

Introduction: Urban Narratives And Bruno Latour's Empiricism

Contemporary representations of cities and megacities are manifold. Cities are sometimes portrayed as rich semiotic fields or breeding grounds for poverty. They are a site of space wars, but also *Steuerungszentralen*¹. We observe an emergence of fashionable metaphors and concepts that become associated with cities such as SimCity, urban labyrinths, imagined cities, media city, and so on.² All these terms and concepts point us to various discourses that not only describe the city, but also constitute it as a concept. They indicate on the one hand, a treatment of the city as a nexus of global-local networks and entanglements of capital, people, cultural or political interests, and so on. On the other hand, these notions and discourses also represent varying interpretations of and reactions to the global, or local effects of this 'connectivity'. In order to retrieve the macro-view of urbanism and the political economy entangled with it, American urbanist, Edward Soja, has attempted to organize the innumerable city narratives coursing through various disciplines. He has identified and described six main discourses, which are, in his own words, "aimed at making sense of the whole urban region, the spatiality and sociality of the urban fabric writ large".³ Soja is interested in reasserting and recapturing the importance of the 'macro-urban' tradition, which he says has lost focus after being 'attacked' by 'micro-urban' critics for being masculinist and reductionist.⁴ He is referring to what he calls a growing,

1 | See in consecutive order Ledrut, "Speech and the Silence of the City"; Gottdiener and Lagopoulos, *The City and the Sign*; Davis, *Planet of Slums*; Bauman, "Urban Space Wars"; Sassen, "Cities and Communities in the Global Economy."

2 | See respectively Miller, *Delhi*; Eckardt, Bechtel, and Fahrholz, *Die Komplexe Stadt: Orientierungen im urbanen Labyrinth*; Alter, *Imagined Cities*; For a thorough study of approaches to (reading) the city, see Hassenpflug, Giersig, and Stratmann, *Reading the City: Developing Urban Hermeneutics/Stadt lesen: Beiträge zu einer urbanen Hermeneutik*.

3 | Soja, "Six Discourses on the Postmetropolis," 371.

4 | Ibid.

epistemological over-privileging of the experiences of the flâneur at the expense of understanding the structuring of the city as a whole, naming, in particular, Michel de Certeau's studies of the 'micro-worlds' of everyday life, that is, the local, the body or the streetscape.⁵

Bruno Latour would do away with the very idea of dichotomies and hierarchies such as micro-macro, small or large scale, local or global ensembles and similar:

"The big (states, organizations, markets) is an amplification but also a *simplification* of the small [...] the micro is made of a proliferation of incommensurable entities [...] which are simply lending one of their aspects, a 'facade of themselves', to make up a provisional whole."⁶

Latour's radical conceptualization of the social through his collaborative project, the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), uses semiotic tools for an exploration of the practices that produce, enact and embed knowledge (processes of knowledge production). The unique aspect of Latour's sociology is his attention to both human and non-human actors. Latour extends the agency concept to embrace humans *and* non-humans such as research objects and technical infrastructure, rather than focusing on an overarching social, natural or conceptual framework that 'contains' human actors or within which events take place. All these "actants" are assumed to form and exist in 'weak' or 'strong' networks, which may be observed, studied and 'described'.⁷ From the position of the observer, and only for the purpose of study, there is a levelling of heterogeneous elements without *a priori* assumptions about them in order to describe their relationality. An ANT study thus does not differentiate between large or small-scale.⁸ No fundamental difference is drawn between actants and networks (semiotic symmetry) as they are both considered effects and causes of relations.

At first glance, Latour's ANT as a method for ontological and epistemological studies presents itself as a rather open and flexible framework. Therefore, in an oblique response to Soja, my project takes its cue from Latour to study a collection of contemporary narratives that thematize life in different megacities.⁹

5 | Ibid., 379.

6 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 243.

7 | Latour advocates the method of description for his sociological project, distancing it from the "false dichotomy" of descriptions and explanations. Ibid., 137–8. More on this later in Chapter II.

8 | Ibid., 220.

