**Urbanization and the City Image in Lowry at Tate Britain:**

**Towards a Critique of Cultural Cityism**

The telescopic distance glimpsed between buildings exposes a vast industrial city. The inspiration is Salford, Greater Manchester, but by the artists own admission, this is no city in particular. The sky is dark and bruised. Chimneys are bilging smoke. The gloom hangs, heavy. The houses, factories and warehouses that occupy the middle ground are orange-red, yellow and black. The densely assembled crowd in the lower third of the composition seem to act in opposition to this grim setting. They are miniaturised by their surroundings but not reduced as human beings. They are jolly, busy and comic; but also purposeful and serious. They converge upon the square, drawn to the centre by the thrill of encounter, by the promise of learning or achieving some kind of political or spiritual transcendence (in the upper right corner of the crowd an orator is raised on a platform). The crowd are there *because* of the industrial context, but also *in spite of it*. Perhaps Henri Lefebvre (2014a: 309) hits upon something when he claims, ‘[i]t is in its streets that the life of the large industrial city is at its most original and authentic’. The painting described here is L.S. Lowry’s ‘Our Town’ from 1941, an image that conveys but also helps constitute a primal scene of urban modernism (see Figure one).

[Insert Figure One Here[[1]](#endnote-1)]

**Fig. 1**

**Our Town (1941)**

Oil paint on canvas

43 x 62

Yet this paper is not so much about L.S. Lowry’s paintings as it is about the exhibition entitled ‘Lowry and the Painting of Modern Life’ that ran from June to October 2013 at Tate Britain. The title of the exhibition is a deliberate nod—that carries many connotations—to curator T.J. Clark’s landmark book about Manet and Paris, *The Painting of Modern Life*. Specifically, the article explores and begins to offer a critique of the ‘cityism’ evoked by the exhibition at a time when a more expansive, ‘planetary’ urbanization is argued by many to have superseded ‘the city’ as the dominant urban form (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2014; Brenner, 2013; Merrifield, 2013). It takes this problematic and works it through an examination of contemporary metropolitan culture, addressing in particular James Donald’s (1995: 92) point that the city is a *historically specific* mode of seeing. Indeed, much of the literature on images of the city (e.g. Lynch, 1960; Rodwin and Hollister, 1984) belongs to a period where ‘the city’ was taken-for-granted as the most distinctive spatial form of urban modernity.

What has changed is whether ‘[…] we really know, today, where the “urban” begin and ends, or what its most essential features are, socially, spatially or otherwise?’ (Brenner et al, 2011: 226). This thesis is largely derived from Lefebvre who, in despondent fashion, argues the dissolution of the city means that ‘the urban, conceived and lived as a social practice, is in the process of deteriorating and perhaps disappearing’ (Lefebvre 2014b: 204). The city, he argues, loses ‘the features it inherited from the previous period: organic totality, belonging, an uplifting image […]’ (Lefebvre, 2003a: 14). As cities are transformed into centres of decision-making, power and consumption and superseded by a generalised, more expansive urbanization, urban life itself becomes increasingly frail. For Lefebvre (1996: 131), urban life is a set of relations premised upon simultaneity, gathering, convergence and encounter and must be seen as analytically distinct from economically and technologically driven urbanization processes. Due to the growing prominence of abstract space (where exchange value dominates use value) and tendencies towards hierarchy, homogeneity and fragmentation (see Lefebvre 2003b), capitalist urbanization processes tend to act in opposition to the urban life that Lefebvre values so much.

The display of Lowry’s city images at Tate Britain therefore takes on a poignancy that is symptomatic of what Lefebvre (2003a: 183) identifies as a ‘long period of disorientation’ between the dissolution of the industrial city and the planetarization of the urban. For Lefebvre (2014b: 204) much of what remains of ‘the city’ has been museumified. Huyssen (2008: 8) argues the museal aspects of the contemporary city reveal the deep sense of loss with which the modern metropolis is increasingly viewed. Stripped of its urban glories, the Western metropolis becomes increasingly reliant on ‘imagineering’ to create a sense of historical city-ness that ‘will attract both tourists and new residents as well as satisfy the desires of the local elites […]’ (ibid: 9). The Lowry exhibition offers a new twist on the museal in that Lowry’s images of the industrial city are exhibited in a prestigious, elite gallery that *is itself* an image of London as ‘global city’. Just as Baudrillard (1981: 96) has spoken of images ‘doubled and redoubled by a mirror’, here ‘the city’—or rather the image of cityness that lingers through the monumentality of the Tate—stages an exhibition of images of its own disappearing form and content. Lowry at the Tate is an example of what is defined in this paper as ‘cultural cityism’: at a time of both planetary urbanization and gentrification of the urban core (i.e. a simultaneous process of de-centring and re-centring), cultural cityism takes the form of nostalgia and/or longing for the city and urban life that is expressed, in broad terms, through a fascination with/ fetish for commodified images of the Twentieth-Century Western metropolis.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The opening section clears ground first, by discussing L.S. Lowry as a painter of the industrial city; second, by interrogating the relationship of Tate Britain to contemporary London; and third, by discussing the qualities and political importance of the ‘city image’. The section that follows considers the urban-historical context of the exhibition, drawing on Lefebvre and others theories of implosion-explosion and the increasing resonance of the city image. The next section argues that Lowry’s paintings of the city, when exhibited in the non-conflictual milieu of Tate Britain, contribute to an urban pastoral that pacifies the class struggle intrinsically connected with key urban transformations associated with the dissolution of the city. A parallel is made with the consumption of city images in popular culture more widely. Lefebvre hints towards this phenomenon but, of course, he could not have envisaged the extent to which city images saturate contemporary culture. However, it is argued that fetishism of the city image should not be read simply as a form of alienation. Using politically and aesthetically nuanced insights from Benjamin and Rancière, it is suggested the clashing of Lowry’s paintings with the image of the city provided by Tate Britain produces a dialectical image that acts as a shock of recognition that, in turn, poses critical, searching questions about our current urban condition such as how we might imagine or provide an image for it. The exhibition is argued, in this way, to be indicative of potential sources of departure from debilitating, overly nostalgic forms of cultural cityism more generally.

