

Victor Burgin's meaningful cityscape and the legacy of socially-responsive narrative view painting

Dr Caroline Igra *Beit Berl College*

Abstract

Victor Burgin's search for meaning within the modern cityscape reflects the attempt to build depth into a genre that, by definition, is superficial in nature. Capturing both the city and its inhabitants in a symbiotic manner, where one's significance reflects the other, Burgin's visual essays represent the successful development of a form of narrative view painting.

For generations cityscapes that focused on both the physical areas of the city and those individuals who daily-occupied those areas, fell into the no-man's land between landscape and genre; neither entirely view painting nor that depicting everyday life. While certain works within this genre suggested pure attempts at topographical documentation, recording what is actually seen and focusing on the permanent, others seemed more like discursive social exercises. This latter type, embracing the local populace and expressing something of the experience of the individual within their environment, rested along the periphery of the classical cityscape. By developing both a convincing feel for the surface, as well as the potential for narrative which naturally exists within any outdoor, peopled scene, Burgin's oeuvre presents a convincing representation of the city.

Our ability to appreciate Burgin's contribution to this genre, to discern between works of genre and cityscape and furthermore, to assess the fluidity between the documentation of fact and the exploration of experience, is greatly assisted by the enlistment of a theory developed to explore the same phenomenon within the field of literature. This essay will apply a theory on descriptive and narrative approaches in nineteenth century literature developed by literary historian Georg Lukács (1885–1971) to Burgin's oeuvre. Lukács' distinct separation of the role of the observer from that of the participant, with its concomitant effect on the nature of any realistic work, effectively enhances our comprehension of the deep and insightful portraits of the modern city provided within Burgin's narrative cityscapes.

Victor Burgin's search for meaning within the modern cityscape reflects more than a century of determining how to build depth into a genre which, by definition, describes the surface. Capturing both the city and its inhabitants in a symbiotic manner where one's significance reflects the other, Burgin's visual essays represent the successful development of this genre. For generations cityscapes that focused on *both* the physical areas of the city (its streets, buildings and green areas) and those individuals who daily occupied those areas fell into the no-man's-land between landscape and genre;

Keywords

Burgin
Cityscape
Narrative
Lukács
Paris

neither entirely view painting nor that depicting everyday life. While certain works within this genre suggested pure attempts at topographical documentation, recording what is actually seen and focusing on the permanent, others seemed more like discursive social exercises. This latter type, embracing the local populace and expressing something of the experience of the individual within their environment, rested along the periphery of the classical cityscape. By developing both a convincing feel for the surface, as well as the potential for narrative which naturally exists within any outdoor, peopled scene, Burgin's oeuvre presents a convincing representation of the city.

Our ability to appreciate Burgin's contribution to this genre, to discern between works of genre and cityscape and accordingly assess the fluidity between the documentation of fact and the exploration of experience, is greatly assisted by the enlistment of a theory developed to explore the same phenomenon within the field of literature. This essay will explore Burgin's contribution through the codified differentiation theory on descriptive and narrative approaches in nineteenth-century literature developed by literary historian Georg Lukács (1885–1971). Lukács' distinct separation of the role of the observer from that of the participant, with its concomitant effect on the nature of any realistic work, effectively enhances our comprehension of the deep and insightful portraits of the modern city provided within Burgin's cityscape oeuvre.

Burgin's interest in extracting the maximum, experiential effect from the cityscape genre is excellently noted in his *Life Demands a Little Give and Take* (Figure 1) from 1974. In this image a group of people waiting for a bus on King's Road in present-day England are described. Prominent within the group is a woman, not of white persuasion, who is located in the near foreground of the image and cropped below the waist. She stands amongst a group, for the most part arranged behind her in an overlapping manner reminiscent of pre-Renaissance delineations of receding elements within



Figure 1.

space. One young male figure stands before her in the immediate foreground. This figure is noted slightly out of focus, cropped beneath the shoulder due to his proximity to the viewer and with head tilted forward to better read his book while waiting for the bus. Despite his prominent placement one gets the clear sense that his significance is far inferior to that of the striking female figure behind. Standing erect and depicted in profile, this female figure takes on noble proportions and becomes the supreme subject of focus.

To the left of this group we view of a wedge of pavement, which recedes rapidly into the distance, and indication, in the faded text on the road itself and a partial view of signage, of this being a bus stop. In the rear, various storefronts of working King's Road are delineated. To the right of the group Burgin adjusts a body of text to fit within the frame of the picture so that the cityscape remains visible and the main cluster of individuals waiting for the bus are undisturbed.

