

City of Words

A Multimodal Collaboration in 'Writing Urban Places'

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A Meeting of Disciplines, Geographies and Modes of Expression

This contribution is a collaborative effort of two scholars from different disciplinary and geographic backgrounds united by their interest in producing and communicating urban narratives. They met briefly at a one-day meeting – held in Limerick in December 2019 – of the EU COST Action 'Writing Urban Places' and decided to explore the possibility of a collaboration on this issue. Luc Pauwels is a visual sociologist and communication scientist from Belgium specialized in visual research methods and urban photography. Anna Ryan is an architect and cultural geographer from Ireland with a particular interest in modes of writing. Their partnership resulted in an experiment that combines aspects of different research and communication methods into a hybrid end result: a collaborative multimodal essay.

First, the methodological particularities of this collaborative effort will be discussed and situated within a number of established and emerging

visual methods: the blending of methods, the researcher's roles, the distinct modes of expression and the different positions vis-à-vis the site under scrutiny ('visitor' versus 'resident'; 'outsider' versus 'insider'). This section will then be followed by the actual multimodal essay on the city of Limerick as a distinct form of scholarly communication balancing between art and science.

A Methodological Note: Mixing Methods, Roles and Perspectives

Visual social research methods have been used productively to examine the urban context, aspects of its material culture as well as human behaviour and experiences. Cities and city life indeed can be examined in meaningful ways through observing behaviour in public places and by interrogating the visible features of urban spaces as social and cultural expressions of past and present intents of a multitude of agents.¹ Visual methods encompass the careful collection and analysis of existing or 'found' visual data of a variety of sources (such as historical photographs, family pictures, news photographs, street photography, to artistic photos and other art objects, feature films, real estate pictures, magazine illustrations, drawings, architectural plans, maps, land use plans, CCTV footage, Google Earth views, advertisements, 3D renderings and so on), to the production of new visual materials by the researcher. They also include approaches that try to more actively involve the field under study by using visual materials in interview situations in order to trigger partly unanticipated factual information and projective comments ('visual elicitation'), or to prompt the subjects of research to become producers of their own visual data and views ('respondent-generated visuals') for scholarly or activist purposes. Finally, these visual scholarly practices also include innovative ways to 'communicate' insight into culture and society in novel ways (through data visualizations, visual essays, films and multimedia products).²

The purposefully produced photographs in the ensuing visual or multimodal essay fall into the category of 'researcher-produced imagery',³ a dominant

mode within 'visual sociology' that comprises primarily all of the applications in which a visual recording device (often, but not always, a camera) is used by the researcher for documenting or expressing meaningful aspects of visual reality, which then can become a kind of newly created visual 'data'.

The sampling method used to produce these images is clearly 'opportunistic' as the photographer just took images of what caught his attention or interest while meandering for a limited amount of time through an unfamiliar city.⁴ As such an approach is considered a first 'exploratory' phase, so a detailed 'shooting script', which is often recommended in researcher-produced image production and stipulates precisely what will be recorded from what standpoint at what time, was not required nor feasible.⁵ Yet there clearly was a focus – though not an exclusive one – on words and short texts in public space as symptomatic markers issued by a variety of actors and instances over time. These snippets of 'found texts' in relation to their visible environment help to channel particular readings of the image and serve as an important aid to narrate the city, be it in a rather disjunctive way.

The images that have been purposefully produced for this multimodal essay predominantly have a documentary character, though they do try to combine both 'mimetic' aspects (geared towards detailed reproduction, description) and expressive elements (adding a vision to the depicted matter). These images were then handed over to Anna as stimulus material for triggering her verbal reactions and comments. In this respect, as second visual method was initiated known as 'photo-elicitation' or more generally 'visual elicitation' (since drawings, films or 3D-printed materials can also be used as stimuli). The central idea behind photo-elicitation is that visual materials trigger the viewer/respondent to start to share factual information on the depicted as well as offer deeper and personal observations and views. The photographs thus seem to ask the questions

while the knowledgeable respondents do not feel like they are being interrogated, rather they feel challenged in a more positive way to share their knowledge, experiences and viewpoints as 'experts' in the field.