**Lowry, the Tate and the City Image**

Discussion of the L.S. Lowry exhibition has been dominated by critic’s reflections on the artistic merit of the painter. Many critics, including John Barrell (2013) in the *London Review of Books,* were positive, declaring the show a revelation: ‘the most radical and exciting re-evaluation of a British artist I have ever encountered […]’. The late Brian Sewell (2013) in the *London Evening Standard* was not so impressed, claiming the exhibition was ‘sentimental’ and Lowry was a man without wisdom or urbanity. Charles Darwent (2013) in *The Independent* complained Lowry dehumanized the urban working-class, depicting them as ‘a mob of flat-capped Morlocks’. There has been little interest in the urban context of the exhibition save for passing comments about why the Tate chose to ignore Lowry for so long (it was his first ever exhibition at the Tate and the first major London showing since his death in 1976).

*L.S. Lowry*

There is a great deal of scholarship on Lowry, but only the space here to point to the most relevant aspects for the analysis that follows. John Berger (1980) argues that Lowry’s style has often been patronised by critics. This tendency, he argues, is a form of self-defence used by critics to avoid discussing the subject matter of his paintings (ibid: 95). Berger is fascinated by Lowry’s ability to make his urban crowds look ‘so simultaneously *civic* and *deprived’* (ibid: 97 original emphasis). He recommends Lowry’s ‘social realism’, praising him for being ‘courageous, obstinate, unique’ (ibid: 96) while damning critics who refuse to acknowledge the social or historical meaning of Lowry’s art. Berger makes three main points in his appreciation of L.S. Lowry. First*,* he argues that although Lowry’s work corresponds to existing places, his paintings are ‘synthetic, insofar as they are constructed from his observation and memory of different incidents and places’ (ibid: 98). Second, Berger describes Lowry’s paintings as ‘static, local and subjectively repetitive’ (ibid: 96). Lowry’s streets, doorsteps, squares and flat-caps belong in the 1920s—the decade he claimed to be at his happiest—yet were present in compositions painted even decades later. Third, Lowry’s subjective gaze on the city exaggerates a feeling of changelessness. His figures appear as ‘fellow-travelers through a life which is impervious to most of their choices’ (ibid: 97). He explains how ‘[t]he bustle of the crowds, the walk to the sea and back, the fight, accident, the crippling of others, changes nothing’ (ibid: 99). For Berger, these three elements combine to create ‘an atmosphere of dramatic obsolescence’ (ibid: 99). Rather than taking this as evidence of a limited artistic vision, Berger insists it was Lowry’s *choice* to obsess over the details of the slow dissolution of a city that was once ‘the workshop of the world’ (see also Spalding, 1987). That Salford and Manchester comprised the first and archetypal industrial city—‘a new kind of city in which the formation of a new kind of human world seemed to be occurring’ (Marcus, 1998: vii)—is underscored by the attention it received from Engels in *The Condition of the Working-class in England in 1844*. Engels recognized the industrial city was not only important in and of itself, but was part of a coherent totality; a concrete, complex and systematic whole.

The curators of the exhibition, Berkeley art historians T.J. Clark and Anne Wagner, view Lowry as a painter of both the humdrum *and* the ‘world historical’. His paintings of the ‘industrial scene’ (Lowry’s own phrase) are world-historical precisely becausethey are constricted, monotonous, awkward and *obvious*. After all, these are the qualities of the social order—the immense social fact—that Lowry chose to confront (Clark, 2013: 21). Lowry’s compositions ‘could have only come from an intellect open to—for half a century absorbed in—the enormity of what “industry” had done’ (ibid: 30). Clark also argues that despite Lowry’s political conservatism, his paintings provide a map for the ‘whole class struggle’ (ibid: 62). And yet, despite these accomplishments, Lowry always remained ‘an artist of the little’; even his later, industrial landscapes are, Clark suggests, essentially modest (ibid: 33). The coldness and drabness of industrial city cried out to be painted and, in England, the birthplace of the industrial, it was Lowry (and only Lowry) who wholeheartedly devoted himself to the challenge. Remarkably, in Lowry, aestheticism and social awareness are not in contradiction (ibid: 26). Indeed, Clark admires how Lowry, like other great modern painters, was able to maintain a sense of detachment, to suspend affect (ibid: 47). This kind of ‘icy aestheticism’ is cultivated in the very best modern painting ‘so as to keep alive the possibility of framing and understanding the present, and therefore changing it’ (Clark, 1984: xxx). In this sense Clark views the stasis identified by Berger rather as a pregnant pause.

Lowry’s achievement in capturing both the totality and detail of everyday life in the (disappearing) industrial city offers, in the context of the present urban moment, a powerful ‘presentation of presence’ (Rancière 2009: 23). His images of the industrial city are raised to the rank of absolute Idea (ibid: 29). This explains, in part, why they attract almost a ‘gaze of divine transcendence’ (ibid: 23) from their curators. This reaction to Lowry is understandable, especially when considering Clark’s long term enthusiasm for painters able to capture the look and the ‘ways of seeing’ modern life in the city, not least because these ‘forms of visualization’ reveal the intricacies of social class distinction (see Clark 1984). The curator’s delay in offering appreciation of Lowry’s painting is also reasonable, especially if we take into account Clark’s (1984: xxiv) point that images should not be treated as dead illustrations or functions of a pre-established script; rather, they can tell us new things and/or gain in significance over time.

Whereas Lowry’s fixation with the industrial scene in 1920s Salford might occasionally be viewed as mawkish (*The Cripples* from 1949 would almost certainly fall under this category), the artist stated that in picturing the bleak poverty of the industrial city there was no room for sentiment (Spalding, 1987: 22). Rather than view the paintings themselves as nostalgic it is instructive, rather, to view Lowry’s enduring popularity as evidence of a certain melancholy or sense of loss. As Waters (1999) explains, it was only after the urban conditions captured by Lowry had been drastically altered by redevelopment that his art became widely appreciated:

[I]n Britain in the 1950s, the pressure to forget was paralleled by a desire to remember, and it is no accident that urban renewal was accompanied by an intense interest in collecting those objects that could serve, in part, both to resurrect a lost past and to reconnect people to it […] (ibid: 137).

Lowry’s continued popular appeal is linked explicitly to the ability of his city images to remind people how urban life in England once was—in both its austerity and its joys—and to connect the contemporary urban imaginaries with the potentials of this ‘other’ city.

