Fictional Images of Real Places in Philadelphia

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Fictional images of real places in novels and films shadow the city as a trickster, doubling its architecture in stories that make familiar places seem strange. In the opening sequence of Terry Gilliam's recent film, 12 Monkeys, the hero, Bruce Willis, rises from underground in the year 2027, to explore the ruined city of Philadelphia, abandoned in late 1997, now occupied by large animals liberated from the zoo.

The image is uncanny, particularly for those familiar with the city, encouraging a suspicion that perhaps Philadelphia is, after all, an occupied ruin. In an instant of recognition, the movie *image becomes part of Philadelphia and the real City Hall becomes both more nostalgic and decrepit. Similarly, the real streets of New York become more threatening in the wake of a film like Martin Scorcese's Taxi driver and then more ironic and endearing in the flickering light of Woody Allen's Manhattan. Physical experience in these cities is dense with sensation and memories yet seized by references to maps, books, novels, television, photographs* etc.[1]

Gilliam's *image is false; Philadelphia is not abandoned, yet the real city is seen again, through the story, as being more or less ruined. Fiction is experimental life tangent to lived experience that scouts new territories for the imagination.' Stories crystallize and extend impressions of the city into images separate from the fabric, carrying them into different media, as news (in print or on television), or fiction: novels or films. From this distance images are available as points of comparison in our everyday reading of places and architecture. The disjunction of a new medium allows them to turn to face the city.* Gilles *Deleuze suggests that the further an image reaches out of its familiar territory into metaphor and the more estranged it is from reality, the stronger it becomes as reference.' He suggests that such leaps create new territories, to which less notable things are compared. This paper will look at images in novels and films of real places in one city, Philadelphia, as it represents many older cities in this country and will suggest some relationships of real and fictional in the city's fabric.*

Philadelphia has long had a distinct character in popular imagination and pulp fiction as a stuffy society of traditional social classes institutionalized in geography and demeanor.

Fig. 1. Philadelphia's City Hall as a ruin in "12 Monkeys."

In Philadelphia, the breaking of class boundaries (always *a narrative opportunity) is dramatic to the point of parody. The early twentieth century saw a distinct Philadelphia genre of novels with a standard plot: a well-to-do heir falls in love with a vivacious working class woman and tries to bring her into his world, often without success. One novel was called simply, It's Not Done. Contrasts in social class were usually made explicit by describing the houses of the various characters: a humble row house identical to its neighbors in contrast to a columned mansion often on the suburban Main Line.*

In films these contrasts, now visual and geographic, still rule as in Alfred Hitchcock's Marnie, Christopher Morley's *Kitty Foyle, and recently, Jonathan Demme's Philadelphia. Both novels and films map social positions of their characters in architectural terms, often describing the house where someone lives before he or she actually appears in the story. This trope recalls* Serlio's *illustration of "decorum" in design: houses appropriate to the station of their owners organized into a city that functions as a body of interdependent parts or social* roles.[4] *Stories depend on the city to define a social geography that their characters can transgress. In turn, Philadelphia's reputation as a city of old fashioned decorum with a fixed hierarchy of neighborhoods, has been fed in fact*
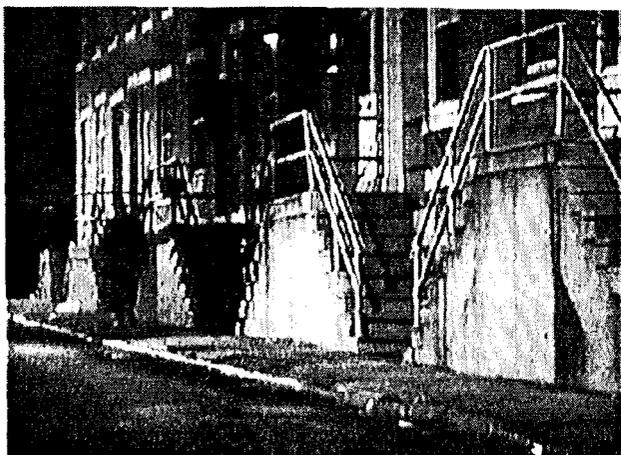
Fig. 2. Rocky Balboa's house in South Philadelphia.