In many respects Burgin's image presents a straightforward cityscape describing an anonymous group of figures situated within an everyday city setting. His camera emphasizes the ordinary nature of the scene with its seemingly random, and unplanned, effect. Yet the feeling of immediacy received from Burgin's dramatic formal arrangement, wherein the figures are abruptly cropped in an arbitrary manner and pressed to the edges of the frame, attracts the viewer's attention to the possibility of a hidden narrative. In fact, our ability, as viewer, to relate to the figures standing on that street corner encourages our involvement and suggests the existence of a story.

One of the biggest obstacles facing those artists who focused on depicting the city throughout earlier generations was the decision regarding the degree to which the individuals in any viewed scene should be allowed to draw the viewer's attention. After all, if the individuals within the cityscape became the focus, the works themselves might gravitate toward that of the genre category and no longer be considered 'cityscapes'. Since the nineteenth century, cityscapists had toed a thin line between pure cityscape and genre, sometimes shutting out the individual that naturally sought to make his presence known within the city and at other times allowing him to actually take over.

In the 1860s Edouard Manet chose to focus on the populace who occupied Paris within a cityscape ostensibly devoted to the physical appearance of the Exposition Universelle (Figure 2). Although remaining faithful to the viewed reality of the Champs du Mars his real goal was to illustrate different aspects of the city's society.¹ Edgar Degas similarly used a famous Parisian location as a backdrop to his exposé on the interaction between members of a particular Parisian family one decade later. His *Place de la Concorde* (Figure 3) 1876, focusing on the social relationships between specific individuals within the city, verged more into the category of genre and accordingly, despite its site-specificity, distanced itself from that of cityscape.² In the early 1880s Giuseppe de Nittis purposefully used a view of a well-known area of Paris in order to raise the ghost of the difficult years the citizens of Paris had suffered and overcome. His *Place du Carrousel* (Figure 4) 1882 featured the charred remains of the Tuileries Palace, whose fate was the subject of much contemporary interest, as a backdrop for an illustration of the daily life of characters from various social strata similar to that noted in Manet's earlier work.³ These nineteenth-century cityscapes indicate the attempt to achieve the complicated task of depicting the surface while

1. T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, New York: Knopf, 1985, p. 73.
2. See Mari Kálmán Meller, 'Degas' *Place de la Concorde*: Vicomte Lepic and his daughters', *Burlington Magazine*, 145, April 2003, pp. 273–281.
3. See Caroline Igra, 'Imagery of Destruction and Reconstruction: Giuseppe de Nittis' forthright approach to Post-Commune Paris', *Konsthistorisk tidskrift*, 67, 1998, pp. 157–174.



Figure 2.

simultaneously breaking through it in order to explore the experience of the populace for whom the city was intended.

Burgin's image, both formally and thematically, indicates his interest in nineteenth-century cityscape efforts. Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Place Clichy* (Figure 5) 1880, for example, used quite similar formal means to draw our attention to the existence of a story. Here the protagonist, a woman standing in the immediate foreground and captured from the waist up, is noted ready to cross a busy street. The sidewalk upon which the leading lady stands recedes rapidly into the distance – the acceleration of this recession similar to that achieved by the yellow road markings of Burgin's image and the angle at which he depicted the street itself. In both images this detail greatly affects the viewer's perception of the experience of these individuals



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

within their urban environments. Renoir's depiction of the figure at that split second within which she has entered his frame indicates something of the quick pace at which she is forced to negotiate her daily life. The main protagonists in both Renoir's and Burgin's images, obviously caught within a drama not of their own design, receive immediate sympathy from the viewer. Noting their unembracing environments, the manner in which they are squeezed to the periphery, hurried along the street, or forced to join a group not of their own choice, the viewer begins to receive data leading to the story of these individuals' harrowing lives.

Although exhibiting substantial similarities, Burgin's image goes one significant step farther than Renoir's by attempting to elucidate the actual experience of the individual within her environment. To the impressionistic, 'discovered', scene noted in the nineteenth-century image, Burgin injects a major commentary on the social inequalities existent within contemporary culture. The text to the right of the figural group reads:

Evening is the softest time of day. As the sun descends the butterfly bright colours which flourish at high noon give way to the moth shades. The tones are pale, delicate. These are the classic Mayfair colours. White, naturally, takes pride of place, but evening white lightly touched with silver or sometimes gold. Mayfair colours are almond pinks and grey, dove greys and blue with the occasional appearance of what can only be described as peach. But what a peach – a delicious soft peaches-and-cream peach. Jewellery is kept to a minimum, just simple pearl and diamonds. Not necessarily real, it is the non-colour that is important. The look is essentially luxurious, very much for the pampered lady dressed for a romantic evening with every element pale and perfect.