*Tate Britain*

The recently renovated Tate Britain (see figure 2), like its compatriot the Tate Modern, is an image or symbol of global, elite London, a ‘city’ that since the 1986 deregulation of the City of London’s financial markets, has evolved from a major Western metropolis to one of a select few ‘command points in the organization of the world economy’ (Sassen, 2000: 4). Approaching the gallery from the south, from Vauxhall Bridge, one is struck by the construction work going ahead on the riverbank opposite where the Temple-like structure of the Tate stands (see figures 2 and 3). These luxury apartments at first appear to clash with the redbrick Millbank estate that is located behind the Tate. This estate, built between 1897 and 1902, was one of the earliest developments of social housing in London and is now a historic conservation area. Since Margaret Thatcher’s ‘right to buy’ scheme was introduced in 1980, over half of the flats in the estate have entered the private market (Boffey 2014). At the time of writing a one bedroom flat in this model working-class housing development is advertised for sale at £740,000. In terms of abstract value, the Millbank estate is subject to the same inflationary pressures that stimulate the new-build construction on the South Bank. The busy thoroughfare of Millbank apart, Tate Britain is surrounded by the unpopulated square of Chelsea College of Art and a series of quiet leafy streets. The landscape is peppered with CCTV cameras and the impersonal ‘instructions for use’—buy tickets, queue, shop, park, eat, drink etc.—that Augé (1995) argues are characteristic of ‘non-places’.

[Insert figure two here]

**Fig. 2 Tate Britain**

[Insert figure three here]

**Fig. 3 Riverside development opposite Tate Britain**

Tate Britain—then called the National Gallery of British Art—first opened its doors to the public in 1897. The gallery, designed by architect Sidney J. Smith on behalf of the philanthropist Henry Tate and featuring a grand porticoed entranceway and central dome, was built on the former site of the Millbank penitentiary prison, which had been demolished in 1890 (the brick were used to build the Millbank estate). The site was deemed a dangerous location, ‘excluded from the civilized city and heavily associated with dirt, inaccessibility and crime’ (Taylor, 1994: 12). The gallery was Tate’s gift to the nation; to promote British art in competition with French art, but also for the social purpose of ‘assimilating’ social classes in order to quell fears of Parisian-style urban insurrection (Miles, 2007: 44). The gallery represented a fantasy of a mixed audience, ‘at ease with itself, variegated and occupied’ (Taylor, 1994: 23). The reality, however, was the Tate soon became a cultural magnet for London’s middle classes (ibid: 27). After a series of extensions, in 1932 the gallery officially became known as Tate Gallery, the name by which it had always been popularly known. It was only after the opening of Tate Modern in 2000 that the gallery was re-branded as Tate Britain. Since then, as Prior (2003: 52) explains, the gallery has become a reflexive, ‘hyper-modern’ institution combining ‘elements of tradition with consumer populism […]’, extending a postmodern culture of spectacle that uses art to feed an expanding world of commerce and merchandising (ibid: 53). In 2011 a major renovation of Tate Britain began as part of the £45 million Millbank Project, funded mainly ‘through the generosity of private individuals and foundations’[[2]](#endnote-2) . As Will Self (2014) comments, the London Tate museums’ success is at least partly due to them being the beneficiaries of flight capital, money that is extracted from less-developed economies and looking for a high-return income.

Lefebvre (2014a: 602) explains how monuments provide a city with its face, or image. The Tate, with its temple-like appearance, offers a recognisable global face for London, a branded visage of the city that seeks, welcomes and rewards investment. In typical neoliberal fashion then, the gallery is both privatised and populist. It is a symbol of London’s past—the triumph of art, commerce and personal wealth over the rabble—and a symbol of contemporary global London’s vast and growing accumulation of cultural and economic capital. Yet, as shall become apparent, the Tate also remains an ‘active nucleus’ (ibid)—a social hub—for some of the ideologies and self-conscious practices of cultural cityism that are preponderant today.

*City Image*

And so, at the exhibition, images of the industrial city (Salford and Manchester) are juxtaposed against the image of a global city (‘command and control’ London). The exhibition is evidence of how, as Highmore (2005: 22) puts it, urban culture is never something that is confined to the past, but is a ‘living physical and imaginary world’. As Harvey (1990: 286) points out, rapid urban change can result in the reversion to images of a lost past, hence the growing importance of museums and the intensification in fascination with modern urban ruins. Moreover, in late capitalism, ‘the image of places and spaces becomes as open to production and ephemeral use as any other’ (ibid: 293). Lowry at Tate Britain is an example of this, a display of nostalgia for ‘a kind of urban formation that really belonged to [an] earlier stage of heroic modernity, rather than to our own time’ (Huyssen, 2008: 15). And yet, images of the city should also be considered as *part of* urbanization processes, an essential part of how urbanization internalises and re-produces its own image (see also Donald, 1999; Highmore, 2005; Pile 2005). Imaginary and symbolic dimensions of the city are, in this way, always entangled with materialized social relations (Balshaw and Kennedy, 2000: 5). Images make the city visible; or, in the case of the exhibition, they provide a sense of city-ness at a time where urbanization processes are actually making the city indistinguishable from the non-city. None of this need be tied to *specific* cities; rather, images can inspire us to think about cities and urban life more generally. As Bender (2002: 219) explains, visual representations of cities are also representations of a ‘public’ or civic culture. Lowry’s ‘dreamscapes’ are not only images of the *materiality* of city buildings and streets but also attempts to capture on canvas the modern, urban, industrial working-class *life* he saw ebbing away before his eyes.

City images are oriented not only towards the past; they can also project towards the future by striving to ‘attain something not yet present’ (Lefebvre, 2014a: 582). Images can appear as signifiers ‘whose *signified* we are presently looking for’ (Lefebvre, 2003a: 131 original emphasis). On one hand, Lowry’s dour images seem to offer a justification for all the anti-urban trends that gathered pace in the 20th-century (slum clearance, suburbanization and gentrification etc.). Indeed, the exhibition itself does imply a sense of urban progress; a feeling that comes from the sanitized milieu and serene mood of the Tate rather than the curators’ intentions (who argue that Lowry’s paintings continue to speak to the present). On the other hand, Lowry’s city images, especially his early paintings of the industrial city, are resonant today because they reveal an urbanity that is missing from the global city (and this effect, in part, is *also* a consequence of the sterile hosting environment provided by the Tate and London SW1).

