»Routine« *versus* »Event«

Media, Memory and the City in B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*

Lena Mattheis / Jens Martin Gurr

> The street conducts the flaneur into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward – [...] into a past [...]
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> Benjamin 1999, M1,2 (416)[1]

> I stumbled on this photograph, [...]
> It took me way back,
> Back down memory lane
>
> Minnie Riperton: *Memory Lane* (1979)

1. Introduction

27 unnumbered and separately bound chapters delivered in a cardboard box in apparently random order[2] and ranging between a mere 10 lines to 12 pages in length – this is B. S. Johnson's 1969 novel *The Unfortunates*, of which the »First« chapter begins as follows:

> But I know this city! This green ticket-hall, the long office half-rounded at its ends, that iron clerestory, brown glazed tiles, green below, the same, the decorative hammerbeams supporting nothing, above, of course! I know this city! How did I not realize when he said, Go and do City this week, that it was this city!
>
> Tony. His cheeks sallowed and collapsed round the insinuated bones, the gums shrivelled, was it, or shrunken [...].

1 | Original: »Den Flanierenden leitet die Straße in eine entschwundene Zeit. Ihm ist eine jede abschüssig. Sie führt hinab [...] in eine Vergangenheit« (524).

2 | Only the »First« and the »Last« chapters are marked as such. We follow the established system of referring to chapters by their opening words (or as »First« or »Last«) and by citing page numbers within the respective chapter. All references follow the 1999 edition.

> Covered courtyards, taxis, take a taxi, always take a taxi in a strange city, but no, I know this city! The mind circles, at random, does not remember, from one moment to another, other things interpose themselves, the mind's The station exits on a bridge, yes of course, and the blackened gantries rise like steel gibbets above the Midland red wall opposite. I should turn right, right, towards the city centre, yes, ah, and that pub! (»First«, 1 f.; gaps and incomplete sentences original unless indicated [...])

The Unfortunates is the interior monologue of an ambitious if unsuccessful writer who has to make a living as a football reporter, sent to report a match in an unnamed city[3] – recognizable as Nottingham – and who, only as he leaves the train, realizes that this is a city he knows well as the city in which, as a young writer, he had spent a lot of time with his then best friend, Tony, an aspiring literary scholar, who had died of cancer at the age of 29 a few years before the time of the novel.[4] The entire narrative then oscillates between the narrator's rendering of the hours spent in the city before, during and after the match and analepses to time spent with Tony, memories frequently triggered by visual cues during the city walk. Thus, a pub on a corner may remind the narrator of time spent there with Tony or, in a more erratic movement of the mind, the built environment of the train station reminds him he is in Nottingham, which, in turn, conjures up Tony's emaciated face, as happens in the opening passage quoted above.

This loose and non-chronological structure of the narrative is mirrored in the act of reading and the materiality of the text: readers need to decide in which order to read the 25 freely disposable sections of Johnson's ›book in a box‹. Not all permutations make sense: The section in which the narrator watches the football match and writes his report must logically come after the section in which he makes his way to the stadium, just as it makes little sense to imagine him eating and contemplating his main course before he has had the starter of his lunch before the match. Nonetheless, there are technically a vast number of possible permutations – the result is the factorial of 25 (noted as 25!), yielding just over 1.55×10^{25} different possible sequences. Taking this most striking feature of the novel – its flaunted non-linearity and breach of print conventions – as our starting point, we ask what this fundamental medial choice and strategy of representation contributes to the book's representation of the city and of memory, taking our cue from Hayden White's notion of »The Content of the Form«. While White is – more generally *and* more specifically – concerned with the connection between »Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation«, as his subtitle has it, we

3 | In fact, the match report, by-lined »B. S. Johnson«, is reprinted on the inside of the cardboard box containing the separate chapters. The novel makes no attempt to veil the fact that it is closely autobiographical.

4 | Disease and death are a further central theme of the novel not explored here; for a discussion cf. Gurr 2017 and Lea 2015.

inquire how the form of Johnson's novel supports, reinforces – or simulates in the first place – its thematic concerns, particularly in the representation of memory and the city: How, in other words, does the way in which the text works *as* a medium support or enhance what it discursively says *about* the workings of media, memory and the city and their representation generally?