With this text Burgin purposefully emphasizes the contradiction between the land of pampered culture targeted within this fashion-magazine text and the actual class of individuals depicted. The luxurious, jeweled look recommended by the words seems much removed from that of the everyday, middle class one noted figuratively in the cluster of individuals waiting for the bus. The pale complexion so highly regarded within the text's emphasis on 'non-colour' is boldly contradicted by the complexion of that main female figure so nobly profiled. The specific choice of works within the text exposes racial inequality. The use of the word *pale*, for example, to describe *beautiful*, when placed beside the image of the obviously working-class black woman, emphasizes the contradiction between the manipulative culture for which most advertising markets are intended and the opposing, real, conditions of society according to Burgin. Burgin's use of 'appropriation', the combination of image and text, provides this seemingly straightforward cityscape image with a social conscience.

From a general essay on the pace of everyday life and the experience of the individual who must go to work in order to survive, Burgin jumps to an exposé of the gap between the privileged and the working class, and the discrimination, within the advertising industry, against people of colour. This interpretation of Burgin's cityscape is strengthened by Lukács' promotion of a socially-responsible approach to realist aesthetics. One of several Eastern European philosophers who profoundly influenced the formulation

of Marxist aesthetics, Lukács' reception into the English-speaking world dates to the 1950 publication of an English edition of his *Essays in Realism*.

Particularly relevant for this study is his essay on narrative versus descriptive approaches to realistic studies.⁴ A descriptive work, according to Lukács, is one in which the author acts as observer: describing what is before him and presenting an accurate picture of perceived social phenomenon through comprehensive, monographic description. A narrative one, on the other hand, is one in which the author acts as participant and, being directly involved in the world around him, reveals the connections and relationships between the elements described (whether animate or inanimate). Lukács illustrated these two opposing approaches through an investigation of late Second Empire and early Third Republic literature, specifically emphasizing how the mode of presentation espoused by contemporary authors both expressed their personal relationship to their immediate surroundings and revealed much about the experience of the individual within the modern metropolis.

Coming to grips with the manner in which the individual is depicted within his environs in Burgin's imagery is greatly enhanced by our application of Lukács' theory. In fact, the identification of the very different methods of approach offered within this theoretician's exploration of realistic literature deepens our understanding of the flexibility of the cityscape genre: its ability to extend beyond its original framework, as documentation of surroundings perceived visually, to present a true and varied account of the populace itself. After all, cityscapes can range from the minute and descriptive to a mode which articulates something deeper, and, though more elusive, far more expressive: a mode which explores the relationship between the individuals or objects recorded and their potential to reveal something of the experience of the individual within the great frame of the city.

At first glance one notes how Burgin's descriptive essay of King's Road and its daily activity, as noted in *Life Demands*, closely parallels the descriptive approach defined within Lukács' theory. To illustrate this mode, wherein the author acts as observer, Lukács focuses on Emile Zola's description of a horse race in Third Republic Paris within *Nana* (1880). Zola's description of the crowd, rather than the race, emphasized his attempt to capture the local colour of Third Republic Paris:

Meanwhile, the field was filling up. Carriages, a compact, interminable file of them, were continually arriving through the Porte de la Cascade. There were big omnibuses such as the Pauline, which had started from the Boulevard des Italiens, freighted with its fifty passengers, and was not going to draw up to the right of the stands. Then, there were dogcarts, victories, landaus, all superbly well turned out, mingled with lamentable cabs, which jolted along behind sorry old hacks, and four-in-hands, sending along their four horses, and mailcoaches, where the masters sat on seats above and left the servants to take care of the hampers of champagne...⁵

Lukács explains that in texts such as this 'the events themselves' are 'only a tableau for the reader, or, at best, a series of tableaux' wherein the readers remain 'merely observers.'⁶ The mid-twentieth century cityscapes by Richard Estes offer a close artistic parallel to the type of descriptive approach noted

4. Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', in *Writer & Critic & Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur D. Kahn, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1970, pp. 110–148.
5. Emile Zola, *Nana*, trans. Leonard S. Davidow, Chicago: Consolidated Book publishers, 1937, p. 300.
6. Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', p. 116.



Figure 6.

7. John Arthur, *Richard Estes*, San Francisco, Ca.: Pomegranate Art Books, 1993, p. 17.

by Lukács in Zola's literature. His photorealist exposés, composed of a detailed and minute technique intended to pick up everything visually noted, are purposefully all-inclusive. They distinctly deny depth, making little attempt to break the surface of the viewed reality they describe, either physically or emotionally.