**The Dissolution of the City and the Intransigence of the City Image**

Signs of the city and urban life abound but in reality the city, or what remains of it, is rearranged over a much wider plane in the likeness of a sum or combination of elements (Lefebvre, 1996: 127).

This section postulates why, at this particular historical conjuncture, there is such a preoccupation with images of the city. It focuses on three related aspects: first, Lefebvre’s theory of implosion/ explosion and its artistic and/or imagistic consequences; second, Lefebvre’s hypothesis that even as urbanization reaches the scale of the planetary, the image of the city remains potent in terms of how we continue to organise and understand urban life; third, the perceptive claim made by Wachsmuth (2014) that the tenacity of city concept in our expansively urbanized world is making a fetish of the city.

Lefebvre argues that as cities achieve greater concentrations of property, speculation and (post)-industrial activity, the urban centre—where people live, work and play—implodes, acting as a spur to the expansion, or ‘explosion’ of urbanization. The city ‘attracts wealth and monopolizes culture just as it concentrates power. But it collapses under the weight of its wealth. The more it concentrates the necessities of life, the more unliveable it becomes’ (Lefebvre, 2003a: 92). How might we understand this process? Brenner (2013: 102), who has led the recent resurgence of interest in one of Lefebvre’s most challenging, misunderstood and/or overlooked urban theses, explains the process in terms of dialectically intertwined moments of concentration and extension. Brenner argues that urban theory has tended to be preoccupied with the former, with agglomeration, whereas less attention has been devoted to how the process of agglomeration is premised upon, and contributes to global transformations of socio-spatial organisation. This occurs in the construction of dense webs of relations between concentrated centres (formerly known as ‘cities’) and other places, territories and scales such as peripheral cities, towns and villages, transportation corridors, transoceanic shipping lanes, underground landscapes of resources extraction and so on. The product of agglomeration is therefore a radiated, extended and intensely inter-connected form of urbanization that implodes back into the site of agglomeration as it unfolds.

Extended urbanization has become ‘shapeless, formless and apparently boundless […] making it hard to tell where borders reside and what’s inside and what’s outside’ (Merrifield 2013: 910). According to Merrifield’s interpretation of Lefebvre, urban society is no longer organised around the city. Rather an expansive urban fabric now ‘outstrips our cognitive and sensory facilities; the mind boggles at the sensory overload that today’s urban process places upon us’ (ibid: 911). Importantly, for the arguments advanced here, this induces a *crisis of representation*, evoking ‘what Clement Greenberg (1961) called “the crisis of the easel picture”, the crisis of the classic framing — maybe the classic framing of the city’ (Merrifield, 2013: 914). Greenberg’s original point was made in relation to the ‘unframed space’ of Jackson Pollock’s paintings. Merrifield suggests the intense ‘skeins and swirls, spirals and drips’ of Pollock’s art is ‘somehow quintessentially urban’. He argues that ‘[f]lows of investment that produce space […] have the same vital, spontaneous energy of a Pollock loop’ (ibid). The point that urbanization can no longer be framed conceptually, but also artistically/aesthetically by ‘the city’ is important. It is addressed, inadvertently perhaps, by Brenner (2013; 2014) who furnishes his recent work with clever images of what he and his colleagues understand to be depictions of planetary urbanization e.g. satellite images of night-time lights, diagrams of typologies of the Swiss urban landscape, a submarine cable map and Garth Lenz’s photograph of the Tar Sands in Alberta, Canada. These images dramatically capture the spread of urbanization but are, in the main, analytic, managerial or technocratic. They seem to lack any social or cultural content or resonance. The nagging doubt, when reviewing these images, is whether, as Marshall Berman (1982: 24) once put it, we have ‘lost the art of putting ourselves in the picture, of recognising ourselves as participants and protagonists in the art and thought of our time’. In these images there is little sense of the experience or travails of contemporary urbanization or a reflection upon the rights that inhabitants, migrants or workers may or may not enjoy. Indeed, from an alternative theoretical perspective to Brenner and Merrifield, one concerned more with understanding explosive forms of urbanization in terms of assemblages, Bender (2002: 221) points to how the paucity of images able to capture contemporary urbanization translates to growing uncertainty around notions of urban citizenship (for detailed discussions of this issue see Purcell 2008; 2013).

Lefebvre (2003a: 57) argues the reign of the city is ending: ‘the “city” object exists [now] only as a historical entity’. Yet, this decline does not result in urban ruins or a hollowed out shell. Rather, ‘the urban core (an essential part of the image and the concept of the city) splits open and *yet maintains itself* […]’ (Lefebvre, 1996: 74 emphasis added). This notion is difficult to understand, but Lefebvre hints this is possible because the urban centre—the very image of cityness—is maintained through the preservation of monuments and museums (such as Tate Britain); the continued use of cities as sites that concentrate power, bureaucracy and consumption; and, finally, the proliferation of mobile images of the city (photographs, reproduced paintings, cinema, literature, travel guides etc.). As the historical form of the city is superseded by expansive, explosive urbanization the city becomes a phantom, or shadow of urban reality (Lefebvre, 2003a: 35). The city becomes an ideology rather than a valid analytical form; it becomes a ‘pseudoconcept’:

An image or representation of the city can perpetuate itself, survive its conditions, inspire an ideology and urbanist projects. In other words the “real” sociological “object” is an image and an ideology! (ibid: 57)

This line of argument is taken up by Angelo and Wachsmuth (2015: 24) who argue that urban studies is beset by the problem of ‘methodological cityism’, a research programme in which the city has remained the privileged lens for studying contemporary processes of urbanization that are not limited to the city.

It is suggested here, in adherence with Lefebvre’s postulation, that Lowry at Tate Britain coheres with a hegemonic ‘urbanist project’ to preserve the image of the city. The exhibition is a cultural example of how the city ‘perpetuates itself’, an apt illustration of what is referred to here as cultural cityism. Wachsmuth (2014: 76) stresses how the city concept is not neutral or innocent, but rather is ideological: it is a ‘structured misrecognition that critical urban theory and practice must confront and seek to change alongside the sociomaterial forms that produce it’ (ibid: 87). Wachsmuth argues that in the absence of the historical reality of the city, attraction to the city concept should be considered a fetish. This argument provides an interesting advance on Lefebvre’s (1991: 28) suggestion that space, as a social product, contains an ‘illusion of transparency [that] goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent’. Arguably though, it is in the realm of culture where cityism is *most* prevalent and pervasive in its ideological effects. As such, the analysis below focuses on the fetish of the city image: the allure of a ‘thing’ that, in concealing its relations of production, appears, as Marx famously claims, *abound in metaphysical subtleties*.