Obviously, Anna was not a mere 'respondent' to the visual stimuli but a collaborator of the combined end product. Nor are the photographs meant as mere stimuli to generate verbalized opinions, views and feelings, to be put aside afterwards, as is customary for this method, but as indispensable parts of the end product.⁶ In this respect one could say that the roles of researcher and researched are blurred and hybrid, a trait that is becoming more and more prominent in contemporary research, but that should not discharge scholars from the effort to develop an analytical and reflexive stance.⁷

The collaborative experiment not only involves an outsider and insider view, but also the use of two very different but highly complementary expressive systems: words and images. In 'photopoetry' and 'photo-text' traditions as described and theorized by Michael Nott, the 'collaborative mode' seems the most dominant, while 'visual essays' in the social sciences are more often 'self-collaborative' or 'cumulative' in nature (the same author being both the image producer and the writer).⁸ Moreover, the collaborative practices of photopoetry and photo-texts are often 'retrospective', which implies that either the texts (frequently poems) or the images existed long before they were picked up and paired with the other mode of expression. The multimodal essay presented here combines elements of both the photopoetry traditions and the social science practises as it is clearly 'collaborative' and its constituting parts – the words and images – were envisioned from the start to work in tandem. Our approach is even more collaborative in the true sense of the word, since both authors were actively involved in the creation of the end product, whereas photopoetry often implies the absence of one of the authors. To some extent the multimodal essay could be seen as ekphrastic poetry or an ekphrastic narrative, in that the words vividly and

expressively elucidate what is presented in the images. But the text goes well beyond what is visually documented and expressed. This is where the power of the image to elicit associations and interpretations becomes apparent. The visuals thus both act as reflections of an inner world (of makers and respondents/viewers) and as partial depictions of a momentary reality.

Photography is known for its strong mimetic and indexical powers, while it also has a whole range of expressive capabilities mainly brought into effect by a thoughtful combination of numerous formal choices. However, it seems that far more attention has been given by scholars to challenging the visual (in particular photographic images) as a source of deception and repression, than to trying to understand its potential for disclosing and communicating aspects of the world. Exemplary in this regard is Susan Sontag's book *On Photography*⁹ of which W.J.T. Mitchell notes that it could more aptly have been called *Against Photography*.¹⁰ Of course visual scholars and citizens alike should be duly aware of the epistemological consequences of distinct technologies and practices, and of the fact that images provide at best a highly reduced and arranged 'version' of reality. But it is also important to emphasize that the 'visual' aspect of our world does not manifest itself uniquely in visual media products: it actively infuses our daily life in most of its facets. Visual culture includes visual objects and 'performances' of a varied nature, for example buildings, statues, fashion and numerous forms of interaction, which are accessible through direct observation with several of our senses.¹¹

Words, in particular as combined in sentences, are powerful means to temporarily 'anchor' or channel the meaning of images that remain otherwise polysemous.¹² But they can also expand beyond the immediate and concrete image content and thus establish a more complementary relationship, able to address issues in a more generalized sense.¹³ Textual

messages can move seamlessly from factual and precise descriptions to very poetic, evocative and engaged accounts.

Narrating Limerick: A Multimodal Essay

The following pages include the result of the above-discussed collaborative effort, presented as a 'multimodal essay', an emerging scholarly format whose main challenge resides in the skilful production and synergetic combination of visual materials with other signifiers – words, layout and design – adding up to an expressive scholarly statement.¹⁴

The photographs of the multimodal essay were taken by Luc, a first-time visitor to the city of Limerick, in Ireland, as a way to come to know and then narrate a view of this new place. Over the course of two dark, wet and windy days, close to the shortest day of the year, he walked, unguided, through various parts of the city, photographing as he went. The focus of Luc's photographs is, as stated before, on found texts in public space, single words or short lines of text and their present context of actuality or as remnants of past intentions.

For Anna, these are not the 'official' kind of city pictures found in tourist brochures: river nor castle nor cathedral is present. This is a walk of edges and centres, of a photographer's search for a particular aspect of life – a viewpoint on the way urban culture is written out on the city's surfaces, as seen through the lens of a camera. That which is left in and out of the frame is careful and precise. The images tell certain stories of the city; the post-scripts of words add and complicate the layers of these stories.