We propose to take the dichotomy of ›routine‹ vs. ›event‹ as a conceptual tool, arguing that Johnson pits his own use of the novel as a medium and his own highly idiosyncratic use of language against a routinized consumption of other media – mainly »radio« and »the telly« – which appear as little more than a constant background noise. We begin by outlining the notion of ›routine‹ vs. ›event‹, arguing that Johnson's own programmatic views on the function of the novel in its media-historical context pit his own innovations in novelistic practice as the ›event‹ in an otherwise routinized mainstream production (Johnson 1973, 13). We then go on to discuss the way *The Unfortunates* represents the interplay between the city and memory as directly resulting from its highly original use of the medium.

Almost exactly 100 years after the 1922 media »revolution that was *Ulysses*« (ibid., 6) and in the context of our own media-historical moment of another widely debated media revolution surrounding digitalization, streaming services and social media, we thus argue that it may be worth exploring how a highly media-conscious writer like B. S. Johnson conceptualized the consequences of such a media change for the representation of the interplay between memory and the city.[5]

›Routine‹ *versus* ›Event‹ and the Function of the Novel

In *Rythmanalysis* (1992), Henri Lefebvre's last book, published in the year after his death, the urbanist philosopher distinguishes between the cyclical and the alternate (or linear) rhythms that create urban space. While cyclical rhythms are large and slow intervals (think of the seasons changing), Lefebvre places urban routines in the realm of alternate/linear rhythms: »the daily grind« of »journeys to and fro« (ibid., 30). These journeys connect familiar places: the home and the work place, the work place and the pub, etc. What Johnson creates in *The Unfortunates* is then, at first glance, a linear rhythm. His alter-ego protagonist tells us about his job of reporting on football matches, which requires him to take trains to various English cities on the weekends and to find his way to the local football field. Having done this for longer than he cares for, he no longer consciously thinks about navigating these urban spaces. An automated routine kicks in, which tells him to »take a taxi, always take a taxi in a strange

5 | Another reason Johnson's writing remains relevant in the 21st century are the parallels to a current trend of (frequently serial) life writing or novels of autofiction by writers such as Maggie Nelson or John Burnside (cf. Menn 2018).

city« (»First«, 1) from the train station. This is where it becomes interesting: his routine applies exclusively to strange cities, to *un*familiar spaces. The linear rhythm here connects anonymous train stations to anonymous football fields. The sudden realisation that he happens to be in a *familiar* city therefore shocks the protagonist out of his routine and forms the first sentence of the *in medias res* opening of the novel: »But I know this city!« (Ibid.) It is because he knows the city, because it is a familiar space, that his routine is disrupted and continues to be disrupted by memories of his late friend Tony, who used to live in »this city«.

In contrast to this disruption, the stream-of-consciousness (or stream-of-memories) narration attempts to draw the protagonist back into his linear routine whenever he is reminded of his work: »It's after two! I must get to the ground then, how my mind has been taken off. Now how to get to the ground, yes, always take a taxi in strange city, no, not that again« (»Time!«, 1). His thoughts interrupt themselves when they threaten to drift off into the comforting anonymity of the city routine and bring him back to the painful memories of his friend's slow and painful physical decay. In Lefebvre's terms, this part of the narration, the memories which are triggered by the urban space, is concerned with cyclical rhythms. It deals with a long friendship that grows closer, more distant and closer again, with lovers coming together and drifting apart, and with the continuous struggle between life and death. The friction between long cyclical and repetitive linear rhythms and between routine and disrupting event – with Jacques Derrida, »it is worth recalling that an event implies surprise, exposure, the unanticipatable« (441) – then forms the underlying tension of the narrative.

As work on routine and rhythm by prominent urban scholars such as Michel de Certeau (1984) or, more recently, Nigel Thrift (2003) shows, urban space is as much constituted and/or shaped by routine as routine is constituted and/or shaped by urban space. This deep entanglement is therefore essential to understanding the ways in which *The Unfortunates* presents its unnamed (yet so blatant) city. Routine, however, also guides our *reading* experience. With the materiality and mediality of the ›book in a box‹ being so unusual, we need our minds to constantly readjust and reapply reading routines. To come full circle, the novel then also comments on routines of media production and consumption while itself enacting and contradicting some of these media-related routines.