**Urban Pastoral**

[T]he institutional is the enemy of urban life (*la vie urbaine*), whose fate it freezes. (Lefebvre, 2014b: 204)

It is suggested here that the Tate exhibition is emblematic of a contemporary strain of urban pastoral that pacifies social conflict while making a fetish of the image of the centripetal mid-Twentieth-century city. This argument, in relation to Lowry, has precedent. Waters (1999: 121) argues, that Lowry’s popularity has always been part of an attempt to memorialise the working-class and to codify the industrial North as a site for popular remembrance. Lowry’s works depict a world that has been lost (ibid: 122); they construct an aestheticized, fairyland version of the North (ibid: 133). This paper, however, does not readily accept this position. It has more sympathy with the curators’ understanding of Lowry as a painter who understood and starkly expressed the class apartheid that is the fundamental reality of capitalist modernity (Clark, 2013: 43). However, the argument put forward here is that, no doubt against the intentions and desires of the curators—whose audacious aim of bringing Lowry and the themes of class, modernism and the industrial city to Tate Britain was remarkably met—the exhibition does produce a modified urban pastoral that fetishes the industrial cityand its perceived ‘authentic’ qualities.

Authenticity, for Zukin (2010: xii), is a schizoid notion that is inferred today in response to uncertainty. Authenticity differentiates individuals, groups or landscapes according to them being judged ‘historically first or true to a traditional vision’ (ibid). Authenticity also confers an aura of moral superiority (ibid: xiii). Authenticity is, then, not only derived from origins, but is ascribed as a result of an urban place being deemed ‘historically new, innovative or creative’ (ibid). The critical point is that not everyone has the training or authority to ascribe authenticity. Authenticity becomes, therefore, a potent, legitimising force in mobilising bourgeois urbanist projects that are committed to promoting an ideology of cityness. To judge an urban form, or an image of it, as authentic is to infer that it is worthy of reassessment and perhaps even, cherishment and preservation.

Such an understanding of authenticity is implicit in Julian Stallabrass’ (1999) development of the concept ‘urban pastoral’. Pastoral art is *about* common people—it has ‘authenticity’—but is not *for* or *by* them:

The essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relation between rich and poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings (felt as the most universal subject, something fundamentally true about everybody) in learned and fashionable language (so that you wrote about the best subject in the best way). From seeing the two sorts of people combined like this you thought better of both; the best parts of both were used. (Empson, cited in ibid: 238)

The main characteristic of pastoral art or literature is to express ‘simple truths’ in sophisticated form. It is the poor who are viewed as best able to tell such truths about society. They are deemed much closer to nature, unsullied by vested interests, and, as a consequence, shown to possess ‘better sense than their betters’ (Empson, 1950: 14). But, the pastoral also implies that the rich and powerful possess powers of expression that the poor lack; *only they* can bring to full consciousness and artistic representation the unconscious virtues of the poor (Stallabrass, 1999: 239). As Empson (1950: 14) puts it, ‘the folk wisdom of simple people is adorned with the refined expression of the gentleman’. Through this expression of humility, the pastoral naturalises inequality and attempts to ‘make good’ conflictual class relations. These days British pastoral art addresses urban rather than rural life. Stallabrass (1999) cites Keith Coventry’s bold, geometric *Estate Paintings* as an example of art that is attracted to the gritty authenticity of the working-class city. Coventry’s images reveal ‘common truths’, but ‘from a distance, as if it was viewing the archaeological remains of some disaster or the passing of an era’ (ibid: 248). The urban pastoral ‘freezes’ the working-class city in time and space while defusing its forward, revolutionary motion.

The display of Lowry’s paintings in Tate Britain also constructs an urban pastoral, a reconciliation of class relations that is extolled in a fetish for images of the disappearing Twentieth-century industrial city. A crucial aspect of this urban pastoral is how Lowry is reappraised by the curators, not necessarily erroneously, as a painter of modern life *a la* Édouard Manet (see Clark and Wagner, 2013). To add to the serious mood of the exhibition the walls are adorned with quotes from Baudelaire proclaiming that: “[…] the heroism of modern life crowds in on us […]”[[3]](#endnote-3). Lowry is no longer conceived as a provincial painter who recreates subject matter his critics dismiss as ‘local exotica’ (Berger, 1980: 96). Instead, the localism and repetition of Lowry’s cityscapes are reconfigured as virtues that render his compositions world-historical.

It is not within the remit of this article to agree or disagree with this summation of Lowry’s work, rather to point to the broader urban cultural significance of the exhibition. To this end, while the curators bemoan the lowering of Lowry’s ‘price’ among art critics (Clark and Wagner, 2013: 18), they also admit how devaluation presents an opportunity to reassess and ‘add value’ to Lowry’s product (ibid: 16). Of course, there is no suggestion of cynical intent on the part of the curators but this is, for want of a better term, an example of how ‘creative destruction’ occurs in the sphere of art criticism. Lowry’s work has long faced disapproval by critics and, in terms of artistic capital, his work has been devalued (arguably the use of Lowry iconography in urban regeneration projects in Salford Quays during the 1990s contributed to the lowering of his artistic ‘price’). Put crudely, the exhibition revisits an old ‘market’ and subjects it to a ‘more thorough exploitation’ (Marx and Engels, 2011: 71). As part of this cycle of reinvestment, Lowry’s Salford is stripped of its particular ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams, 1977) and becomes instead an image of an ‘astonishing social reality’. Lowry’s Salford is reduced to abstract space, where the only arbiter is exchange value (Lefebvre, 1991: 41). Lowry’s images confirm the authenticity and simple virtues of a working-class city that is presented by the Tate as a historical artefact that is *universally* shared. To develop another Marxist analogy, this is an act akin to what David Harvey (2009: 75) calls ‘accumulation by dispossession’, the dominant form of accumulation in neoliberal capitalism, where even ‘[t]he commodification of cultural forms, histories and intellectual creativity entails wholesale dispossessions’. Lowry’s popularity is replaced by lofty critical reappraisal. The specificity of the working-class industrial city becomes simply ‘the city’ or even just ‘modern life’. Indeed, in the exhibition we find little empathy for, or engagement with, the industrial working-class, only a fetish for images of ‘an environment [the city] which they help to produce and which may then become the subject of appropriation by a section of the cultured middle class: artists, gallery-goers and fine-art book buyers’ (Stallabrass, 1999: 253). There is scant consideration of Lowry’s subjects, how they got there or what happened to them. Were they displaced by slum clearance? Did they move to the suburbs? Did the mill shut down? Who won the match?