Although Estes' approach adequately captures the surface, providing the type of 'tableau' identified within Zola by Lukács, it does little to capture the experience of the individual within the city. The artist denies the viewer any real access to the populace of the city chosen as subject matter and instead leaves us with a generally unsettled feeling as we mourn the obvious loss of the people for whom the city has always been intended. In images such as *Telephone Booths* (Figure 6) 1968, for example, the individuals are virtually erased, the contours of their raincoats blending into the metal edges of the booths in which they are encased. When people do appear here and there within Estes' oeuvre they are anonymously enclosed behind glass windows or reduced to minor, incidental or distorted elements.⁷ In works such as *Double Self-Portrait* (Figure 7) 1976, for example, we find the individual captured within the reflective glass of the storefront of a diner, part of the landscape yet virtually absorbed within it and, accordingly, barely discernible. The absence or erasure of inhabitants in Estes' works expresses the alienating experience of the individual in the twentieth-century metropolis, or perhaps the city's dehumanizing effect. Yet, making little effort to provide the kind of narrative which might reveal something specific regarding the experience of the individual within his surroundings, Estes' delineation of the observed world lacks the depth intrinsic to life which would complete his very detailed images.

While Estes' encyclopedic approach introduced the viewer to the everyday reality as seen by the artist, the absence of the individual and any exploration of the relationships between the characters described limited his



Figure 7.

oeuvre's ability to truly enhance our 'impression' of contemporary city life. Faced with the rich and complex dialectic of appearance and essence in life, Lukács probably would have found these surface essays 'opaque and fragmentary'.⁸ His theory on mimesis within works of realism distinctly outlined the limits of photographic reproduction and the need for descriptions which would capture the phenomenal world. He encouraged 'the reproduction of intensive totality, the totality of the essential... determinations of the objects'.⁹ The same warning regarding the limitations of mimesis is noted in the work of literary theorist András Horn:

Art is also anthropomorphism in the sense that it represents man and those essentials of his inner world and his environment which are relevant to mankind not in conceptual form, that is after the manner of science, but in a way that makes them fit to be subjectively felt, to be *experienced* [author's emphasis].¹⁰

Countering the detailed, surface approach noted in Zola's work, Lukács offered that of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877), here describing the emotional crisis experienced by the main characters at a contemporary horse race of the type so aptly described in *Nana*:

Anna heard his slow, shrill voice, and lost none of the words which her husband spoke, and which rang unpleasantly in her ear. When the hurdle-race began, she leaned forward, not letting Vronsky out of her sight for an instant. She saw him approach his horse, then mount it; her husband's voice kept floating up to her, and was odious to her. She felt for Vronsky; but she suffered painfully at the sound of this voice, every intonation of which she knew.¹¹

Lukács states that although the Russian author describes far less than Zola, he reveals far more. The Russian's description of the race is 'no mere

8. George Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ernest Block, London: NLB, 1977, pp. 38–39.
9. Georg Lukács, *The Specific Nature of the Aesthetic*, 1963, p. 461 cited in Horn, "The Concept of Mimesis", p. 27.
10. András Horn, 'The Concept of "Mimesis" in Georg Lukács', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 14, 1974, pp. 31.
11. Count Lyof N. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 1877, New York: Walter Scott Publishing Co., p. 220.

12. Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', p. 111.
13. Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', pp. 38–39.

tableau but rather a series of intensely dramatic scenes which provide a turning point in the plot'.¹² Determined that creative output must reflect a deep understanding of the inner workings of the society it depicts, Lukács decried the limited nature of 'descriptive' literature of the type noted in Zola's work, finding that it failed to reflect the real experience of Third Republic Parisians: 'The goal of the realistic artist', he wrote, 'is to find a way to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceivable network of relationships that go to make up society'.¹³

Lukács' identification of the ability of realistic work to delve into the experience not explicitly 'described', greatly enriches our understanding of Burgin's contribution. His theory emphasizes the importance of depicting not only the actual, viewed landscape but more significantly, those individuals which populate it. Applying this differential theorem to cityscapes provokes a consideration of the specific manner in which the individual within the view is described within the great story of the city in which he circulates: directly involved, a participant, his personal story begging our attention, or entirely absent, all sense of narrative disappearing as the view adheres to the surface.

The participatory, narrative approach, precisely noted in Burgin's figural deportment and manipulative text used to convey experiential information would have garnered Lukács' praise for its elucidation of both commitment to, and involvement with, the perceived subject. To clarify, the explicit placement of the female figure, within a group yet drawing our attention through posture and colour, pulls her into our space. Accordingly, despite our uncertainty regarding the nature of the relationships existing between the figures clustered together in this image, the viewer receives the sense of immediacy and involvement similarly evoked by Renoir's female hurrying across the street. Our shared experience of the mini-drama unfurling before us reflects the type of involved-viewer response encouraged by Lukács in his exploration of nineteenth-century literature.