The tension between ›routine‹ and ›event‹ is therefore not only an essential part of how *The Unfortunates* works as a novel, it also connects the three main areas of interest for this article and this special issue, as media, memory and the city all require routines to function, but are essentially characterized by ›event‹ interruptions of these routines.[6]

6 | For everyday life in the city, Thrift describes the interplay as follows: »[W]hen the minutiae of everyday interaction are closely looked at, what we see is not just routines but also all kinds of creative improvisations which are not routine at all (though they may have the effect of allowing that routine to continue). So, in everyday life, what

Johnson's own conception of the function of the novel at his own media-historical moment can largely be understood in terms of the dichotomy of ›routine‹ vs. ›event‹ as well: In the most sustained programmatic account of his own literary and critical beliefs, his 1973 »Introduction« to *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs,* a collection of his shorter prose works, Johnson argues that the novel – like its predecessor, the long narrative poem before it – has in turn lost its function of being the prime story-telling medium, this time to film and TV:

> [N]o novelist's description of a battle squadron at sea in a gale could really hope to compete with that in a well-shot film; and why should anyone who simply wanted to be told a story spend all his spare time for a week or weeks reading a book when he could experience the same thing in a version in some ways superior at his local cinema in only one evening? (*Aren't you rather young* 4)

His discussion makes much of an observation that opens the text, the fact that James Joyce, having fully understood the potential of the new medium, was – if briefly – co-owner of the first cinema in Dublin in 1909. He argues that »[l]iterary forms do become exhausted« (6) and that this is precisely what has happened to the traditional, story-telling novel. Commenting on Joyce's insight into the changing function of different media and the new niche he believed he had to create for the novel, Johnson argues:

> Joyce is the Einstein of the novel. His subject-matter in *Ulysses* was available to anyone, the events of one day in one place; but by means of form, style and technique in language he made it into something very much more, a novel, not a story about anything. What happens is nothing like as important as how it is written, as the medium of the words and form through which it is made to happen to the reader. And for style alone *Ulysses* would have been a revolution. (4)

Thus, somewhat paradoxically, we might say that the events narrated in *Ulysses* are mere routine and that it is the representation of routine by means of a unique use of language that makes the novel an event. The same, it seems, is true of *The Unfortunates*: a football reporter spending a day in the city he has been routinely sent to for his match report is so uneventful, it is hardly the stuff ›routine‹ novels are made of.

Given Joyce's fundamental insight into the need for radical change in the function, subject matter and representational strategies of the novel, Johnson voices dismay at the newly conventional mainstream of British fiction after the end of High Modernism: »Why«, he asks, »do so many novelists still write as though the revolution that was *Ulysses* had never happened [...]?« He goes on to polemi-

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is striking is how people are able to use events over which they often have very little control to open up little spaces in which they can assert themselves, however faintly.« (103)

cize against the vast majority of contemporary English writers »shackled by tradition« – routine – and against the »stultifyingly philistine [...] general book culture of [his] country« (13), an intellectual and artistic stand-still collusion of uninspired writers and undemanding readers (for a discussion of *The Unfortunates* in this context and its role in Johnson's œuvre as a whole, cf. Gurr 2017).

3. *The Unfortunates* as Highly Media-Conscious Simulation of Memory and City

A passage from Johnson's programmatic »Introduction« lends itself to being used as a starting point for our analysis, combining as it does an explicit reflection on the role of ›routines‹ – note that he uses the term himself – and their interruption by unexpected events (»it hit me«) to the genesis and the functioning of *The Unfortunates* as a novel. Moreover, in this passage, which needs to be quoted at some length, Johnson connects all three of our central concerns in this essay (›media‹, ›memory‹ and ›city‹) when he argues that it is precisely the unusual material form of the novel with its loose unnumbered sections that allows him adequately to represent the interplay between city and memory:

> With each of my novels there has always been a certain point when what has been until then just a mass of subject-matter, the material of living, of my life, comes to have a shape, a form that I recognise as a novel. [...] The moment at which *The Unfortunates* (1969) occurred was on the main railway station at Nottingham. I had been sent there to report a soccer match for the *Observer*, a quite routine League match, nothing special. I had hardly thought about where I was going, specifically: when you are going away to report soccer in a different city each Saturday you get the mechanics of travelling to and finding your way about in a strange place to an almost automatic state. But when I came up the stairs from the platform into the entrance hall, it hit me: I knew this city, I knew it very well. It was the city in which a very great friend of mine, one who had helped me with my work when no one else was interested, had lived until his tragic early death from cancer some two years before.
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> It was the first time I had been back since his death, and all the afternoon I was there the things we had done together kept coming back to me as I was going about this routine job of reporting a soccer match: the dead past and the living present interacted and transposed themselves in my mind. [...]
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> The main technical problem with *The Unfortunates* was the randomness of the material. That is, the memories of Tony and the routine football reporting, the past and the present, interwove in a completely random manner, without chronology. [...] This randomness was directly in conflict with the technological fact of the bound book: for the bound book imposes an order, a fixed page order, on the material (Johnson 1973, 10 f.).