9 | My project concentrates on four urban narratives that serve to illustrate and support my thesis and arguments. However, a number of other texts could have been included in the corpus but were not for reasons of economy and scope. The thesis was formulated with a number of other publications in mind. These include Byrne, *Bicycle Diaries*; Hardy, *Scoop-*

Focalization in these narratives is achieved through the authors themselves, as they perform as contemporary urban chroniclers. Their empirical observations, experiences and narrativization serve as our point of departure. It must be added, however, that it is not the aim or the scope of my project to justify or verify the truthfulness of their narratives. This ready acceptance of their authenticity comes from our acceptance of the explicit authorial intentions. The presence of these intentions in the text marks what I consider to be their *empirical anchorage*. A naïve phenomenology informs the authors' straightforward descriptive method to document a world whose ontological accessibility is assumed by them. This essential referentiality of their documentation is its *empirical anchorage*. In the next chapter, we will see how this term suits us better than the usual fact-fiction divide. We may venture a further postulation about their epistemic status – the empirical anchorage of these narratives allows us to anticipate knowledge about the documented urban space, despite or, as de Certeau would argue, especially due to their subjective stance (or 'micro-view' in Soja's terms). In this sense, they serve as demonstrations or case studies of possible ANT methods.

My descriptions of these books try to meticulously collect different representational and discursive strategies the authors use to render their observed and experienced 'reality'.¹⁰ In the process, I hope to reveal *how* these authors generate very specific topographies of the respective city, and thus actually oppose the 'flatland' metaphor conceived of by Latour.¹¹ My project thus concentrates on the *how* as an epistemic goal. It is thus led by questions as to *how* these authors do justice to their experiences of these urban spaces, or *how* they represent the city. Such a strategy is, as we will see, more productive for our ANT exercise as it gets out of our way the central problem of the situatedness of all knowledge by not asking the futile question 'but is it true?' The empirical anchorage of a text can, by contrast, be analysed, described, and rendered explicit. We can see how the authors generate a sense of their own presence in the narrative, and therein lies the great paradox that is the symptom of our times. This presence is simultaneously a testimony to both – the narrative's subjectivity *and* a narrative anchor. It aims to guarantee a 'realness' or the authenticity of the reality of the empirically anchored author-observer. Such a line of questioning allows us to see

Wallah; Alexander, *A Carpet Ride to Khiva*; Ackroyd, *Venice*; Morris, *Sydney*; McCloud, *Kevin McCloud's Grand Tour of Europe*; Ansary, *Destiny Disrupted*; and Delisle, *Burma Chronicles*.

10 | This study also treats the distinction between fact or fiction as inappropriate and inadequate in dealing with such works. See for example Heyne, "Truth or Consequences: Individuality, Reference, and the Fiction/Nonfiction Distinction."; See also Heyne, "Toward a Theory of Literary Nonfiction."

11 | The terms city and megacity (and their plurals) will be used interchangeably, referring to larger cities across the globe in the sense of Saskia Sassen and their urban agglomerations. See Sassen, "Cities and Communities in the Global Economy."

how it is possible to maintain some notion of objectivity (knowledge) considering the authors' subjective stance, and how this strategy of documentation can yield 'matters of concern' rather than 'matters of fact'.

In chapter I, we will see how the pursuit of such themes situates my project within studies pertaining to the realist and historical novel, which thematise the recurring return to documentary or journalistic aesthetics and travel writing.¹² The *Documentary Turn* has been identified as a contemporary return of concerns for an 'objective' representation of 'reality' in a variety of films and literary genres. It is marked by the use of documentary aesthetics and formal structures – not only to utilize and modify existing documents, but also to perform the integral task of creating new 'documents'.¹³ There is a development and proliferation of new and innovative documentary approaches, which establish a space and path for different concepts of reality and representation in the contemporary context of globalization. The emergence of such diverse forms points to the transformation of the very concept of 'documentary', wherein 'documentary' becomes merely *one* of the discourses of the real.¹⁴ This key change affects the relationship of documentary forms to 'reality', and has its effects on traditional public spheres and the structures of communication within and between them. Recent analyses of literature and discourse reveal a reinforced awareness of the problematic relation between narrative discourse and representation. The revised approach focuses on how the facts are described, and how authority and authenticity is ascribed to them in order to sanction one mode of explaining over another.¹⁵ The proliferation into the literary field of a re-analysis of the nature of narrative, and of the distrust of the authority and objectivity of historical sources and accounts is accentuated by new styles of writing as well as the plurality of alternative sources of information and their interpretation.¹⁶ In order to establish a relation and continuity with these developments in literature and the related emancipation in literary analysis, I will categorize my corpus as *literary documentaries*. This working term indicates both content as well as form. It brings together the 'empirical anchorage' of these texts as well as their use of literary techniques for the textualization of their documentary endeavor.¹⁷