Burgin's distinct attempt to capture the true essence of this phenomenological world appears throughout his cityscape oeuvre and closely answers Lukács' call for a form of responsible, experiential realism. Another image, titled *Alone in the Ruined Streets He was Startled by the Sudden Appearance of the Figure of a Woman Moving with Gradiva's Unmistakable Gait* (Figure 8) 1982, offers another example of depth within Burgin's cityscape oeuvre. Here we are offered a street scene in Warsaw in which the near and far distances are sharply juxtaposed. Ironically, the 'real' human figure is noted in the distance, crossing the city square and described slightly out of focus. In the foreground, two 'imaginary' figures appear in an intimate advertisement for perfume pasted along a transparent bus stop. The sharp juxtaposition of near and far is unalleviated and indeed intensified by the barrier of a tree and the indication of another pane of glass threading along the vertical axis of the image to flatten it further – collapsing the obviously-described depth into a two-dimensional, patterned surface. This juxtaposition creates a sequence in and of itself, offering a type of narrative as the viewer negotiates between the events of the foreground and the background in an attempt to make some kind of order of the visual clues offered by the artist.

Burgin's distilled view of this Polish city square first instigates the viewer's involvement through formal manipulation then deepens it through



Figure 8.

addition of a distinct mood. The narrative suggested by the juxtaposition of an intimate couple and a lone woman draws us further into the image and forces our contemplation of the viewed experience. The particular atmosphere created by Burgin suggests that noted in the earlier cityscapes of Edward Hopper. Hopper's cityscapes exploited narrative potential through the delineation of a limited cast of characters and an expressive formal technique which included the unmitigated juxtaposition of different spaces. An excellent example of these characteristics, and an effective comparison with Burgin's *Alone*, is noted in *New York Office* (Figure 9), 1962. In this



Figure 9.

14. Interestingly, Hopper set up a similar situation in his famous *Nighthawks* (1942). Here the juxtaposition of the narrative scene within the featured café and the harsh, impersonal environment outside emphasized the same discordant relationship between the individual and his environs.
15. Ivo Kranzfelder, *Edward Hopper*, trans. John William Gabriel, New York: Taschen, 2002, p. 54.

image we are offered a dense, inner city view, wherein one large office space is highlighted. Seen through a plate glass window, this interior space is wedged into the right side of the frame, leaving the remaining space on the canvas to an exterior, limited, view of the neighbouring buildings. The sky is entirely blocked out – the frame capturing only the first or second floors of obviously higher buildings. The street is empty and the only figure visible is that of a woman, positioned centrally within the frame of the large window of the featured office space, directly facing us.

The artist's decision to suggest a story, through evoking our interest in this woman isolated within the darkness of an office space, obviously presents narrative potential. In this case the narrative serves to emphasize the desolation of the individual within her environment, clarified through the isolation of her space within the greater city space depicted, the isolation of her personal self within her dim surroundings, and her physical appeal as she turns outward to the viewer. Although her private space and the view beyond are clearly described, the glass window acts as a barrier further emphasizing her discordant relationship with her environs.

The juxtaposition of the intimate view afforded by the delineation of the private space of this woman and the anonymous one of the neighbouring buildings' facades recalls that noted in *Alone*. Here too Burgin delineated two specific areas of interest in order to emphasize the degree of disconnection experienced by the individual within her so-called 'natural' environment. His delineation of the sole female figure in the rear of the image and out of focus, while that intimate couple on the advertisement on the bus marquee receives optimal exposure in the foreground and is clearly described, accentuates her alienation. Furthering the effect, the blurred depiction of the leaves on the one tree highlighted centrally, as they reach out from the direction of the lone woman toward the embracing couple, suggest this woman's desperate search for a kind of intimacy which is always just out of reach.

In both images a distinct sense of narrative is offered through the dislocation of the individuals depicted within their particular environments. Furthermore, both Burgin and Hopper used the juxtaposition of double areas of focus to enhance their construction of narrative.¹⁴ In Hopper the suggestion that events noted within the private area of the image are related to the absence of such events in the public ones stimulates the viewer. Confronted with the painted image the viewer attempts to extend the real space presented within the image to include his own, and thereby begins to explore his own experience of the city. The successful seduction of the viewer signifies the artist's successful expression of the city experienced or lived.¹⁵ Interestingly enough, this was later picked up by Burgin in his own version of the theme, titled *Office at Night* (Figure 10), 1986. In this image, the intimate view of an office worker appealing to the viewer in such a way as to suggest her melancholy detachment from the work at hand is juxtaposed with a flat band of colour, and pictograms in black and white describing the inflexible world of the office worker. Burgin's office view depicts the woman imprisoned in a flat, depthless environment definitely not of her own design.