3.1 *The Unfortunates* on Media and as Medium

The Unfortunates frequently refers to everyday media –»telly«, »radio«, »recorder«, »the paper«, »photos« – which are here represented as partly annoying background noise routinely consumed without requiring a lot of attention: »[Tony] had a transistor radio [...] to take him out of himself, to take his mind off it, ha, it went everywhere with him, carried, it was not pocket size, he had it on the bed, toyed with it, when he was sitting downstairs, too« (»Then they had moved«, 6). Even more frequent references are to television as a medium of distraction: »we watched the cricket on the telly, there were test matches, I don't take much notice, myself [...] no doubt I dropped off to sleep« (»Sometime that summer« 2).[7] A similarly dismissive reference concerns a shop window display of TV sets: »I am not at all drawn to this windowful of no-deposit television sets« (»Cast parapet«, 2 f.).[8] As for the contrast between journalistic language use and the highly self-conscious artistic use of language, he suspects that his routine journalism is harmful to his writing: »Does this bloody reporting affect, destroy even, my own interest in language« (»The pitch worn«, 7; cf. also »Time!«, 2 f.).[9]

By contrast, and in keeping with Johnson's views on the function of the novel, the text itself as a medium with its self-reflexive use of language frequently – routinely – breaks routines by drawing attention to itself: The scrupulous, halting and searching prose style does more than merely simulate the associative nature of a stream of consciousness: More importantly in our context, the frequent re-formulations within the individual sentence – often long, sprawling, associative clauses extending over more than half a page – and the numerous qualifications make explicit the process of writing itself:

7 | Here as elsewhere, such references to everyday media are often directly juxtaposed with references to »the new novel«.

8 | For further references to everyday media, see »Then they had moved«, 6 and 7; »Up there«, 5 and 8; »Away from the ground«, 1 and 2; »That short occasion«, 1; »For recuperation« 1, 2, 4 and elsewhere.

9 | Bored with the game and with the report he is writing, Johnson entertains himself by trying to sneak literary allusions into his match report: »*Devoid of real incident, the match dragged its slow length*, no, yes, there's Alexander, earlier, when he hit the bar. *Alexander, dragging his slow length along from right back, hit a long one which beat Phipps but struck the intersection,* like a wounded snake has to be worked in somewhere, no, it'll never work, too contrived, scrub it.« (»The pitch worn«, 6, italics original). The reference is of course to Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* and its self-reflexive performative critique of the tedious writing of inferior poets: »A *needless Alexandrine* ends the Song / That like a wounded Snake, drags its slow length along.« (ll. 356 f., italics original)

> And yes, there is a castle here [...] sandstone, as I remember [...] did Tony tell me, he had a great mind for such trivia, is that the right word, no, nor is detail, trivia it is to me, perhaps, to him important [...] he had a good mind for such detail, it crowded his mind like documents in the Public Records Office, there, a good image, perhaps easy, but it was even something like as efficient, tidy, his mind, not as mine is, random [...] how he embraced conversation, think of an image, no. [...] I learnt, I selected and elected to hear what I needed, what was of most use to me, at that time most use, from his discourse, yes, the word is not too pompous [...]. (»First«, 3 f.)

Jordan even speaks of an »excess of prosaic scrupulousness« and argues that »[e]ach sentence contains its own first – and sometimes second and third – draft« (2014, 746). It is characteristic of the self-reflexive nature of Johnson's prose that this tentative, iteratively self-corrective writing process is again made explicit when the text refers to the process of »[w]orking more specifically, this time, on and around my first novel, discussing, improving, refining, deleting« (»Again the house«, 1; cf. also Jordan 2014, 759). This is further supported by the unusual spacing throughout the text: frequent blanks far longer than the common single space after a full stop – often extending to half a line or more – also appear to suggest the halting nature of the prose style and simulate pauses in thought or speech.