12 | Nünning, "Mapping the Field of Hybrid New Genres in the Contemporary Novel."

13 | Weeks, "Re-Cognizing the Post-Soviet Condition: The Documentary Turn in Contemporary Art in the Baltic States."

14 | Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 10.

15 | Schlote and Voigts-Virchow, "Introduction: The Creative Treatment of Actuality – New Documentarism."

16 | See for example White, *Metahistory*; See also Agrell, "Documentarism and Theory of Literature."

17 | A study and discussion of literary documentaries, especially in the contemporary atmosphere of medial simulations and a perceived "loss of reality", has been initiated and

Latour's ANT is also concerned with the *manner* of discursive constructedness of the object of study. In chapter II, we will delve deeper into his ideas of an Actor Network Theory for its applicability in our project. Latour urges a change in the conventional logic of research and a subsequent renewal of empiricism. Specifically, this requires a shift of focus from 'objectified' "matters of fact" to more complex and historically situated "matters of concern".¹⁸ Reality, Latour says, is not and should not be defined by "matters of fact", which are, in spite of the neutral status that they project, biased, "polemical political renderings" of what they claim to analyze or explain.¹⁹ In his re-assessment of science studies, Latour argues that for the field to regain focus and credibility, it needs to embrace an empiricism of a 'new order' – a return so to speak of the 'realist attitude', but with an emphasis on contextualizing data into more relevant and durable "matters of concern".²⁰

In this chapter, in order to systematically develop heuristic tools from Latour's ANT, we will trace a developmental trajectory of Latour's central idea of studying networks as a key to different levels or processes of constructivism. In ANT, we see the beginnings of such an empiricism with which Latour tries to invent a vocabulary that emphasizes the inter-connectivity of 'things' today and ties together the material, the human and the semiotic. ANT, more method than theory, bears many traits of that "workaholic, trail-sniffing, and collective traveller" – the creature emerging from the acronym – the ant.²¹ It stays true to the tenets of ethnomethodology by giving minute and detailed descriptions of the procedures and activities it observes. ANT imagines human and non-human "actants" in networks, of intricate machinations and connections in which we find "black boxes" that are not immediately decipherable.²² The bundled complexity of these black boxes has become a "matter of fact" or the accepted and unquestioned norm that we call 'common sense'.²³ Thus, 'following/tracing the network' implies an ant-like activity of sniffing out the trail of the network and 'undoing' the black boxes (also "reversible black-boxing").²⁴ Latour's guiding principles for a "second empiricism" prescribe a meticulous study of a "collective"

collectively subsumed by Schlote and Voigts-Virchow under the Documentary Turn. Refer Schlote and Voigts-Virchow, "Introduction: The Creative Treatment of Actuality – New Documentarism" See a more detailed description of these developments in chapter one.

18 | Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?"

19 | Ibid., 231.

20 | Ibid.

21 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 9.

22 | Latour, *Science in Action*, 3–17.

23 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 118; See also Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?"; and Latour, *Pandora's Hope*.