The sharp juxtaposition of different areas of depth/space is used here in the same expressive way as that seen in *Alone*. Flattening the natural three-dimensional space of our living world, the artist expresses its limiting and binding effect on the individual forced to negotiate it every day. Paul Smith

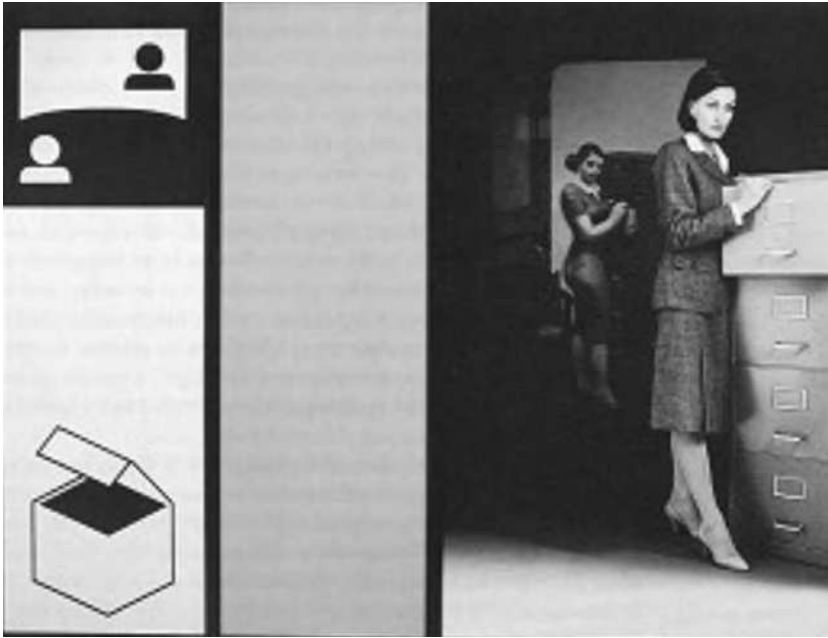


Figure 10.

discusses Burgin's development of what he calls 'double space', suggesting that the artist wishes to create a kind of dialectic confusion: a comment about the cooperation of internal and external space. He theorizes that the inherent complexity created by this aspect of imagery indicates the artist's move toward complex referentiality and a kind of political art, which is confirmed with our discovery of socially-responsible narrative substance in the works themselves.¹⁶

The role of 'suggestion' in cityscape genre indicates responsiveness, on the part of the artist, to the lived experience unravelling before him. Lukács appreciated the manner in which the extension of the genre describing the modern city, usually devoted to documentation and verisimilitude, could begin to answer more philosophical questions regarding how human perception could be revealed through aesthetics. He understood 'the ability of art to contribute to people's understanding of social relationships beyond what was readily perceivable in everyday life'.¹⁷

The ability to convey the experience of the figures depicted within their city environment through formal manipulation was noted within Lukács' positive response to Balzac's work. Balzac's avoidance of minute description in *Lost Illusions* (1837), and his consequent concentration on both the inner drama experienced by the main characters and the integral relationships between the characters, closely parallels that effect achieved by Hopper. Describing life in a theatre box:

Evidently the youthful Rastignac was the entertaining spirit in this box: he it was who took the lead in that typically Parisian derision which, moving to fresh pastures every day, is in a hurry to exhaust the topic in vogue by turning

16. See Paul Smith, 'Double Space: On Victor Burgin', *Cultural Studies and Critical Theory*.
17. Bela Kralyfalui, 'Georg Lukács or Bertolt Brecht?', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 25, Autumn, 1985, p. 344.



Figure 11.

18. Honoré de Balzac, *Lost Illusions*, trans. Herbert J. Hunt, London: Penguin Books, 1971, p. 178.

19. In his earliest cityscapes Hopper explored narrative potential in a far more obvious manner. *Le Bistro* or *The Wine Shop* from 1909, for example, offers an open view along the Left Bank toward one of the bridges crossing the Seine in which the left edge of the image is closed off by a cluster of low houses. Embedded within one of these facades is a couple sharing a drink at a café. Hopper provides limited information regarding the couple, restricting facial expression and positioning them at a slight distance. Instead he concentrates on the overall placement of the couple within the larger city view. Wedged together formally with the use of a saturated shade of brown, and

it into something old and stale in one brief moment. Madame d'Espard was anxious. She knew that the victims of slander are not allowed to remain long in ignorance of it, and she waited for the end of the act. As for Lucien and Madame de Bargeton, when people turn their feelings inwards upon themselves, strange things happen in a short time: the laws determining moral revulsions are rapid in their effects.¹⁸

Both French author and American artist emphasized their ability to extend the range of description beyond the rigid framework imposed by its definition, and instead of merely documenting the physical side of viewed reality, capture the whole of human life. Even in unpeopled imagery, such as *Early Sunday Morning* (Figure 11) 1930, Hopper manages to suggest the omnipresence of the individual, albeit momentarily absent. His buildings loom within their frames, blocking out the horizon. His formal delineation of the architectural details of his cityscapes supports the strong sense of mood suggested through a limited or absent cast of characters. Drenched in colour and smeared to induce maximum expression, his buildings convey a sense of both description and atmosphere that equals that of the more obviously 'narrative' scene. Hopper's images' relative desertion and the slow pace at which the viewer is forced to read them, due to his methodically-thick and draggy brushwork, contributes to their evocation of enormous narrative potential. Hopper's cityscapes are begging to be contemplated, and this characteristic specifically induces the viewer's involvement.¹⁹