The extended captions to the selected photographs have been written by Anna as direct responses to specific photographs selected from Luc's journey around the city by foot. For Luc, it was fascinating to find out which of the images Anna would select to comment upon, what the nature of

those comments would be, both in form and content, and how they would resonate with the images.

Anna has been working in Limerick for 13 years, living in the city centre for nine of those. By looking at a familiar place through the eyes of another, for Anna the words have become a way to expand beyond the frame of the photograph, adding and contextualizing the stories of the city told, or rather suggested, by the photographs.

After the initial round of sharing photographs and texts, the authors discussed which images and textual parts seemed to work and which did not, how they should be ordered to tell the story, the typography of the texts and the overall layout.

Obviously, any portrait of a city is ever-incomplete. What follows are pieces of Limerick, fragments of the city, vignettes, even, offered in the context of the above described positions.



When arriving in any new city by train, anticipation builds. Fellow passengers familiar with the route start to pack away belongings, reach for coats, squeeze crisp packets into empty coffee cups, readying themselves to exit as the train begins to slow. Once off the train at Limerick's Colbert Station – named after one of the executed leaders of the 1916 Rising in Ireland¹⁵ – the sound of the idling engine remains immense in the shed of two platforms with its accumulated grime on the overhead glazed steel trusses, as many feet navigate the black-and-white-speckled chequerboard of tiles that lead towards the doors to the city.

Limerick declares this moment of arrival by a difference in height. The traveller emerges from one of three cut-stone arches and is presented with a prospect. Eight steps higher than the ground below, a broad piece of city is revealed: a wide forecourt for pedestrians and car drop-offs, recently redesigned with trees, lampposts, benches and bins, all with the panoramic backdrop of Parnell Street – named after Charles Stewart Parnell, the nineteenth-century politician that led the movements for Home Rule and land reform.¹⁶ The panorama of the street, however, is more like a collage

with the buildings on the scale of a small town more so than a city. From The Railway Hotel to a gaming arcade and bingo hall, to a pharmacy and a jumble of to-let signs on the windows and walls of domestic-scale two-storey former shopfronts, this assemblage is not a unitedly conceived welcome to the city, but rather communicates a sense of confusion about the message being portrayed by the city to its arriving visitors. And so, from the breadth at the top of the steps, the traveller descends into the city.

The stretch of dilapidated buildings reflects changes in ownership and use; the rises and falls of the economic journey of the city are exposed on the façades. Rather than the material unity of brick that unifies the four-storey-over-basement Georgian terraces that lie a block or two 'behind' this street to the north, here materiality is collage-like: the pinkish-brown redness of the pebbledash, the orangish shopfront herringbone tiles – distinctive mid-twentieth-century features of buildings that housed pharmacies and grocers across Irish towns and villages. Now the empty buildings are uncertain of their function, and the particular Irish-ness and visual scale of their pieced-on surface-layer façades reveal the traces of time, the impact of years of rain and moisture. The crumbling earthiness of a lived-in-city: Limerick does not want to be polished, shiny, pristine. Its grittiness is its appeal.

Welcome.



Winter weather holds heavy by the river. The city is shrouded with the softness of fog: edges blur as it sits down on the grid of streets that slope towards the water. As the temperature of the day rises, the fog begins to disintegrate into the dampness of drizzle, a gentle layer of light wetness is felt on the face when walking. With the later rising of the wind, rain then lashes up the river, surprising the crossings of the streets and laneways. This Limerick winter-ness brings a greyness of light, a bare shadow and little reflection, brick and concrete soaking in the wetness and the light.

