# "City of Unseen Steps": Blindness and Palimpsestual Sensory Impressions in *Jonathan Dark or the Evidence of Ghosts*

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Urban fantasy literature provides invaluable political and social criticism. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that critical reflections on everyday cultural discourses, especially surrounding contemporary urban spatial practices and identity, are the very fabric that these texts are made of. Although urban fantasy literature frequently depicts marginalised and disadvantaged individuals (cf. Ekman 453) such as the homeless or ethnic minorities, A. K. Benedict's *Jonathan Dark or the Evidence of Ghosts* serves as a rare example of urban fantasy literature depicting disability.

As I will demonstrate, the novel employs blindness as a narrative strategy to create an urban palimpsest consisting of a cacophony of different sensory impressions and to juxtapose the characters' diverging perceptions of the city. The depiction of blindness is also part of an attempt to provide a diverse set of characters and to challenge homogeneous concepts of urban identities and space. However, as a closer analysis reveals underlying power imbalances that suggest an inherent perpetuation of both gender stereotypes and ableism, the text can also serve as a cautionary tale highlighting the power that such popular literary genres possess to strengthen the very shackles they seek to break.

The novel follows DI Jonathan Dark as he seeks to solve a case surrounding a stalker threatening Maria, a young blind woman. To be more precise, Maria used to be blind. However, capitulating to the incessant outside pressure from others—especially from her former partner—she undergoes surgery to restore her vision. Since Maria grew up blind and is used to experiencing her surroundings by means of touch, smell, sound, and taste, she does not want her impression of the capital to be tainted by vision, which she considers a more superficial and undesirable sense. For this reason, she wears a blindfold at all times, rendering her de-facto blind.

The narrative is told from the point of view of various focaliser-characters (including Maria, Ed the stalker, and the police officer Jonathan) to create a juxtaposition of divergent perspectives on the urban setting. Applying Bakhtin's terminology, we can refer to this juxtaposition of a range of unmerged narrative perspectives as polyphony (cf. Bakhtin 6). For Bakhtin, this points towards a dialogic concept of truth, meaning that the truth is not a fixed, disembodied reality, but something that requires a multitude of different perspectives or forms of consciousness (cf. Robinson n.p.). This narrative strategy allows Benedict to uncover the way in which Western societies give precedence to vision and consider it to present a fixed truth, thus disregarding the

fact that all impressions of urban space—be they of a visual or any other sensory nature—are in fact highly subjective. Consequently, our understanding of urban space is not merely subject to, but also contributes to, contemporary socio-cultural and political discourses. This explains the popularity of dialogic narrative forms in urban fantasy literature, as these texts put great emphasis on the diversity of urban space, culture, and society. Choosing a narrative situation that dismisses homogeneous concepts clearly contributes to this endeavour. In this particular case, the narrative style lends a voice to underrepresented and marginalised individuals such as Jonathan, a police officer who likes to cross-dress, and Maria, a blind woman. The text portrays Maria's way of sensing the urban space as one of many other ways of doing so—all of which need to be considered valid and equal. This exemplifies urban fantasy's tendency to employ multiperspectivity in order to represent the diverse and multi-faceted nature of the postmodern city.

On the intratextual level, Maria's layered approach to decoding the urban environment contributes to this challenge of homogeneous representations of urban space. Her blindness is a core narrative strategy for conveying the palimpsestual nature of urban space and society. Jonathan referring to Maria's blindness as "a gift, not a disability" (Benedict 135) summarises the novel's stance on disability. It is continually portrayed as an advantage over other able-bodied characters, as Maria's ability to read and navigate the city far exceeds any other character's knowledge and skills (cf., e.g., Benedict 134). The novel also attempts to do away with common misconceptions surrounding blindness, as the following quote written from Maria's perspective reveals: "Neither of the men replies. Maybe they'd thought she couldn't hear: some people believe that since her sight is out of action, her other senses are as well; others that alternative senses compensate. Disability is a city of myths" (Benedict 22). This quotation, which also establishes a clear connection between the city and Maria's body and identity, alludes to the misconception that one sense is merely replaced by a number of other senses. On the contrary, for Maria, all of the senses mix: "Her world is complete, she doesn't need to see: her city gleams like the notes on a glockenspiel; her Thames is the colour of the way plums taste and she wants it to stay that way" (Benedict 6). This synesthetic experience presents the urban setting as a hyper-complex web of different overlapping and interconnected sensory layers. To reflect this spatial complexity, I propose to introduce the term 'meta-palimpsest,' suggesting an extension of the term 'palimpsest': in addition to the palimpsestual layers created by the combination of numerous senses, each of these senses in turn consists of various impressions or layers, as Maria for example smells or hears a multitude of things simultaneously.