The suggestion of narrative through slow-paced means intended to induce contemplation and involvement on the part of the viewer can also be noted in Burgin's work. Nothing specific informs the viewer of the particular experience of the figure strolling in the distance in his *Alone*, yet her confinement within the artificially constructed pictorial space is immensely expressive. The viewer is forced to work through the significance of the juxtaposition of the lone figure with the couple advertised, at the height of

their passion, on the billboard along the side of the bus stop. The narrative suggested by the author through numerous visual clues effectively delves beneath the surface of the visual scene offered within works of a descriptive nature like Estes' and reveals, through formal manipulation, the relationship between the individual depicted and her environs.

According to Lukács one could be either observer or participant, and realistic essays representing the latter approach would forever be more accurate and, accordingly, satisfying. Assuming the standpoint of the participant, Burgin creates a far deeper and involved picture of society. His success, in extending the range of cityscapes such as *Alone* (Figure 8) and *Life Demands a Little Give and Take* (Figure 1) to include both a description of the city itself and a feeling for the experience of its inhabitants, can be attributed to his appropriation of those elements of earlier cityscape work which best suited his agenda and the simultaneous development of a concrete theory regarding the individual's experience of the city.

Burgin's visual and verbal exploration of this theme resulted in a book titled *Some Cities*, which was published in 1996. His introduction to the book exposes the natural involvement of the artist when describing any city environment.

On our first day in a city that is new to us, we go looking for the city. We go down this street, around that corner. We are aware of the faces of passers-by. But the city eludes us and we become uncertain whether we are looking for a city, or for a person.²⁰

No experience of the city, according to Burgin, can be passive, for being only an observer means denying one's significance as recorder of a shared experience. Accordingly, the artist's experience is forever active and participatory. Existing within the scene and faced with the task of recording, the contemporary artist must cope with the role played by his own personal perspective. Burgin's manner of accepting the responsibility of producing true images of the individual within his environs resulted in essays on social structures which went far beyond the boundaries of classical cityscape, and closely answered the call for socially-responsible realism encouraged in the writing of theorist Lukács.

Lukács' primary interest in the literary descriptions of life in nineteenth-century France was in understanding the way contemporary authors revealed the effect of social structures on individuals from various classes.²¹ He recognized the contribution of descriptive works such as those by Alphonse Daudet and Zola, writing: 'Description becomes the dominant mode in composition in a period in which, for social reasons, the sense of what is primary in epic construction has been lost'.²² Indeed, Lukács found Zola's literary exposés to be comprehensive and convincing descriptions of the social milieu in which the author lived, and commended the author's ability to record social fact, as witnessed in any number of the many tomes produced from the late 1860s onward.²³

Nevertheless, Lukács recognized that surface-level coverage of contemporary life grounded in realism and reflecting the position of the observer made no attempt to investigate those issues most relevant to his study of the growth of the capitalist society under Second Empire Paris: in particular, the

thematically 'completing' one another, the suggestion of a story or relationship developing within the cityscape begins to emerge. See Kranzfelder, *Edward Hopper*, p. 129.

20. Victor Burgin, *Some Cities*, London: Reaktion Books, 1996, p. 7.
21. See George Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971.
22. Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', p. 127.
23. Zola's series of books describing the Rougon-Macquart family is an example.

24. Interestingly enough Burgin's commentary includes a similar concern regarding Haussmann's destructive approach to the city in the name of beautification and improvement. He called him an 'artiste démolisseur', basically a stage designer, and was worried about the negative effect that clearing out neighbourhoods, ostensibly for the sake of sanitation, had on the working class who inhabited them. Victor Burgin, *Some Cities*, p. 14.

25. Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', p. 122.

26. Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', p. 140.