This is also apparent in the description of his journalism in writing the match report: The repeated routine of reporting is not one Johnson presents as novel or exciting. It seems in fact that both Johnsons find the activity rather dull and tedious. The drill of producing the same kind of match report over and over again allows Johnson to engage with the anticipated mediality of the article as it is being created and thereby to comment on how his own text works as a medium. A repeatedly used device in this context is the blank space. Just as blanks are part of any writing process and empty spaces or placeholders mark where content still needs to be delivered in publishing and reporting, the reading or writing mind can sometimes draw a blank as well. Johnson reminds readers of the mediality and materiality of any published work and forces them to engage with the creative process when he writes: »The pitch worn, the worn patches, like There might be an image there, I could use an image, there, if I can think of one« (»The pitch worn«, 1). The blank space on the page manifests, first of all, what is being described: a worn patch. Before the reader can settle on the idea of the patchy field being thus materialised on the page, Johnson shifts the meaning of the blank with the second sentence of the chapter and proposes that »there might be an image there«, suggesting that he still needs to think of an appropriate metaphor or simile to fill the gap. The continuation of the sentence, however, takes us elsewhere yet again: »I could use an image, there, *if I can think of one*« (our emphasis). The deictic »there« is a fainter repetition of the blank, and the »image« now suggests both the rhetorical device still to be found by the journalist – or the author of the novel – and a photograph that could be used by the paper to illustrate the article. Johnson thereby cleverly has us reflecting on various levels of mediality and reminds

us of how the text in front of us works as a medium, all by adding a few additional spaces. The rest of this particular chapter documents the process of composition and of how the finished piece is then mediated to the paper via dictation on the telephone.

The device of the blank or gap is prominent here but also honeycombs the entire novel. It is frequently read as a manifestation of the death and decay that perforates the story (cf. Gurr 2017; Jordan 2014; Lea 2015), but it also always points to how the text comments on itself as a medium. Especially when the gap is taken literally, in a somewhat humorous way, this reflection on its own mediality becomes prominent. Take for example this instance of narrativised space manifesting itself on the page when Johnson describes a local pub he has been to before: » Here it must have been I sat, for the music, for the poem, this space cleared for the musicians, the piano, the violinists' musicstand, here. « (»Yates's is friendly«, 3). The description of the cleared space is positioned in the middle of a blank space on the page, the printed text echoing the described space, almost reminiscent of Apollinaire and concrete poetry. Of course, the blank space also shows how Johnson attempts to resurrect his incomplete memories of the place by aligning remembered place with experienced place.

The Unfortunates thus complicates its reflections *on* media by foregrounding its own mediality, its material existence *as* a medium. By pointing to the tired routines of other media, such as the match report, the novel highlights its own event-like disruptions of reading routines, for example in the form of the unusual blank spaces. The plethora of possible meanings that could fill the blanks is not only suggested, but *mediated* and moderated by the ever-self-conscious narrator/author figure navigating his own memories as well as the city.

3.2. *The Unfortunates* as a Meditation on Urban Memory[10]

An unattributed motto on the inside of the box in which the chapters are delivered is from Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: »I will tell you in three words what the book is. – It is a history. – A history! Of who? what? where? when? Don't hurry yourself. – It is a history-book, Sir (which may possibly commend it to the world) of what passes in a man's own mind.« (Sterne 1965 II, chap. 2). Since the novel's 27 sections make up one extended stream of consciousness detailing »what passes in [Johnson's] own mind« on one day, this highly apposite motto highlights two central observations: Firstly, *The Unfortunates* is arguably more concerned with the elegist than with the deceased; secondly, it emphasises the centrality of thought processes and particularly of the workings of memory. Numerous passages detail, for instance, the way in which memory rearranges events based on spatial and temporal contiguity – »The mind is confused, was it

10 | Section 3.2. in parts reuses material from Gurr 2017, 329-331.

this visit, or another, the mind has telescoped time here, runs events near to one another in place, into one another in time.« (»Again the house«, 4 f.) – or retrospectively modifies assessments of situations, people or relationships based on later events: »[M]emories are not now of [Wendy] so much, but only of her in relation to him. So his death changes the past: yet it should not. Yet she too, Wendy, is changed in my mind by what happened later.« (»Up there, yes«, 1).