In this way, Maria is in a superior position to Jonathan, who gives clear precedence to visual impressions. When she convinces him to wear a blindfold to perceive London in the same way she does, he remarks:

> '[there] were lots of images . . . [but] they were ones that I'd seen with my eyes. Even taking away my sight for an hour intensifies everything but I can't get near your experience. You have no visual pictures to reference. I can't imagine how fascinating your world must be.' (Benedict 134)

In other words, he can only replace visual impressions with memories of the same kind, thus his perception is pre-fabricated and inflexible. Similarly, the general public is accustomed to vision as their primary sense of orientation, as the following quote reveals:

> 'Three lamp-posts in from the beginning of the street. Here we are,' Maria says as she dives into a doorway. Maria's map is such a different version of the same city. 'Every time a council decides to cut its spending and take away a street light I have to rethink the city again.' 'And the police receive more reports of crime. Which costs the council more in the long term. It is short-sighted.' (Benedict 135)

This demonstrates the novel's awareness for the politics of space, as even inanimate objects—here the lamp-posts—possess the agency to discriminate against people like Maria who perceive the urban space in a manner that does not conform to the norm. Once again, the text portrays the urban space not as a fixed, non-negotiable truth, but instead reveals its heterotopic nature: the same part of the city embodies entirely different meanings for different individuals. While the DI's reply in this quotation reveals a focus on the visual city, for Maria, the lamp-posts' ability to reveal potential dangers is of minor importance, as she employs them as haptic clues and thus as a source of orientation. Hence, the text criticises authorities' lack of awareness for the diversity of urban citizens and their individual needs.

The dominant vision-based perception of the urban setting (here exemplified by Jonathan) is of a one-dimensional, nature and thus only offers restricted insights into a much more complex reality. By contrast, the impression of the city that originates from Maria's blindness may at times be chaotic and disorienting, but it is ultimately represented as preferable and more truthful, due to its multidimensional and complex nature. This reveals that alongside the narrative perspective, Maria's de-facto blindness is one of the key means by which the novel accomplishes a dialogic, palimpsestual depiction of the setting that gives room to all layers and subjective truths of the contemporary metropolis. This representation of urban space is employed to reveal subconscious mundane spatial practices and biases and to challenge homogenous concepts of urban space and identity.

The novel adds another type of spatial layer to the aforementioned sensory meta-palimpsest, namely body politics. In her essay "Bodies—Cities," Elizabeth Grosz argues that the city is "the most immediate and concrete locus for the production and circulation of power" (48-49). In *Jonathan Dark or the Evidence of Ghosts*, such space-related power imbalances centre around gender and disability. The text pits Maria's blindness against the other characters' prejudiced perception of her disability. Despite her extraordinary ability to read the city, the choices Maria makes regarding her own body never cease to be contested—especially by the male characters. As they are unable to adapt their pre-existing perception of blindness to her lived reality, they attempt to impose their ideology onto her. Her own former partner, when trying to urge her to undergo regenerative surgery, even goes as far as to insinuate that her rejection of vision turns her into a monster (cf. Benedict 107), thus demonstrating how the disabled body is Othered. In addition,

her inability to see others is juxtaposed with their incessant gaze. The unchecked male gaze, most prominently represented by the stalker, makes her feel threatened and ultimately leads to her no longer being permitted to leave her home. While this is in order to protect her, it renders her blindness—formerly described as a gift—a disability. She is subjugated by a socio-cultural system that marks her as inferior to the male, able-bodied criminal. In other words, the novel presents vision as a more powerful sense which endows the owner with more agency than all of the other senses combined.

It is via the stalker Ed that the male gaze is taken to an extreme, as he eroticises Maria's disability. In addition, the free indirect discourse presenting Ed's interior monologue introduces another aspect that is interconnected with this theme of body politics and agency, namely the gendering of senses:

What would making love be like for Maria? She certainly is interested in sex. Maybe it doesn't matter that she's blind. Women aren't supposed to be as visual as men. He's also heard that they have better imaginations but that is not good. When they close their eyes you don't know who they are thinking of. (Benedict 186)

Here, the stalker clearly describes vision as an inherently masculine sense. In accordance with this view, the characters' gender does indeed determine their way of sensing the city: as mentioned above, Maria perceives the city with all of her senses alongside mental images or maps. Meanwhile, both the stalker's gaze and Jonathan's initial spatial practice represent male vision and the masculine urban experience. Jonathan's initial way of perceiving the city hints at the aforementioned gender-based power dynamics:

> Walking through London at night used to make him feel better . . . . He's been strolling through the dark city since he was a teenager, walking from Wandsworth to the Wapping streets he grew up on, taking an alleyway rather than a brightly lit street, searching out a road he's never gone down before and drifting along it. It used to feel that he was having an affair with the Night City, the one that lets slip a shoulder of moon through the clouds to see him through, that held his hand from the South Bank to Camberwell to Nunhead and back, that made him want to learn its every line and dimple and for it to know him. (Benedict 55)

