

Polysèmes

Revue d'études intertextuelles et intermédiales

22 | 2019

Landscapes/Cityscapes

Ned Beaman's *Glow*, or the hallucinated city

Glow de Ned Beaman : la ville hallucinée

Claire Larssonneur



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/polysesmes/6029>

ISSN: 2496-4212

Publisher

SAIT

Electronic reference

Claire Larssonneur, « Ned Beaman's *Glow*, or the hallucinated city », *Polysesmes* [Online], 22 | 2019, Online since 20 December 2019, connection on 24 December 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/polysesmes/6029>

This text was automatically generated on 24 December 2019.

Polysesmes

Ned Beaman's *Glow*, or the hallucinated city

Glow de Ned Beaman : la ville hallucinée

Claire Larssonneur

- 1 Portraying London in the 2010s is an enterprise that undoubtedly involves a level of hubris “especially as novels proposing new and original views of the city continue to proliferate” in the early twenty-first century (Guignery 13). The city has been featured in so many novels, poems and films that it has become a trope and carries a very rich intertextuality. The sprawling, multicultural and motley nature of a modern metropolis in itself also proves a daunting challenge for writers, especially in the case of London, a city prone to so many redevelopments and urban reclamation projects. And yet this was the task that Ned Beaman set himself to for his third novel *Glow*, published by Sceptre in 2014. Himself a London-born, London-bred author, son of the renowned founder of Persephone Books, Nicola Beaman, listed among *Granta*'s Best Young British Novelists in 2013, Ned would know about literary London, and especially the inter-war era his mother's publishing house specialised in. His first two novels, *Boxer*, *Beetle* (2010) and *The Teleportation Accident* (2012), thus explored the ambiguities of the thirties, shuttling from Germany to London to the USA, bringing together Nazis and homosexuals, the wives of show business and a certain infatuation with science. The sudden shift to the contemporary scene with *Glow* is all the more striking. Ned Beaman claims—rather provocatively—the main motivation for this shift was that he had to write about the drug scene in London before he grew too old (he turned 28 when finishing *Glow*).¹ However the keen eye he has for historical detail was not lost on his portrayal of South London: Southwark, Bermondsey, Peckham are fully recognizable in the novel, which focuses for the first 15 chapters on London in 2010, before brief forays into Iceland and Guinea. Beaman's work on the urban landscape falls in line with Andrews' description of landscape as a form of “mental conversion” of our experience of the land, an artifice shaped equally by works of art and our daily practices (Andrews 1). Beyond drugs one should evoke here the influence of digital technologies which inform much of our lives and prompted Timothy Kennett to label *Glow* a “very

internety thriller” in his review for *3AM Magazine*. I therefore propose here to explore how Beaman weaves together the heritage of English cityscape and the contemporary aesthetics of the young and urban.

A Millennial's City

- 2 Beaman's London is undeniably that of a millennial, if we understand the term as a person reaching young adulthood in the early twenty-first century. With the characteristic cheekiness of youth, Raf, the main character who is 22, highlights the focus on the present that stands at the core of the novel: “Raf shrugs. He's always felt that if you have to research what was going on before you were born to find London interesting or magical, you don't really deserve to live there” (168).
- 3 *Glow* describes a twenty-first century *young* urban metropolis. Characters are portrayed as typical hipsters, immersed in passionate flings, fascinated by raves and drugs while engaged in sententious discussions about the grand meaning of life, pretty much like many youths all over the world. They are also digital natives, active on Youtube (41, 63, 72, 108, 117, 244), engaged in mailing lists and message boards, expertly using Google maps and Google earth in their investigation.
- 4 The choice of scenery within the novel equally corresponds to the lifestyle of partying youths: launderettes, junk food joints and an Iranian corner shop for daily necessities, a warehouse, the roof-top of a council block, a salvage yard or railway bridges for alternative encounters. Ned Beaman's method involved extensive research on Flickr and may feel at times like an Instagram account of trendy millennial London. It is also coherent with his use of very short snippets of reality, which could be linked to the culture of Twitter posts and hashtags: Beaman details inscriptions on the dusty vans and on railway bridges (34), truncated shop signs (86) and bill posters, and relishes in phrases like “social anxiety disorder for dogs” that have the feel of witty soundbites from social media.
- 5 Beaman's sources of inspiration are themselves markedly contemporaneous, at least in the account he gives through his blog where he exposes the making of *Glow*. Sharing some insights into his creative universe, Beaman created a playlist on Spotify² of the tracks he listened to while writing. Some titles by *Burial* are directly related to the plot, like “Night Bus” corresponding to the scene with the fox. Beaman describes this in detail in his *Flavorwire* interview by Jonathan Sturgeon:

Yeah, it's a very specific experience I was trying to crystallize in prose: sitting on the top deck of a night bus that's going through South London in the drizzle at 2 or 3 or 4 A.M. Fairly empty bus. Almost completely empty street. Listening to either the first or second *Burial* album on earbuds and maybe seeing a fox run across the road when you're stopped at the traffic lights.
- 6 Beaman also cites photographers Rinko Kawauchi and Rut Blees Luxemburg.³ Rinko Kawauchi, born 1972, lives and works in Tokyo. She has won numerous prizes and is currently one of the most famous Japanese photographers. Her photographs reveal the overlooked beauty of minute details of everyday life: the soap bubble blown by a little girl, a dish of strawberries, vines climbing unto a metallic chain: <http://rinkokawauchi.com/en/works/241/>. Kawauchi's use of close-ups and the poetic intensity she imparts on trifles match some of Beaman's description techniques. In the following example, broken glass is thus elevated to the status of diamond; the