24 | Latour, "On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy."

of “hybrids” and the “networks” they form (or are a part of).²⁵ Such a study must move away from a conception of the social in terms of artifacts or subjects since in Latour’s network these collapse into a “collective”.²⁶ Latour perceives this collective as a labyrinthine network of entities with ‘knots’ in it, which are, as mentioned above, conceived of as black boxes.²⁷ Different, even competing or contradictory, interpretations, associations and connections between ideas, things or events (hybrids) should then be considered and analyzed in order to ‘undo’ the so-called black boxes or knots in the network. Latour argues in favor of the ANT for, among other things, its ability to do away with hierarchies such as small or large scale.²⁸ I would contend, however, that while Latour foregrounds the intricacies of a flattened level of observation (undoing knots), his anti-essentialist conception of ‘reality’ nevertheless maintains, even simply at the level of terminology, the idea of the network as some sort of ‘whole’ (labyrinthine) even as it tries to use it to describe more local manifestations (knots/black boxes/associations). There is also a neglect on Latour’s part to address the role of the observer or spokesperson, which is directly related to a neglect of other issues in his theorization such as (i) the criteria for tracing networks, (ii) the basis on which a spokesperson may make decisions, and (iii) the perspective or stance of the spokesperson.

Followers of Latour must thus proceed with caution because Latour’s own model of a new empiricism is an on-going project with numerous inconsistencies and contradictions. These are displayed not least by his own publications with corrections and reappraisals of his ideas.²⁹ We will deal with further explanations and explications as well as contradictions, doubts and critique of Latour’s ideas in our second chapter. For the purpose of first bringing together Latour and our corpus, let me tentatively suggest an application of Latour’s ANT, and with that, state a starting point and hypothesis of my analysis. If the city in all its physical

25 | Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 115.

26 | *Ibid.*, 14.

27 | This is much like Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphor of the “rhizome” in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*; or Donna Haraway’s ‘cat’s cradle’. See Haraway, “A Game of Cat’s Cradle”. The terminology that Latour introduces for a new empiricism has been stated here and marked as such. All further use of these terms in my project refers to Latour even though, for mere typing ease, they may not be marked as such.

28 | Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications.”

29 | See for example Latour, “On Recalling ANT”; Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications plus More than a Few Complications”; Latour, “The Trouble with Actor Network Theory”; For an immediate critique of Latour’s ideas, see Bloor, “Anti-Latour”; and Latour’s response in the same issue, Latour, “For Bloor and Beyond – a Reply to David Bloor’s Anti-Latour.”

and abstract manifestations is such a 'knot' in the network, then each of the empirical attempts to discover, document and narrate the city embody author-specific methods of undoing the knot or opening and examining the black box. In other words, applying Latour's ideas and vocabulary to describe our corpus may reveal these city enterprises to be tangible methodologies for a new empiricism in Latour's sense, and thus provide a contemporary paradigm for describing matters of concern. The hypothesis is, to put things simply, that the authors of my corpus perform the function of the previously mentioned 'trail-sniffing ant' to describe and thus undo the knot called the 'city' (each in his own way). We may then carry out a bit of the trail-sniffing activity of the ant ourselves to describe the empirical, narrative and discursive strategies the authors use. These strategies can constitute a more tangible method for ANT than provided by Latour's study so far. We can take this part of the analysis further and make another addition to Latour's ANT. We will theorize the position of the spokesperson in our reading of the project's corpus as ANT-like methods. The authors establish the empirical anchorage through a reader address. This explicit presence of the authors in their texts can help us analyze their individual means of describing their urban enterprise (strategies) and ways of seeing (perspective). We may thus show *how* contemporary notions of objectivity and reality are 'authentically' *created* and *authorized*. Considering Soja's critique of micro urban narratives mentioned at the beginning, this line of inquiry serves us another purpose. It opens up space for a discussion on how we may possibly reconcile the gap between macro- and micro-urban concerns.

The description of my project so far would appear to advocate the narratives of my corpus for their ability to exhaustively document the city and contextualize it through the subjectivity of the authors and the stance they actively assume. However, we will later critically assess in how far the documentary endeavors of the authors fulfill such claims, or function, as I have suggested, as a sort of Latourian ANT (a new or second empiricism). Similarly, there will also be a stocktaking of Latour's ideas with the insights gained from the description of my corpus. Yet, it is still possible to bring Latour and the authors of my corpus together because of their joint concern about how to live in a world of increasing demographic density, where space is lacking. In other words, the questions that haunt both Latour and the authors pertain to how humans could possibly collaborate and create 'habitable spaces' in a rapidly transforming urban world.³⁰

In the chapters that follow, we will use Latour's concepts and vocabulary to analyze three such urban narratives in more detail.³¹ We will begin in chapter

30 | See for example Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*; and Latour, "Waiting for Gaia. Composing the Common World through Art and Politics."