Similarly, he comments on the ethical impulse to embellish or sentimentalize remembrance, possibly because of the internalized notion of *de mortuis nil nisi bene dicendum* or to assuage one's own conscience: »I sentimentalize again, the past is always to be sentimentalized, inevitably, everything about him I see now in the light of what happened later, his slow disintegration, his death. The waves of the past batter at the sea defences of my sandy sanity, need to be safely pictured, still, romanticized, prettified« (»I had a lovely flat«, 2).

Moreover, the narrator remarks on the mind's similarly self-protecting tendency to forget particularly poignant or painful moments in the compelling analogy of the »fuse« as a protective device against overvoltage or power surges: »Some said, it must have been June, that there were times when Tony broke down, knew and said he would never live to see the boy grow up. I fail to remember, the mind has fuses.« (»Then they had moved«, 5).

Most importantly, however, as we have seen in his account of the technical challenges in *The Unfortunates* in his programmatic »Introduction«, the subdivision of the novel into unnumbered sections to be read in random order is clearly designed to reproduce the non-linear, non-chronological and associative nature of memory, or, more precisely, to produce »as nearly as possible a re-created transcript of how my mind worked during eight hours on this particular Saturday« (»*Aren't you rather young*«, 11).

It has been argued that Johnson's approach here should be regarded as inconsistent or insufficiently radical. Thus, Coe has maintained that »a longish, twelve-page section [...] would impose its own narrative sequence [and] any attempt at conveying randomness would be suspended for a good span of reading time« (1999, x). In her study on *Chance and the Modern British Novel*, however, Jordan plausibly defends Johnson's method as follows:

> Memories and recollection of experience do not return to us in a linear, tightly plotted, traditionally novelistic way; but neither do they come to us as entirely disjointed flashes, or individual images. It is common enough to remember whole events and with them their significance, but not to remember these discrete entities in the correct, chronological order. Memories are not necessarily analogous to single words or even single sentences, but they are often episodic, and fragmented: much like the sections of *The Unfortunates*. (2010, 110)

In one of the most perceptive discussions of *The Unfortunates*, Tredell states that »the novel's topography of mourning and remembrance is urban and subur-

ban« (1985, 40). Indeed, the novel's opening sentence already marks the event of recognizing that the setting of the novel is not just any city routinely travelled to and through on the way to reporting a match: »But I know this city!«. To emphasise the point further, »this city« – repeated 31 times in the novel and 8 times in the first chapter alone – remains unnamed throughout, but is recognizable as Nottingham by its Midlands cityscape, the architectural style of its train station and the surrounding area in particular. It is the specific topography and architecture of »this city« which reminds the narrator of Tony, just as memories of Tony induce the narrator to seek out specific sites: »surely I must have gone into a pub around here with Tony, yes, there, of course, Yates's Wine Lodge, marvellous, a drink there, Tony introduced me to it, of course, the great bar downstairs, the gallery round [...] the poem I wrote afterwards, after my first visit there.« (»This poky lane«, 7). In a second associative step, it is memories of Tony that then trigger memories of having visited Tony together with Johnson's former girlfriend Wendy, whose later betrayal was to be traumatic for him: »I even now forget what it was she betrayed me over, some other man, yes, but I have dealt with that, I do not have to think of that any more, it is past, why does Tony's death and this city throw them up at me again?« (»His dog«, 5). It is passages such as this that show the close connection between »city« and »memory« in the novel: palimpsestic layers of memory triggered by urban landmarks and locations such as pubs or street corners are thematically and aesthetically central to the novel.

All in all, in keeping with everyday psychological experience, the novel suggests that it is events rather than routines we remember: Johnson mindlessly goes to Nottingham, believing this to be a routine visit, until a flash of recognition clearly designated as an ›event‹ makes him realize this is the city associated with his friend Tony.