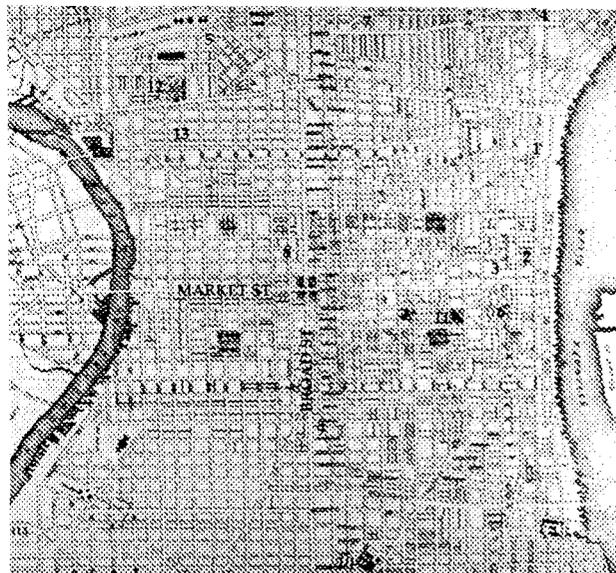Fig. 3. Wealthy Stockbroker's House in "Trading Places" directed by John Landis.

Fig. 4. Frank Cowperwood's progress through Philadelphia.
1. 21 Buttonwood St., his childhood home.
2. 124 New Market St., his first independent house.
3. 64 South 3rd St., his first office.
4. 956 North 9th St., his wife's house where he moves on marriage.
5. 1937 Girard Ave., large house he builds at height of his career.
6. Near 114 South 3rd. St., his brokerage house.
7. 1200 Girard Ave., home of his lover and her family.
8. Cherry St. near 15th St., dressmaker's shop where she runs to hide.
9. South Broad St., near Ridgeway Library, home of Republican party boss.
10. 10th and Reed Sts., Moyamensing Prison, where he is taken.
11. 6th and Chestnut Sts., State House, wher he is tried.
12. Eastern State Penitentary, where he is imprisoned for two years.
13. North 21st St., his wife's home after auction of 1937 Girard Avenue house.

and fiction, until it has become a stereotype.

In 1927, novelist Theodore Dreiser offered a detailed social map of the real city in his chronicle of the rise and fall of a nineteenth-century financier, Frank Cowperwood, as he moves from address to address, as marked on the adjacent map.

As a young man Cowperwood leaves his humble family home at 21 Buttonwood Street to establish his own residence at 124 New Market. He marries and moves to 956 North Front Street and finally builds a grand house at 1937 Girard Avenue. Each move anchors him within the social body of the city complete with detailed descriptions of architectural decoration and furnishings. Each of his houses give the financier a specific position with its attendant powers, culminating in the house on Girard Avenue where he hosts an elegant ball for the city's elite. At the height of his ambition, a bank failure and bit of adultery land the financier in Eastern State Penitentiary (still existing at 23rd and Fairmount Streets) where, stripped of finery and clothed in coarse prison garb, he was able to see only the stars at night. "This is then what society did to the criminal, it took him and tore away from his body and his life

the habiliments of proper state and left him these."'
Cowperwood's houses are extensions of his body, that act in a social world within the physical body of the city, its buildings. To be stripped of a house is to lose one's presence, and become invisible. Yet such an act speaks of extreme circumstances for houses and neighborhoods do not release their occupants easily. The severity of his expulsion finally required the financier and his lover to leave the city entirely, to head west. The city's social order embodied in its buildings repeatedly overruled their ambitions and attractions.

The grittier side of the city, of endless brick neighborhoods and urban underworld, also clings to its inhabitants in a continuing stream of dramas of crime, corruption and soul.' Two of Philadelphia's contemporary newspaper columnists turned to fiction to expose the working city they know from their beat. Pete Dexter's South Philadelphia is tough, densely familial and centered on church and tavern, while Steve Lopez's North Philadelphia suffers under murderous drug lords and poverty. Both districts are possessive, holding characters tightly within rules and spaces that define their lives, "the only thing that can't be forgiven is leaving the neighborhood."' Yet a warmth dwells within the family life of row house interiors where harsh truths can be spoken in the

Fig. 5. Eddie Murphy entering his new house in "Trading Places."

Fig. 6. Scene from "A Christmas Carol" including Tin) Tim

Fig. 7. Facades on Second Street in Philadelphia

half-light of back kitchens. In these stories that surround both wealthy areas and poor, one image has fed on another, insisting on a social decorum that has kept the city's neighbor-hoods in a hierarchy so fixed that sections of the city wanting to renovate have had to changed their names. Part of Southwark became "Queen Village" and part of North Philadelphia, "the Art Museum Area."

A recent movie, *Trading Places,* traces a similar social geography in Philadelphia to charge the plot but turns the Philadelphia stereotype to parody. Dan Aykroyd is a rich stockbroker and Eddie Murphy a streetwise ne'er-do-well who switch their respective social positions and social geog-raphies and are thus changed into the other.