Towards the edge of the formal grid of Limerick's Georgian city – Newtown Pery – and sandwiched between a casino and a funeral home on Thomas Street, parking spaces are offered for a small hourly fee. Little puddles are trapped by broken concrete. Dark-green moss climbs the cracked render. Rubble and brick reveal themselves. The condition of the building materials speaks of prolonged vacancy and dereliction. This crumbling nature is typical of the centres of many of the Georgian blocks in the city, thus SPACES – in white and blue – proposes more than a place to park for a shopping trip of a few hours. It proposes the need for us to re-love and reinhabit the cores

of the Georgian city, to 'return' *en masse* in a variety of ways, to the city from its suburbs. It proposes that we consider the peculiarly Irish relationship between country and city. The message – in capital letters – demands that we offer ourselves SPACES for imagination – to make speculations for the future of our city, and then, to make them happen.



The medieval cathedral of St Mary's sits prominently in the city. From its hill on King's Island, its west doors look out the River Shannon towards the estuary and ocean far beyond, while to the east, in its figurative shadow, lies a modest shop supplying parts and accessories for cars. Located where the busy Athlunkard Street crosses paths with the once-principal Nicholas Street, the traffic lights here at the summit of the hill cause a line of traffic to regularly pause outside the shop. Its cream walls have been painted with players from the two sports that are lifeblood to the city – rugby and hurling.

In Limerick, rugby has a deep-held foothold across all walks of life; it gathers rural and urban, those from the most deprived parts of the city with

those from the least, through the regional team of Munster playing on a national and international stage at its home in Thomond Park.



Hurling – often described as the fastest sport in the world and played with an ash stick and a small hard ball called a *sliotar* – is an amateur sport requiring incredible levels of skill and is played across Ireland on a parish-by-parish and inter-county basis, supported by the strong community-based Gaelic Athletic Association.¹⁷ Deeply parochial, intensely emotional, playing for the county colours is the highest honour.

Hurling in green for the county. Rugby tackles in red for the province. Years of players' names of these sports conjure memories of greatness for the city. In green: Carey, Mackey, McKenna. In red: Clohessy, O'Connell, Earls. Our city is gathered by these sports and their stories, where language breathes and travels, the moments of glory on the pitches told and retold across generations. Even the physical city itself is animated by these sports. On match days – whether for hurling or for rugby – communities unite. Masses of bodies – dressed in red or in green – process from the

Georgian brick-grid centre of the city, across the breadth of the River Shannon, along the slowly inclining solidness of Ennis Road, towards whichever pitch is the focus of that day's sport. The city's citizens generate this regular spectacle as they move together in a block of colour through their city. The intersection of people, an allegiance, a coming-together. Singing, roaring, even silence of the thousands, emanate from the stadia of The Gaelic Grounds and Thomond Park. The city resounds to the sound of its voices.

Luimneach Abú!



The limestone spire rises to survey its surroundings. This visual marker from the nineteenth-century city stands alone – a few metres apart from its church of Mount Saint Alphonsus – as a commanding presence, even from far across the river. On a natural high point where the dense tightness of the South Circular Road turns itself into Henry Street, the network-streets of houses decline gently away from it towards the Georgian brick centre. ‘The Fathers’ it is known as: the colloquial name for The Redemptorists, a religious congregation of brothers, mostly priests, who have located

themselves there for 180 years as a presence of Catholic life in the city as they undertook their missionary work. They used to visit different parishes around the county, and beyond, coming for a few days at a time; such visits were called 'The Mission'. My mother, now 85, remembers being stunned with fear when she was a teenager attending such a visit one evening with her own mother in their town in west County Limerick. The Redemptorist priest, 'the biggest man she had ever seen', was screaming from the pulpit. Fires of hell, damnation, and the opening line of every oration from The Fathers is engrained into the memory of Irish Catholics of a certain age: 'Remember your last end and you shall never sin.' My grandmother told my mother that she never need go back to The Mission, and that if she was asked by the nuns in school the next day that she was to say she was not allowed to go. Likely ahead of her time in the Ireland of the 1940s, my grandmother tried to protect her children from the instilling of belief systems of fear, guilt and shame, those cultures and ways-of-being that are intrinsically bound up in the Catholic church.