Jonathan's masculinity and vision empower him to walk potentially dangerous streets in a flâneur-like, idle manner and to perceive the urban space as a female entity, an object of male desire that is to be explored and conquered. In other words, the city is a passive agent in a network that is dominated and controlled by male individuals. Yet, as the novel progresses, this traditional masculinity and dominance over the urban space gradually diminishes. As Maria teaches him to perceive the additional sensory layers of space, Jonathan becomes increasingly disoriented, until eventually, "the world is not as he thought a day, a week, a year ago. . . . Everything he thought he could rely on has changed" (Benedict 196). His increasing spatial disorientation demonstrates how the characters' development is closely tied to their perception of the urban space. While

his original sense of space is put into question, he simultaneously raises questions relating to his (sexual) identity. London is used as a metaphor to give expression to his non-binary identity: "It's a misleading description—transvestite, cross-dresser—as if gender were two opposing riverbanks: if that is to be the way, for now, he would rather swim between them" (Benedict 210). The fact that it takes a woman to introduce him to the additional sensory layers of London needed to solve his case further adds to his emasculation. Jonathan's departure from traditional masculinity thus coincides with a decreased focus on vision and a decline in agency, thus confirming the stalker's concept of vision as a predominantly male sense. Consequently, Jonathan's new identity and Maria represent the novel's attempt to include non-hegemonic urban spatial practices and identities, whereas the stalker alongside Jonathan's previous identity represents traditional gender roles, homogeneous spatial practices, and ableist ideologies. The novel thus oscillates between traditional perspectives on urban identities and space on the one hand, and a demand to better integrate and understand disabled citizens and their individual needs on the other. While urban fantasy commonly features social criticism surrounding issues such as racism and classism, Benedict's novel extends the genre's political reach to include additional facets of body politics and politics of space.

However, the novel's ending puts this progressive venture into question. Not only does it take a male, able-bodied character to save the disabled damsel in distress—despite her independence and extraordinary skills—the text also concludes with a conventional ending, namely the romantic relationship between the protagonists. This happy ending is, however, only possible once Jonathan's gender identity and spatial disorientation allow him to understand Maria's sense of the world. This is reminiscent of a canonical literary depiction of blindness. Much like Rochester's loss of vision in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, it establishes an equilibrium between the protagonists and is thus a prerequisite for their liaison.

The novel's ending, which further underscores its underlying ableist and misogynist tendencies, is not redeemed by Benedict's choice to include female solidarity and revenge, either. Tanya, who plays a major role in the stalker's death, appears as a ghost and states, "I watch him. I've been in his apartment" (Benedict 212). The roles of victim and perpetrator have been inverted, as Tanya—a woman and former victim of his—tails the male, former stalker in the final scenes of the novel, while he suffers from his inability to escape:

> Ed runs towards Maria and Jonathan. Tanya is behind him. She is always behind him. She walks slowly yet never more than a few metres away. . . . Ed wishes the Thames would take him far away from Tanya; from what he has done; from this city of unseen steps. It won't. He can't get away. Death has no sequel. (Benedict 262)

While on the surface this can be read as a cathartic outcome that re-establishes justice, the underlying message cannot be ignored: not only does Tanya have to die and swap her former human shape for an existence as a ghost, i.e., a supernatural being with elevated powers compared to the human counterparts, in order to be able to prevail over Ed, but she also has to commit

the exact same crimes by killing him (cf. Benedict 243-244) and then stalking his supernatural remains. We can thus conclude that true gender equality, in this novel, is only feasible between ghosts, not humans. Nonetheless, the two characters' actions are judged in entirely different ways. While Ed's motive is left largely unexplored, Tanya's act of revenge is presented as a justified act of female empowerment and solidarity. Furthermore, it is implied that the Thames helps complete Tanya's murder of Ed by "[rushing] in and [reaching] for his legs" before it "closes in around him, fills his throat, taking him for its own, taking him on his own journey" (Benedict 243-244). This *deus ex machina* solution allows the author to alleviate Tanya of any potential guilt or judgement, as the final steps of the murder are carried out not by her but by the force of nature.

In conclusion, Benedict's novel employs both blindness and polyphonic narration as strategies to achieve two goals. First, it creates a palimpsestual sensory representation of the contemporary metropolis that does justice to the contemporary city's hypercomplex and heterotopic nature and challenges homogenous concepts of urban space. Second, it employs the dialogic sense of truth that it achieves in this way to represent the diversity of the city's inhabitants and to do justice to the neurodiversity and divergent spatial practices that this broad range of identities encompasses. Nonetheless, in doing so it succumbs to literary tropes that perpetuate the same gender stereotypes, power imbalances, and ableist tendencies that it tries to eradicate as part of its ambitious political intention.

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