towards social justice and away from racial violence (p. 40). More broadly, the authors theorize graffiti as an expression of dissent that, in being both creative and destructive, speaks to the dialectic of protest (pp. 40–41).

Part 2 is titled "Urban Literature" and uses the city script as a lens to read fictions engaging with urban spaces, arguing that these stories allow readers to navigate the changes cities undergo when facing various challenges (p. 18). The four chapters in this section cover various issues, ranging from the experience of ur-

ban decline (Chapter 5: “Scripting the Inclusive City, Narrating the Self: Contemporary Rust Belt Memoirs in Poetry and Prose” by Chris Katzenberg and Kornelia Freitag), postindustrialism (Chapter 6: “Whose Detroit? Fictions of Land Ownership and Property in Postindustrial America” by Julia Sattler), gentrification (Chapter 7: “To the Bodega or the Café? Microscripts of Gentrification in Contemporary Fiction” by Maria Sulimma), to promises on urban renewal (Chapter 8: “Redemptive Scripts in the City Novel” by Lieven Ameel). This last issue is indicative of a general tone of resistance to postindustrial scripts of pessimism and erasure, in which citizens of declining cities use stories to announce and claim their own futures through renewing and life-affirming narrative strategies, such as in the form of literature. Chapter 8, then, is of particular interest as it directly engages with the intersection between literature and urban spaces: the city novel. Through reading urban fiction set in New York, Ameel acknowledges that in many urban scripts redemption is not a viable outcome (p. 156). However, he finds the possibility of redemption in narration, “as well as in urban planning, contemporary music, and popular culture set in New York” (pp. 156–157).

To illustrate this argument, the chapter begins through readings of *The Great Gatsby* (1925), in which a break from the past is framed as a dangerous fantasy; that said, Ameel does find a “redemptive script” in the first-person narrator Nick Carraway’s point of view and argues that the finding of voice implicit in the novel’s narration offers a model of meaning for traumatic and difficult experiences (p. 161). Ameel continues this line of thinking through a reading of Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999), in which the main character Lila Mae Watson finds the possibility of redemption through questioning universal narratives (p. 166) that have controlled her life and her access to the world in which she lives. Ameel then argues that these examples from fiction attend to urban futures through the notion of redemption, acknowledging its possibility while also indicating its problems (p. 166). Looking at American postindustrial urban revitalization plans, Ameel sees similar redemptive scripts operating that run similar risks to those found in fiction. As such, “redemptive plots, then, continue to be important narrative frames of meaning” as cultures and societies continue to navigate “past traumas and future threats” (p. 169).

Finally, Part 3, called “Urban Histories of Ideas,” extends the script framework to crises responses in cities (p. 20) with a clear emphasis on the futures of cities. This section contains three chapters that explore attempts to change already formulated narratives about cities (Chapter 9: “Patterned Pasts and Scripted Futures: Cleveland’s Waterfronts and Hopes of Changing the Narrative” by Johannes Maria Krickl and Michael Wala), the future of city economies by way of the creative class (Chapter 10: “The Creative Democracy: A Critique of Concepts of Creativity in Contemporary Urban Discourse” by Hanna Rodewald and Walter Grünzweig), and the intersections between the futures of cities and the script of sustainability (Chapter 11: “Forms, Frames, and Possible Futures” by Barbara Eckstein and James A. Throgmorton). Chapter 10 exemplifies the tenor of this section in its exploration of creative urban development

(p. 194), in which visions of postindustrial cities come to hinge on mobilizations of the rhetoric of creativity that belies an emphasis on economic functionality and exclusivity (p. 195). The chapter grounds the city script historically in the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Dewey that emphasizes the creative process as a way to counterscript the oversimplified narrative of the creative class that still operates under a model geared towards profit and growth (p. 195). In the end, the authors construct a notion of urban creativity that is process-oriented and does not inevitably end in commodification and gentrification but rather “transforms the creative city-script into a more inclusive and ultimately more democratic endeavor” (p. 209).

The final chapter in the volume includes the voices of Eckstein, a retired English professor, and of Throgmorton, who served in city council and as mayor of Iowa City, making the case for the significance of narrative and the study of narrative for the study and planning of urban spaces (p. 214). For Throgmorton and Eckstein, this critical effort is future-oriented and simultaneously requires a reframing of the past that takes into account and utilizes empathy-based scripts in order to achieve justice and sustainability (p. 225). Drawing on Throgmorton’s experiences as an elected official, the chapter describes instances of stakeholders in the city (such as politicians, businesses, individuals, organizations, etc.) using narratives to make known their own experiences and advance their own agendas. A particularly interesting example attends to the ways in which city scripts were mobilized, during Throgmorton’s tenure as mayor, to induce action from the city on climate change (p. 222).

Important here is the endgame, to which the editors refer in their introduction: “a greener, more inclusive, more creative future” that takes into account “the agency of the human, nonhuman and more-than-human world” (p. 22). Ultimately, this book demonstrates the value of transdisciplinary narratology (p. 22) and exemplifies the value of the expanding application of the literary tools of analysis beyond the walls of English departments and classrooms and beyond the interpretation of cultural artifacts like comics and film. *City Scripts* thereby makes a strong case for the necessity of a clear understanding of the powers and structures of narrative in the quest for a more just future.

Bibliography

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How to cite this article:

Tkacz, Carlos: “Scripting the City. Barbara Buchenau, Jens Martin Gurr, and Maria Sulimma Explore the Relevance of Storytelling for Postindustrial Urban Futures [Review of: Barbara Buchenau / Jens Martin Gurr / Maria Sulimma (eds.): *City Scripts. Narratives of Postindustrial Urban Futures*. Columbus, OH 2023].“ In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 13.1 (2024), pp. 140–144.
DOI: [10.25926/ysd9-d831](https://doi.org/10.25926/ysd9-d831)
URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20240703-133756-2](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20240703-133756-2)
URL: <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/500/698>



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