27. Lukács, *The Specific Nature of the Aesthetic*, p. 565.

28. Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?', p. 116.

effect of growing industrialization on the Parisian populace and the vast uprooting caused by Haussmann's urban renewal plan.²⁴ His finding of 'shallow prejudices of bourgeois sociology'²⁵ in Zola's work can easily be extended to twentieth-century cityscapes by Estes. By not breaking the surface, works of a primarily descriptive nature remain eternally the record of an uninvolved observer and accordingly quite limited. Lukács' opinion of such limited methodology was clearly outlined in his article on 'Narrate or Describe?':

The method of observation and description developed as part of an attempt to make literature scientific, to transform it into an applied natural science, into sociology. But investigation of social phenomena through observation and their representation in description bring such paltry and schematic results that these modes of composition easily slip into their polar opposite – complete subjectivism. Such is the legacy the various naturalistic and formalistic movements of the imperialist period inherited from the founder of naturalism.²⁶

Adapting Lukács' theory to modern cityscape oeuvre we understand that the nonexistence of the individual or, at best, his elusive inclusion within certain cityscapes, contributed significantly to the overall feeling that the artist was illustrating an observed or found moment rather than one actually experienced. Not surprisingly, therefore, Lukács found descriptive media untenable as an effective indicator of modern life, as modern life itself was 'infused in all its pores... with subjectivity'.²⁷ He found that the exploration of the effect of capitalism on both institutions and the populace was more successfully executed by authors adopting a narrative mode.

Lukács suggested the ability of 'view genre' to respond to the experience of the individual. He consistently commended authors, like Tolstoy and Balzac, who approached their work as participant and attempted to capture social situations. For this reason, the interaction of individuals and their city environs suggested in Hopper's earlier work, even when not specifically elucidated or played out to some kind of formal conclusion, would have pleased the theoretician. Extremely satisfied with the stimulating, participatory nature of Tolstoy, for example, Lukács wrote that the 'opposition between experiencing and observing is not accidental. It arises out of divergent basic positions about life and about the major problems of society and not just out of divergent artistic methods of handling content or one specific aspect of content'.²⁸

There is no question that Burgin's exploration of the city comes close to capturing the experience of the populace who inhabit the modern metropolis. Burgin's inclusion of abrupt and thought-provoking formal or textual juxtapositions produced the kind of socially convincing portraits of the modern city that the literary theorist would have considered accurate and true depictions of modern city life. Lukács' search for significance in the aesthetic record of everyday reality assists our ascertainment of whether the modern cityscape can extend beyond the limits of view painting to incorporate narrative potential and, most significantly, reach into the realm of social commentary. The application of his theoretical work to Burgin's cityscape oeuvre results in a deeper understanding of exactly how this cityscapist's oeuvre expressed the experience and position of the individual in the changing twentieth-century city.

References

- Arthur, John (1993), *Richard Estes*, San Francisco, Ca.: Pomegranate Art Books.
- Balzac, Honoré de (1971), *Lost Illusions* (trans. Herbert J. Hunt), London: Penguin Books.
- Burgin, Victor (1996), *Some Cities*, London: Reaktion Books.
- Clark, T. J. (1985), *The Painting of Modern Life*, New York: Knopf.
- Horn, András (1974), 'The Concept of "Mimesis" in Georg Lukács', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 14, p. 31.
- Igra, Caroline (1998), 'Imagery of Destruction and Reconstruction: Giuseppe de Nittis' forthright approach to Post-Commune Paris', *Konsthistorisk tidskrift*, 67, pp. 157–174.
- Kranzfelder, Ivo (2002), *Edward Hopper* (trans. John William Gabriel), New York: Taschen.
- Lukács, George (1971), *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, (trans. Rodney Livingstone), Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- (1970), 'Narrate or Describe?', in Kahn, Arthur D. (ed. and trans.), *Writer & Critic & Other Essays*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, pp. 110–148.
- (1977), 'Realism in the Balance', in Block, Ernst (ed.), *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: NLB, pp. 38–39.
- Meller, Mari Kálmán (2003), 'Degas' *Place de la Concorde*: Vicomte Lepic and his daughters', *Burlington Magazine*, 145, April, pp. 273–281.
- Paul Smith, 'Double Space: On Victor Burgin', *Cultural Studies and Critical Theory*. <http://theory.eserver.org/burgin.txt>.
- Kralyfalui, Bela (1985), 'Georg Lukács or Bertolt Brecht?', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 25, Autumn, p. 344.
- Tolstoy, Count Lyof N., *Anna Karenina*, New York: Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1942.
- Zola, Emile (1937), *Nana* (trans. Leonard S. Davidow), Chicago: Consolidated Book publishers.

Suggested citation

Dr Igra, C. (2008), 'Victor Burgin's meaningful cityscape and the legacy of socially-responsive narrative view painting', *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* 7: 1, pp. 57–73, doi: 10.1386/jvap.7.1.57/1.

Contributor details

Caroline Igra is presently a Lecturer at Beit Berl College and was formerly an Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Haifa, Israel. She completed her doctoral work at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Her articles, primarily concerning the experience of foreign artists in early Third Republic Paris and nineteenth-century cityscape painting, have been published in various journals including *Art History*, *The Journal of Architecture*, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, and *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*.

Contact: Beit Berl College, 3 Almog Street, Box 5401, Caesarea 38900, Israel.

Tel: 972-4-626-5761; 050-880-3111

E-mail: cvwgigra@zahav.net.il