Now, the outward-facing Redemptorists attempt to right the wrongs of the past. The imposing presence of the heavy-grey limestone exterior of Mount Saint Alphonsus once acted for its people as a constant reminder of human wrongdoing, but now aims to work within its Limerick community in a different way: as a place of welcome and openness. Soft candlelight on a Sunday evening. A warmth of anonymity in the semidarkness. The rhythm of a Taizé chant wrapping the congregation. My six-week-old son asleep in my arms at his first Christmas midnight mass. A modernized atmosphere of home and belonging in the glittering gold. The Novena in June – ten masses and sessions of prayer and The Rosary every day for nine days – when thousands from the city and county come to pray together, the church and its spire an almost-two-hundred-year-old witness to both the sameness and the changing nature of practices of togetherness within this community of faith.

Yet it is difficult to shake the legacy of the past. Common to many Catholic institutions internationally, The Fathers will remain a place of comfort to many, a source of painful memories, hurt and betrayal for others and, likely for most, a torn mixture of these feelings. Mount Saint Alphonsus will continue to sit as an active member of the long-established network of city-centre Catholic churches: St Joseph's on O'Connell Avenue, The Jesuits on The Crescent, St Augustine's on O'Connell Street, The Franciscans on Henry Street, St John's Cathedral at Pennywell, all within a one-mile-square piece of city, and all establishments of architecture with severe façades where the scale of the individual is deliberately dwarfed by the experience of crossing its threshold.¹⁸ These once-full churches, built to house a much larger church-going population, are now mostly near-empty for much of the week. And yet their quiet emptiness still marks various rhythms in the city, both physical and invisible: from the passing-by of their monumentality on foot, to the known ritual of different mass times across the network, to the ringing of the bells providing a measure of daily time to its parishioners, to the people of the city as a whole.



Nicholas Street is on an island. King's Island, in fact: the medieval urban core of Limerick from which the original city later expanded westwards. Directly across from the massiveness of King John's Castle, the former shop of an outdoor clothing business leaves its name as a provocation above its locked-up metal railings. WILD IRELAND reminds both the city's dwellers and its visitors of the landscape that surrounds Limerick. Just the words – large – on a cracking-paint façade of the city are a powerful suggestion of the intensity of mountain, of sea; of distance, of exposure; of moisture, of air. And of the wildness of Irish music and dance, of the energy of people and communities, of our culture and native language that rises and falls in its intonation with different parts of the land.

Urban culture in Ireland is still developing, aided by the increasing mix of nationalities that bring with them to Ireland new-to-us ways of living in the city. Nonetheless, the connection with a rural life is never far away, whether physically or conceptually. Indeed, there are fields of cattle in Limerick city. But in the main, in this century, this city-connection with the rural is of a 'new' type of rural-urban living: not living *from* the land, but living *on* the land so as to be able to look *at* the land, while still working away, *in* the

city. Our understanding of and approach to the city continues to develop. This shop building holds its place in history as the home to a Maoist bookshop in 1970, quite an anomaly in the staunchly conservative Catholic Limerick of that time. With its façade then painted red, the distribution of communist literature – ‘insidious propaganda’ in the words of the city’s then mayor – caused such fear in some sectors of local society that an editorial of the *Limerick Leader* newspaper urged the ‘people of Limerick’ to ‘unite to run all those connected with the movement out of the area’. Not long afterwards, shots were fired through the shop-window.¹⁹

Fifty years later, the building’s uses continue to evolve. WILD IRELAND has moved to a solely online presence. A striking new brightly coloured mural of The Cranberries’ lead singer – Limerick-woman Dolores O’Riordan – decorates the entire height of the shop’s gable end. In the space of less than a month from when this photograph was taken by Luc in December 2019, the landlord painted the building in mustard, and the blue lettering was removed. This photograph of a shop sign, of a former bookshop, is a legacy of the turnover of words on and in and about the city. Some urban memories can be fleeting. Some endure.



Limerick has lost, and continues to lose, much of its Georgian heritage. The hulk of building that is Arthur's Quay Shopping Centre replaced, in 1989, a terraced block of once-elegant Georgian townhouses fronting the river that had, over a century, disintegrated to become tenements housing the city's most deprived slums. Today, directly across the road from this shopping centre, another Georgian block is under threat from the imminent construction of what is being called the Limerick Opera Centre – a proposal for a 14-storey tower, large commercial buildings, a plaza and apartments. Many have fought to retain this section of the city's built fabric, while others welcome the treatment of this block as a tabula rasa for a 'transformational project' for the city. The fighters have lost.