31 | The fourth narrative in my corpus will be analyzed only in the concluding part of the project.

III with Iain Sinclair's *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire, A Confidential Report*, which zooms in our attention to a borough in London. Hackney, a borough in East London, found its way extensively into the news, as it was part of the site for the Olympic 2012 Games.³² Iain Sinclair, Hackney's indomitable defender and gazetteer, was a leading voice speaking against the changes that the Games brought for the borough, deeming the Olympic Development plan to be simply a guise under which developers and the state ally for selfish economic benefits.³³ Sinclair's book is born out of the conflict between the city's authorities and a certain artistic milieu of the borough that Sinclair represents. It thus represents a very individual response to the unwanted 'encroachment' in the borough. We will read Sinclair's very dense and yet fragmented narrative as an ANT-like tracing of networks and associations in Hackney, and analyze the various representational strategies used by the author. The aim in doing so is to evaluate on the one hand, the extent to which Sinclair's strategies may collectively offer one possible methodology of ANT. On the other hand, such an application of Latour's ANT ideas and terminology will also enable a critical analysis of ANT as a practice of studying networks as a key to processes of knowledge production. We will follow the same procedure for an analysis of two further city narratives. In chapter IV, Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* takes us to Mumbai and presents a rather dense narrative on the Indian megacity, but provides access to it by distinctly different means than Sinclair.³⁴ We will see how the interplay of perspective and authorial intentions can have startlingly different results through the use of different strategies of tracing networks. In chapter V, Sam Miller's *Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity* represents, on first glance, a more systematic approach to the megacity through a pre-mapped spiral route as the author's primary means of accessing the megacity – his 'tool for discovery'.³⁵ We will see, however, how the method ironically randomizes the author's urban enterprise. Despite the fixed route through the city, the author finds that his walk of Delhi takes unexpected 'adventurous' turns. Finally, in the conclusion, we will also join an author who takes us to different cities across the world. Patrick Neate's *Where You're At, Notes from the Frontline of a Hip Hop Planet* traverses from New York to Tokyo, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro, giving us rich insights into the hip hop scenes in these different cities.³⁶ Neate's music journalism, read as a sort of ANT method, demonstrates how ANT can push

32 | This title will henceforth appear as *That Rose-Red Empire*.

33 | Sinclair, "The Olympics Scam": "When did it start, this intimate liaison between developers and government, to reconstruct the body of London, to their mutual advantage? Dr Frankenstein with a Google Earth program and a remote-control laser scalpel."

34 | This title will henceforth appear as *Maximum City*.

35 | This title will henceforth be abbreviated as *Delhi*.

36 | This title will henceforth appear as *Where You're At*.

local, national, and conceptual borders for that matter. The authors of my corpus intervene, in their own way, in the formation of meta-discourses (indisputable matters of fact) on megacities, and by adding their narratives in a world-building activity (matters of concern), they can be said to 'de-naturalize' the absolute notion of 'factual' documentation. At the same time, as touched upon earlier, the specificity of the urban topographies generated by each author indicates an element of conjecture in the Latourian empiricism – his not quite unproblematic reliance on 'common sense' to guide the empiricist. This so far under-theorized aspect in Latour's thinking calls attention to the insufficient problematization of the position of the 'spokesperson' in such an empiricism and indicates a neglect of self-implication. In my project, I will treat this finding as a theory-immanent critique of Latour.

My first step will be to discuss the various generic traditions that are reflected in my corpus, and to then historicize my corpus for Literary Studies. This will allow me to 'contextualize' my own corpus within a collection of, on the one hand, representations of 'reality', and on the other hand, representations of the 'urban'.