All of this offers a cultural reprise of Lefebvre’s (2003a: 35) argument that, ‘the city, or what remains of it or what it will become, is better suited than it has ever been for accumulation of capital’. Here, it is Lowry’s *images* of the city, once reviled and considered devoid of any artistic worth, that are reappraised in mimesis of the waves of investment and disinvestment that drive urbanization processes (previous waves of investment in the built environment are abandoned and left to rot until they once again become a profitable option for investment and wholesale redevelopment: see Smith 2008). Crucially, however, artistic revaluation on such an ambitious scale requires the legitimation of critics like T.J. Clark and Anne M. Wagner and an institution like Tate Britain.

The fascination with images of the industrial city evident in the exhibition might be seen as an example of a more general trend towards cultural cityism. Images of ‘authentic’ Twentieth-century metropolitan life are now commonplace in interior furnishing stores and homes. Paradigmatic examples include a limited-run monochrome map of Brooklyn, New York City with all its neighbourhoods—DUMBO Park Slope, Bedford-Stuyvesant etc.—lovingly named and demarcated while screening any evidence of class and/or racial segregation (for sale from an art dealer in Brooklyn Heights) and a mass-produced montage of four photographs of central Paris available from IKEA (the global furniture chain who might legitimately be seen, ironically, as pioneers of both out-of-town ‘big box’ urban development *and* cultural cityism[[4]](#endnote-4)). Other examples include art prints of East End pie-and-mash shops for sale in London’s Spitalfields market and curtains artfully depicting Amsterdam’s historic townhouses, as advertised in interiors magazine *Living etc*. (May 2014). There have also been lavish reprints of Miroslav Sasek’s classic mid-Twentieth-century illustrated children’s books *This is London* and *This is Paris*. At the Lowry exhibition it was possible to purchase diaries, umbrellas, and even beer (northern bitter, naturally) festooned with iconic Lowry streetscapes (see Figure 4). The gift shop sold copies of ‘topical’ books with evocative Lowry-esque cover images such as Robert Roberts’ *The Classic Slum,* Richard Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy* and John Bulmer’s coffee table photography book *The North*. Fredric Jameson (1984; 1985) pointed to such generalised nostalgia decades ago, but in terms of the city image this sentimentality is under-explored. In the commodified images of the city discussed above it really appears that in terms of picturing and evoking the experience of contemporary urbanization all that is left is to communicate ‘through the masks [the city images] in the imaginary museum’ (Jameson, 1985: 115).

[Insert Figure 4 here]

**Fig. 4 The gift shop at Tate Britain**

Cunningham (2013: 40) uses Debord’s argument that the image has become the final form of commodity reification to suggest ‘a hyper-intensification of the visual within metropolitan life’. One way of interpreting this is to suggest that as urban space in the great Western metropolises continues to grow obscenely in exchange value—making the city unliveable and unattainable for the majority—one consequence is that the image of the city also becomes commodified. The commodity images of the city listed above construct a nostalgic aesthetic that makes universal the Twentieth-Century metropolis, combining ‘the acquisition of modern goods on one side and the identification of historical symbols on the other’ (Bridge, 2001: 214). If you cannot afford to live in Brooklyn you might at least be able to afford to hang its image on your wall or wear its image on a T-Shirt. City images, sold as commodities, make a fetish of ‘the city’, with each image conjuring an authentic ‘experience of origins’ (Zukin, 2010: 3) that conceals *first*, historical processes that are also class struggles; and *second*, the dissolution of the city itself. These images contain a fantasy of urban life (of simultaneity, gathering, convergence and encounter) that is not in itself regressive—for as Lefebvre (2014a: 583) reminds us, ‘we cannot invent an image without having previously felt an emotion’—but because history is decomposed into the image (Buck-Morss, 1989: 220), the injuries of social class that are intertwined with capitalist urbanization often remain concealed.

**The Dialectical Image**

And yet, the Lowry exhibition invites more critical comment on contemporary urban life than is revealed above. The curators’ intention that we recognise how Lowry’s art is now more vital than ever (Clark, 2013: 73) *is* redeemed, though not through the conventions originally envisaged. It is argued here that the exhibition makes legible the dissolution of the industrial city while also highlighting the paucity of images we have to help comprehend explosive, expansive urbanization and our experiences of it. This is to re-interpret Mumford’s (1938: 6) point that ‘[w]hen the city ceases to be a symbol of […] order, it acts in a negative fashion: it expresses and helps to make more universal the fact of disintegration’. To make this argument, however, it is necessary to move beyond understanding city images purely in ideological terms. Moreover, it is important to retract from any intimation that the spectacle of the exhibition and the fetishisation of the city has a *totalising* effect; that the urban pastoral evoked by the exhibition (and commodified city images more generally) is evidence of complete alienation from, and the pacification of urban life. In order to argue that the exhibition does more than construct an urban pastoral it is necessary to return to Lefebvre and to augment his stress upon the right to urban life (Lefebvre, 1996: 158) with the nuanced political meditations on the image provided by Walter Benjamin and Jacques Rancière.

There are two parts to the argument made in this section. First, the nostalgia prevalent within the urban pastoral of the exhibition is suggested as evidence of a latent desire for the right to the city (and urban life) that invokes also a quest for a different kind of authenticity. Second, Benjamin’s concept of the ‘constellation’ or ‘dialectical image’ captures the critical potential created by this exhibition to imagine and reassess the contemporary urban condition. Rancière is also useful in explaining the potential of the exhibition to segue from a collection of contrasting city *images* towards enlightened and collective urban *imaginaries*.

