

Report on “Masculinity and the Metropolis: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Art History, Film and Literature”

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György Kalmár
University of Debrecen
gykalmar@hotmail.com

“Masculinity and the Metropolis” was an interdisciplinary conference hosted by the University of Kent. Its expressed aim was “to explore the complex and contradictory engagements between masculinity and the developing metropolis since the beginning of the twentieth century.” As the organisers pointed out in their call for papers, the modern metropolis has been a paradoxical place in the twentieth century, as it was “simultaneously a place of liberation and possibility, whilst also a place of alienation and oppression.”

The questions addressed by the organisers provoked a wide range of papers. There were talks covering issues from geographical areas from China through the US to Hungary, papers on black and white, straight and gay, more and less privileged masculinities, boxers and painters, workers and photographers, in literature and all kinds of visual art. This colourful palette of topics was paired by a variety of researchers from various continents, at very different stages of their careers. The keynotes, as usual, were established scholars. Peter Ferry from the University College Dublin, delivered “Writing the City, Writing Masculinity: The Flaneur in American Fiction”, an excellent choice for opening such an event. His lecture showed how the figure of the flaneur has been employed and reimagined in contemporary American fiction, while also indicating the new configurations of masculinity it entails. Later there was also a whole panel devoted to flanerie. The second keynote was by Gabriel Koureas from the University of London. His lecture, “Male terrors in the Metropolis” addressed such other key concepts of the conference as terror, violence in the context of gender.

As the keynotes also proved, connecting the questions of metropolitan spaces and masculinity may be most fruitful. In the twentieth century these cities became condensed reservoirs of all sorts of masculinities with all kinds of cultural, economic, ideological and material backgrounds. The extremities characteristic of cities (wealth and poverty, cultural elites and masses of underprivileged people) produced a variety of gender-constructions hardly visible elsewhere. The fast pace of development also created possibilities of liberation and self-fulfilment for some, while brought about the crisis of their gendered identities for others.

In spite of the differences in topics, approaches and media representations analysed, there were several key points that tended to resurface time and time again during the conference.

Such were the crisis of masculinity, gay life in metropolitan spaces, masculinities after historical traumas (such as 9/11 or the Eastern European regime change), and war. Connecting cultural experiences from such diverse places as the US and Hungary opened up inspiring dialogues about post-traumatic masculinities. Recurring concepts and ideas included Connell's hegemonic masculinity and its subsequent critiques, the ways hegemony is negotiated and constantly renegotiated in context and interaction, how hegemony needs to be affirmed by the gaze of others, the flaneur and its contemporary versions, acts of physical engagements with metropolitan spaces, the re-imagining of urban space in counter-hegemonic narratives, the difference between the cartographical and the phenomenological, the process of forging usable pasts by urban communities, and finally the ways such historical events as 9/11 in the US rewrite dominant modes of representation.

In the light of the papers of the conference, the concept of "the crisis of masculinity" seems so wide in scope that it may eventually become quite meaningless. The general conclusion of the papers concerned (if such a general conclusion is possible) could be that gender is always in a flux, sometimes change is slower and thus easier to digest, but often more dynamic, thus creating the feeling of crisis. Such changes as the appearance of black boxers in Britain in the early 20th century, or the terrorist attacks of 9/11, or the regime changes in Eastern Europe or China may all result in such rapid, crisis-like rearrangements of gendered identities. Some respond to these situations with the somewhat predictable affirmation of hyper-masculinities, as in such American post-9/11 films as *United 93* (Peter Greengrass, 2006) or *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone 2006), some with conservative, backwards-looking, root-seeking attitudes, as in such Chinese films as *Hero* (Yimou Zhang, 2002). Yet, some rather reacted with sardonic, self-deprecating humour, as British newspapers responding to the losses of white boxers to black ones in the 1910s and 1920s, or such Eastern European films commenting on the post-1989 situation as *Kontroll* (Nimród Antal, 2003), and there were also examples of serious self-criticism, as in case of the protagonist of Spike Lee's *The 25th Hour* (2002).

Seeing such diverse cultural examples in one context usually leads to establishing creative links between seemingly distant fields. Though no official volume is planned, several international co-working projects started at the conference, indicating that this inspiration took place in Canterbury as well.

For the full programme of the conference see: <https://masculinemetropolis.wordpress.com/>