These flashes of recognition also play with a Benjaminian view of memory and city as deeply connected: Johnson's representation of urban memory as spatialized, layered and topographically anchored, and at the same time as fragmented, disjointed, non-linear and ultimately hypertextual can helpfully be conceptualized in terms of Walter Benjamin's notion of »superposition« (for the following, cf. the more detailed discussion in Gurr 2017 and 2021, 52-109). In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin develops a view of the interpenetration of different layers of time and of their simultaneous co-presence in urban space, a phenomenon he refers to as »superposition« (1999, 172, 418, 854 *et passim*). Given a certain frame of mind – which Benjamin characterizes as that of the *flâneur*[11] – this simultaneous co-presence can be perceived and understood by an urban observer. He even speaks of

11 | The notion of the flâneur's – originally a white, male, cis, able-bodied walker in a Western European city – as the ultimate urban perspective can and should be problematized (for a helpful discussion of such criticism, see Knittle 2021, 108), but it speaks to both Johnson's and Benjamin's urban experience.

this »interpenetration and superposed transparency« of different times in a given space as the »perception of space [unique to] the flâneur« (1999, 546): »Thanks to this phenomenon, anything that ever potentially happened in a space is perceived simultaneously. Space winks at the flâneur: ›Well, whatever may have happened here?‹« (1999, 418, translation modified; cf. also 4, 390, 392, 418, 462, 841, 854 and 879 f.).[12]

These parallels become even more persuasive if one bears in mind the similarities in the strategy of representation: *The Arcades Project*, *Das Passagenwerk*, is a vast collection of about 1000 pages of some 3500 quotations and thoughts on 19th-century Paris, organized into 36 folders or sections [»Konvolute«] and a number of essays and outlines, proceeding not discursively, but by means of suggestive juxtaposition and montage. There are, for instance, multiple cross-references and some 30 different symbols marking thematic clusters *across* the different folders. This system of internal cross-references instead of a linear presentation strongly invites a kind of hypertextual reading following certain threads or thematic strands; Bolle here speaks of a »network-like reading« (Bolle 2010, 25; our translation). The non-linear representation both in the *Arcades Project* and in *The Unfortunates* is vital to the conceptualization of urban space as a space of layered, spatialized memory.

4. Conclusion

Above, we have cited at some length Johnson's own account of the day in Nottingham which led to the writing of *The Unfortunates*. This was the day when the »routine job of reporting a soccer match« and »the mechanics of travelling to and finding your way about in a strange place« led »to an almost automatic state«, only to be interrupted by a sudden recognition: »it hit me: I knew this city, I knew it very well.« That day, Johnson recalls, »all the afternoon I was there the things we had done together kept coming back to me as I was going about this routine job of reporting a soccer match: the dead past and the living present interacted and transposed themselves in my mind.« (Johnson 1973, 10-11). Just how closely the themes of city and memory are interconnected in the novel, how memory is anchored to specific sights, how a specific frame of mind allows for the overlay of past and present – and how these interrelations of memory, media and the city are consistently formulated in a highly self-reflexive, media-conscious way – is also indicated in a further key passage in the novel:

12 | The original reads: »Kraft dieses Phänomens wird simultan was alles nur in diesem Raume potentiell geschehen ist, wahrgenommen. Der Raum blinzelt den Flaneur an: ›Nun, was mag sich in mir wohl zugetragen haben?‹« (Benjamin 1992, 527).

This poky lane by a blackened sandstone church leads, is on my way up to the Council House, now it comes back to me, now I remember, the Council House, the local name for the Town Hall, in this city, where the Council meets, logical enough, now it comes back to me, the Council House. […] The architecture nothing, here, in general, as I remember, not even interesting houses behind the grasping façades of the businessmen's shops […] but what was there before, here before, that was subsequently disfigured? The cash drive, evident everywhere, why this is thought to be a booming city, ha, this was not a village before the industrial revolution, but nor was it developed, or at least if it was then they tore so much of it down, replaced it with these Victorian and Edwardian blocks, villas, dwellings, whatever. My mind passes dully over the familiar ground of my prejudices, so much of thought is repetition, is dullness, is sameness. […] Yes, this narrower part must be older, though it is hard to see it whole, outwardly. […] [»This poky lane«, 1 f.]

While it is probably a truism to state that, with literally any novel, its manner of presentation – narrative perspective, style, structure, treatment of chronology – will in one way or another correspond to its subject matter, there is hardly a novel of which this is more centrally true than of *The Unfortunates*: The non-linearity and the juxtaposition of routine and event are central to the representation of how memory works, how it is triggered by urban settings and how this is mediated in the novel – and how the novel itself functions as the attention-seeking ›event‹ device set against routines of media consumption (and contemporary literary production) that do not demand (or, in Johnson's view, deserve) anywhere near as much attention. The ›book in a box‹ is as much a novel *about* media, memory and the city, as it is a novel that wants to be self-consciously read *as* medium, memory and city.

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