In an often-quoted but under-analysed passage, Lefebvre (1996: 150) insists the right to the city is ‘like a cry and a demand [that] slowly meanders through the surprising detours of nostalgia and tourism, the return to the heart of the traditional city […]’. In this sense, nostalgia for the city, as evidenced in fascination with city images, may be considered a muted cry for the right to the city, a displaced desire for the urban as ‘creative lifeblood of attraction and incorporation’ (Merrifield, 2012: 272). Of course, nostalgia for the city image does not refer to any actually existing historical city. In postmodern culture, ‘the history of aesthetic styles displaces “real” history’ (Jameson, 1984: 67). But this nostalgia *is* closer to Marshall Berman’s (2009: 314) understanding of authenticity as a deep radicalism that yearns not to abolish the ideals and possibilities of modernity but rather *to rediscover and fulfil them*. In Lowry’s early street scenes such as *Our Town*, *After the Fire*, *The Removal*, and *Coming Home from the Mill* something profound is revealed about the transcendent forms of sociality that urban life produces. Just as Lefebvre (2014b: 205) writes, in Lowry’s paintings it is evident that ‘[i]n the city […], play and gravity are at once opposed and merged; dwelling, going down the street, communicating, and talking—*they are both serious and fun*’ (emphasis added). For Lefebvre, fascination with the city image is perfectly understandable, especially as the industrial city (and its attendant urban qualities) undergoes dissolution.

In *The Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre (2003: 129) writes that ‘[o]n a map of Paris […] u-topia can be neither read nor seen, and yet it is there in all its glory. It is the place where the gaze that overlooks the city is situated […] a place of consciousness; that is, a consciousness of totality’. Can the same be said for the mass-produced street maps of Manhattan sold in IKEA and hung in homes around the globe, in domestic spaces both within and outside traditional city boundaries? Perhaps. Maybe there is something radical or authentic to be rescued from our captivation with the city image that, through convoluted means, ignites ‘the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity’ (Jameson, 1979: 144). In the anti-urban context of Tate Britain, a utopian quality emerges from Lowry’s depiction of a coherent, unified working-class subject; of vibrant rather than sanitised city streets; of public life as opposed to trenchant privatism (Lowry only ever painted one interior); of a community that has regard for one another, but also has fun together; from the predominance of pedestrians in Lowry’s streets rather than the automobiles we find in ours. As Fuller (1993: 104 added emphasis) argues, Lowry found a land ‘flowing with milk and honey not in some *estranged* vision of utopia, but in the smoky heart of the city itself’. And so, in the Lowry tote bag or cufflinks that can be purchased at the gift shop, the commodity fetish and dream fetish become almost indistinguishable (Buck-Morss, 1989: 118). And yet, because images of the industrial city are experienced in some senses as a loss, our yearning for a richer, more fulfilling urban life runs the risk of fuelling the more melancholic dimensions of cultural cityism. As Lefebvre (1996: 170) writes, ‘the possibility of an urban society […] cannot be satisfied with centralities of the past […]’. Despite our fetish for the centripetal Twentieth-century Western metropolis, there can be no going back.

Walter Benjamin’s ‘dialectical image’, a concept developed in the *Arcades Project*, refers to an image in which the past and present flash into a constellation. It is to be found wherever the tension between dialectical oppositions is greatest. In this discussion the opposition is, of course, between the global and industrial city. This opposition is interestingly posed in the gallery itself where visitors find themselves contained within airless, artificially lit rooms, shuffling from painting to painting, reading snippets of Baudelaire affixed to the walls and staring at northern, working-class people from almost a century prior; people who are full participants in the drama of urban life: walking to and from work, going to the match or fair, dancing, playing, gossiping, chasing animals, witnessing an accident or tragedy. For Benjamin, the image is the dialectic at a standstill, the moment when history becomes saturated with tensions (Frisby, 1985: 221). Moreover, ‘[t]he dialectical image possesses a historical indexicality, but not in the sense that it belongs to a specific time, [rather] primarily that they only come to legibility at a specific time’ (Benjamin, cited in ibid: 220). This idea can be stretched to argue that Lowry’s paintings of everyday urban life only develop their full legibility when clashing against Tate Britain, an image of global London and imploding/exploding urbanization. The exhibition, a montage of contrasting city images, presents a dialectical image that reveals the tensions of the past and present and, in so doing, insists upon awakening from the fantasies of cultural cityism. The dialectical image induces not passivity or stupor, as in the sense of a spectacle, but a moment of recognition: for the extraordinariness of Lowry’s industrial scene (an outcome that coheres with the curators’ intentions) butalsothe extraordinariness *of our own urban scene*, even if we don’t yet fully recognise or understand the latter; even if we do not yet have an image for it.

The revelatory effects of the exhibition can be explained further using Rancière’s notion of the sentence-image, a notion based upon his reading of montages of heterogeneous images, his primary example being Jean-Luc Godard’s (1988) movie *Histoire(s) du cinema*. Rancière’s (2009: 34) belief is that on one hand images have liberating power, they can dismantle understandings that are transmitted through text; and on the other hand, images, in conjunction with other images, can construct a history and function as an operation of *communalisation* (as opposed to universalism). The exhibition—as a constellation of images—possesses an ‘active, disruptive power’ that encourages a leap from textual understanding—in this case the *prima facie* meaning of the exhibition outlined in Clark and Wagner (2013) and transmitted through the environment of the Tate—to something altogether different, an urban imaginary based upon the ways that ‘city dwellers imagine their own city [or own era/space of urbanization] as the place of everyday life’ (Huyssen, 2008: 3). The clash of images that one encounters in the exhibition refigures the relationship between text and image. The sentence-image begins with the image of Tate Britain and the Thames riverside, before moving through Lowry’s early street scenes and progressing to his outsized industrial landscapes that forewarn us of the bleak devastation caused by explosive urbanization. The next set of city images are encountered in the gift shop. Finally, on leaving the exhibition global London appears stranger or less familiar than it did before entering. In dismantling ‘stories’ or myths—of say, urban progress and cityness—the sentence-image has the power to *write history* (Rancière 2009: 55). In connecting with their ‘outside’—the industrial city giving way to global city and planetary urbanization—Lowry’s paintings make different sense to that suggested by the exhibition. Conversely, Tate Britain, an image of a different kind of city, is placed within an historical sociology of the disappearing city form that it otherwise appears keen to counter or evade.