Reclothed in the habiliments and the architecture of the other's state they remake themselves, crossing boundaries of both class and race. Their role-swapping sets up a struggle over manners and propriety, touching off frenetic play acting that ridicules the hierarchy of the stockbroker's firm and eventually topples it entirely. Genteel houses become foils for the antics of the characters and the butt of their jokes. References are both intertextual and architectural, playing on the literary habit of typecasting the city's neighborhoods from within the genre of fiction. The fictional city, the real city's double, was moved, creating a new position from which Philadelphia and its buildings could be reread as simply buildings, clothing that might be shed, not as the body of authority.

Reread or rewritten. Parts of Philadelphia's older districts have been reclothed to fit a colonial image that was largely invented in picture books and movies. One new facade built in 1966 onto a row of shops on Second Street in Society Hill resembles an image of old London popularized in a film version of Charles Dicken's story, *A Christmas Carol* di-rected by Brian Desmond Hurst in 1951. The Hollywood movie set that was built to envision a street described in Dicken's story that in turn was modeled on mid-nineteenth century London. The facade rewrites allusions of the area in terms of Dickens' story, glossing over a history proper to the place and its buildings. Juxtaposing an "olde London" with

an "olde Philadelphia" sets the city at a distance from itself. as if it were a somewhere else, as a fiction.

The shopfronts are removed from the city fabric by fiction then re-placed, as a resident alien, familiar yet strange. In the process, adjacent rowhouses of the Society Hill historic district, are recast as participants in the old/new Dickens' story. This fiction, grounded in place, reaches so far from the history and reality of the area that it creates a new territory against which the pre-existing fabric is read as more or less dickensian. History and story weave together.

Likewise movie sets have become models for renovation. A nostalgic South Philadelphia neighborhood was selected for Al Pacino's film Two *Bits,* then painted and redesigned to heighten the effect. In this case, a part of the city fabric caught in the lens was lifted out of its context to look back on itself as a superreal example. When the city street emerged from makeup, it was even more characteristic as a model than the surrounding city. The relation of fictive and real come full circle. When compared to its own image, the real city seems pale, even inauthentic.[8]

Finally, Cowperwood's fine house on Spring Garden Street, Dicken's *Christmas Carol,* and the underground world of *12 Monkeys* are part of the city's architecture as they are part of our experience. Their construction in the pages of fiction, rather than on the street, matters little in the contribu-

Fig. 8. Rocky Balboa on the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum.

tion they make to the collective imagination of the places they protray. Like memories of real events which cling to their sites, the city's tales, whether built or written or drawn also become a part of their places so the city itself becomes intertextural. An image of Rocky has so possessed the steps of Philadelphia's Art Museum the place now recalls the movie rather than vice versa (Fig. 8).

In a recent novel by John Wideman, a character walks the steps and sees, "some fool bounding up pretending he's Rocky Balboa, arms raised in triumph, claiming the city."[9] Wideman's character further contemplates the view toward City Hall, "this was how the city was meant to be viewed...You can grasp the pattern... A miraculous design... He could see a hand drawing the city. An architect's tilted drafting board,

instruments for measuring... He could tell thought had gone into the design. And a person must have stood here, on this hill, imagining this perspective. Dreaming the vast emptiness into the shape of a city." Both Wideman's hero and Rocky take their place in the city of someone else's dream. The architect's fantasy of long ago has invited them to tell stories. Fiction stirs the same imagination as architecture, not only telling stories but inviting us to dream up tales as well. Fictional metaphors stretch our reading of places in the city beyond their normal bounds, opening new territories for invention and trajectories toward new stories. The real city becomes dense with voices of novelists and film-makers who gives us back our city remade as they, or we. might desire, fear. or imagine that it is.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Univ. of California Press, 1996), p. 28

[2] Ibid. p. 50

[3] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Univ of Minnesota, 1989), p. 172. One of their theorems of Deterritorialization is that the least deterritorialized reterritorializes on the most deterritorialized.

[4] Sebastiano Serlio. *The Book of Architecture* (B. Blum, NY, 1970).

Theodore Dreisser, *The Financier* (1927), p. 434

[6] Douglas Muzzio, "'Decent People Shouldn't Live Here:' the American City in Cinema" *Journal of Urban Affairs* 18 No. 2, pp. 189-215. I thank David Ames for this reference.

[7] Pete Dexter, *God's Pocket* (Random House, 1983), p. 226.

[8] Tourists visiting Venice in the 18th century looked in vain for the specific views that Canaletto painted, for his scenes were fanciful conglomerates that created a picturesque image to which the real city was compared. W. Barcham *The Imaginary View of Antonio Canaletto* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 1974).

[9] John Edgar Wideman, *Philadelphia Fire* (Vintage Books, 1990), p. 45.