It is over 200 years since Limerick has been a wealthy city. Old buildings need money to survive, and the people of Limerick have not been in a position to maintain their extensive grid-city of Georgian brick architecture. The generous spaces of these special buildings no longer house city-centre homes, but are mostly repurposed in relatively piecemeal ways as offices divided floor-by-floor.



Along Rutland Street, and along Ellen Street that joins it at the perpendicular, leases have not been renewed. The ground floors of these empty buildings that form the Opera Centre site have been boarded up, and play host to the traces of a four-year-old street art project that wrap two sides of this block. As one passes, one can read:

Belonging.

Hybrid.

Culture is where we are from. Culture is where we are going.

Above these words, these statements, the upper floors' rhythm of Georgian windows – from piano nobile to attic – march onwards, unaffected. The special proportion of the Georgian window and its reveals, and the way it welcomes and modulates natural sunlight, both direct and diffuse, continues unabated, but no-one has the pleasure of experiencing it here anymore, one block back from the river.

The pink and brown tones of the beautiful eighteenth-century master plan for Limerick's Newtown Pery – the extension to the city across the Abbey

River from King's Island – was funded by Edmond Sexton Pery and drawn by Christopher Colles.²⁰ The ambition of this plan, its grid laid out on the hill that sloped to the river, and with rules for height and a sense of conformity, allowed the city to rise site by site, piece by piece. Through speculative building, through market demands, individual Georgian houses rose as standalone teeth, until the neighbouring sites were built on, and the teeth aligned in rows, and the city blocks were shaped. The ambition of Colles' plan was never fully completed as drawn. And now, 250 years later, its vision of a totality is eroding, to be disassembled by contemporary market forces, contemporary speculation. And so it is that the buildings in these photographs await their demolition.



On a very low spring tide, when the pull of the moon is at its strongest and the brackish river-sea water of the River Shannon has made its temporary diurnal journey out the estuary, it is possible to walk along the muddy-stony riverbed through the centre of Limerick city. This territory, exposed for a few hours to the sunlight in this cyclical manner, offers a particular way of

experiencing the underbelly of the city. Stone quaysides rise heavy from their foundations, a solid edge defining this lower world. Standing beside the north bank, looking southwards across to Shannon Rowing Club, Poor Man's Kilkee, and uphill towards the Georgian grid, the stratified materiality of the city is apparent – the red-brick-ness of city blocks built on top of the layers of cut stone. A boat storage shed, with its regular rhythm of brick pilasters, sits on the peninsula that forms the entrance to the lock gate. In 2016, as part of Limerick's campaign bid to become European Capital of Culture 2020, six words in large white lettering a metre high were applied to the stone quay below the shed. They read:

It will rise with the moon.

These words formed part of a street art installation, a collaboration between Piquant, a graphic design company in Limerick, and Stanzas, a local poetry group. Eight of the group's members each wrote a poem that was inspired by Limerick; the designers then selected one line from each poem, reproduced those lines in 3D, and attached them to walls around the city.

Four years later, this line of poetry remains on the city's river wall. The ever-moving water rises to the base of the letters at high tide, and they are partly submerged when the river floods. The words prompt those who pass them, as they walk across Sarsfield Bridge. They implicitly ask us to recall our relations with the river and its potential, the wateriness of our bodies and of the earth, the power of gravity and of lunar forces, the human scale and the scale of the world.

Around the corner from here, 200 metres from the riverfront, another set of words also remains.

*The old/new
vintage attack*

Black on painted white, and not particularly large, they discreetly rest along the high perimeter wall-building of the former Cleeve's condensed milk factory. Significantly above eye height, on a road of mostly stone walls on either side – walls with their window-and-door openings all now blocked-up – the words subtly animate this stretch of city for the passer-by that notices their quiet presence.

This project of physically inscribing contemporary poetry inspired by a place onto the walls and surfaces of that place, generates another version of poetry of place: a poetry of regular physical encounter between citizens and a living literature: a city of words.

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