As Rancière claims, the sentence-image organises a clash, but also constructs a continuum (ibid: 60). The exhibition configures a continuum by ensuring that ‘all of yesterday’s conflicts become expressions of intense co-presence’ (ibid: 62). It is not quite as simple that the exhibition reveals the urban qualities that global London lacks, or that the industrial city is shown to be more authentic than contemporary forms of urbanization. Rather, the exhibition produces a ‘seamless fabric of co-presence—the fabric that at once authorises and erases all seams; constructing the world of “images” as a world of general co-belonging and inter-expression’ (ibid: 63). Neither is it the case that the experiential transition between city images presented by the exhibition reveals a hidden ‘depth’ or substratum to the surface of images. Rather, as Rancière (2004: 46) argues, it is more that it invokes a sense of ‘horizontal distributions, combinations between systems of possibilities’. The exhibition therefore depicts *ongoing,* equivalent struggles for a just and fulfilling urban life: it testifies ‘to a common [urban] history and a common [urban] world’ (Rancière 2009: 67). In this way, Lowry’s paintings become less melancholy and regain their forwardmotion. Images of the industrial city become much more than a fetish. It becomes much clearer how ‘the urbanization of industrial society does not happen without the breakup of what we call “the city”’ (Lefebvre, 1996: 126) and that as visitors to the exhibition we are just as caught up in this process as were Lowry’s city dwellers. The dialectical image of the exhibition provokes consideration of the present, a judgement upon how *Our Town* reflects upon ‘our town’.

## Conclusion

This paper is about the persistence of images of the city at a time when cities are dissolving and being superseded by an explosive, planetary urbanization (Lefebvre, 2003; 2014b). As Wachsmuth (2014: 79) makes clear, ‘the city’ is now an ideological misrepresentation of urbanization processes that actually far exceed the city. *Lowry and the Painting of Modern Life*, an exhibition held at Tate Britain in the summer and early autumn of 2013, is viewed here as a cultural symptom of what is referred to elsewhere as ‘cityism’ (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2014). The exhibition reveals a nostalgic preoccupation with images of the industrial city and the urban street life that characterised this space (or, rather, Lowry’s representations of this life). It demonstrates how as the urban core of the city declines or is transformed, an *image* of the city is maintained (Lefebvre, 1996: 74). Contemporary fascination with and/or a fetish for images of the Twentieth-century city is referred to here as cultural cityism.

Although Lowry’s paintings have a geographical specificity and Tate Britain is situated in central London on Millbank, the arguments advanced here concern the city, urbanization and culture more generally. It is the clash between images of the industrial city (Lowry) and global city (Tate Britain and its environs) that is instigated by the exhibition. As Huyssen (2008: 1) argues, ‘other’ cities have always been part of the way we live and perceive our own worlds. Current fascination with city images from the Twentieth-century raises questions regarding whether, in the context of globalisation and planetary urbanization, we are ‘increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current [urban] experience’ (Jameson, 1984: 68). This is why cultural cityism is a topic is of acute importance. City images play a critical role in articulating how we see, feel and think about urbanized space. They reveal much about how we imagine the changing relationship between citizen, city dweller and urbanization processes.

In some senses, the Lowry exhibition at Tate Britain is indicative of a new urban pastoral that ‘makes good’ conflictual relations between metropolitan modernities and social classes. Fascination with Lowry’s city images is evidence of nostalgia for working-class urban cultures and spaces of the past. Yet, this admiration is concerned primarily with aesthetic surfaces—with a collection of images—rather than developing a deep understanding that includes an appreciation of the historical class struggle that is inscribed in space (Lefebvre, 1991: 55). The Lowry exhibition is therefore coherent with a more generalised fetishisation of images of the ‘authentic’ modern city. This fetish includes the images of Western metropolises like London, Paris and New York—in the main extracted from the mid-Twentieth-century—that make their way onto commodities such as artwork, T-shirts, interior furnishings and so forth. And yet while this fetish does signal, in many respects, a widespread sense of alienation or displacement from both urban history and the urban present, these images of the city may also be seen as spiritual products that contain dreams about a *less alienated* and *socially more fulfilling* urban life. As Pile (2005: 175) argues, dreams of the city are to be taken seriously; they exist to be learnt from. Or, as Lefebvre (2009: 141) puts it, dreams ‘become the elements of ways of life or cultures which have always had a partial validity and […] can perhaps be integrated into the modern [urbanized] world once this has been organised and renewed’. There is, then, a utopian aspect to our current fetish for city images. Cultural cityism is a contradiction comprised of both debilitating and emancipatory dimensions. This paper raises awareness of this concept but offers merely the beginning of a critique.

While conforming to an ideology of cityness that is a by-product rather than an intention of the curatorial project, the Lowry exhibition is not a spectacle in any simplistic sense. In unexpected ways the exhibition is disconcertingly revealing about our contemporary urban condition. Lowry’s images of the industrial city flash in contrast to the image of the global city provided by Tate Britain. This constitutes what Walter Benjamin calls a dialectical image, an image that stretches dialectical tensions to their limit that highlights the immediacy of the past within our present. Lowry at Tate Britain, through its inadvertent construction of what Rancière calls a sentence-image, encourages a critique of the ideology of cityness and the nostalgia of cultural cityism. It provokes a frank assessment of the urban qualities found within the fragmented, yet homogenised and hierarchical spaces produced by contemporary urbanization (Lefebvre, 2003b: 210). Most importantly the exhibition prompts consideration of how processes of implosion/ explosion could (or should) be visually depicted. The city possessed an uplifting image that has outlived its historicity—as Lefebvre argues—but can a stirring image with such wide social and cultural resonance be created to convey the potentials of the current urban condition? Such a question instigates a critical and artistic project comparable to that which Lowry embraced. If ‘the city’ really is/ was a historically specific mode of seeing then the need to learn to see afresh has never been more pressing.

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1. Permission from Touchstones Gallery in Rochdale agreed in principle. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See: <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/press-office/press-releases/tate-britain-reaches-ps45-million-funding-goal> [accessed 12.1.15] [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Baudelaire (2010) *The Painter of Modern Life*. London: Penguin Classics for the full essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Jones and Doucet (2001) for a discussion of IKEA-style out-of-town urbanization. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)