Edinburgh International Book Festival: Will Self and Richard Sennett – Draughtsmen Drafting

‘I’ve always wondered why I find suburbs sexy’

Although the novelist, academic and former bad boy of journalism, **Will Self,** claims now to like suburbs, he certainly didn’t appreciate growing up in one any more than I did. Hampstead Garden Suburb embodies what Self calls ‘an idealisation of the bucolic’, the very British idea that there have been times when everything was perfect, and that this mythical perfection can be recaptured ‘in a few cul-de-sacs with privet hedges and semi-detached houses in the Tudorbethan style.’

Whether Self likes suburbs or not (he has now lived in London for many years) he’s here at the Edinburgh International Book Festival with the admirably patient **Richard Sennett** (Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics, *left*) to discuss cities, and more especially ***Invisible Cities,*** the novel by **Italo Calvino,** first published in 1972.

In Calvino’s book Marco Polo visits the emperor Kublai Khan, describing for him, in a series of vignettes, the various cities of Khan’s vast empire. In reality, every vignette is about one city – Venice – and none describes the city in concrete terms. Instead places are glimpsed through a phrase, a glance, a sound;

‘… the special quality of this city…….on a September evening, when the days are growing shorter and the multicoloured lamps are lighted all at once at the doors of the food stalls, and from a terrace a woman’s voice cries oooh!’

Unlike Flaubert or Dickens, Calvino gives us no narrator to describe the scene. *Invisible Cities*, says Sennett – a huge fan – ‘speaks of things the human eye cannot see, of “thin cities”, “invisible cities”….’ Or, as Self puts it ‘what Calvino tries to investigate is the way the imagination works in a reciprocal way with the urban environment.’

Self is a born raconteur who can easily turn any conversation into a monologue, albeit a most engaging and entertaining one. Sennett is more measured but well able to hold his own, and with his own dry line in humour. (To an audience member who’s trying to engage with Self: ‘He’s very tough. I know this guy. Just submit.’)

The two of them disagree on many things – for Sennett, struggling to bring the subject of cities alive for his students, the publication of Calvino’s work was a bright light in ‘a sea of near-suicidal despair.’ ‘The single finished urban project’ is, he says ‘a kind of graveyard of the imagination’, whereas *Invisible Cities* showed people just what architects were killing in obeying the mantra ‘think practically.’

Self, coming to Calvino’s work for the first time, points out that the book is not written by a city dweller. Calvino loved New York but saw it from an outsider’s point of view;

‘What I take from Calvino is a lack of understanding of what it is like to live in cities.’

(Sennett, who knew Calvino, describes him as ‘wild on the page but surprisingly withdrawn as a person, intensely engaged with places’, someone whose idea of a walk was a three hour trek up and down the grid streets of NYC.)

So what might we learn from Calvino's book in an age when cities (and people) are struggling?

Both Sennett and Self agree that parts of cities are rapidly turning into investment opportunities, 'the commodisation of space itself.' Numerous properties – especially, but certainly not exclusively in London – are owned by people so wealthy that they don't even bother to rent them out. Self, a psychogeographer, calls such places 'shadow streets', and describes walking around Edinburgh's New Town the previous evening and seeing no lights in the windows. The New Town is 'antiseptic and denuded', something he finds ironic in an area built to embody the Scottish Enlightenment. He recalls (as I do) the many bomb sites and wastelands that still existed in London in the 1960s; the city has lost its 'wiggle room' and is becoming frozen in aspic.

'Form has followed finance in the city.'

Whilst Self tells his students (and us) to go out and get lost in a city, to get away from the idea that everything has to be determined by time and money, to use the city as a springboard to free the imagination, Sennett is more concerned with what he sees as the shrivelling complexity of urban life.

Both commerce and politics, he says, want to simplify everyone's experience, to corral folk into uniform areas where they will only encounter people exactly like themselves; 'This is terrible.'

And it's surely true that many cities are, by their design, now discouraging us from walking anywhere – Houston has long been known for this, and now it's quite difficult to walk round parts of London. Self is a well-known walker – in the past he's walked from his home in Vauxhall to Heathrow Airport, and from JFK into Manhattan. How long before this is no longer allowed 'for your own safety'?

Sennett sees the best cities as complex places, ones that make their citizens learn to manage complexity; they are forced to live cheek by jowl with strangers, people they might not like, foreigners, 'even Brexiteers' (Sennett is a fierce Remainer). Ordinary people are being driven out of cities by the inflation of property prices and the lack of stable jobs. He sees the possibility of revolutionary upheaval on the horizon, much of it caused by the polarisation of wealth that Brexit will only exacerbate

A city, he says, is good for teaching people to deal with complexity, not only in their own lives but out in the world. When people have to live together, they have to learn to get on. He doesn't want cities to be simplified ('Google maps can do that for you'), he wants to make them *more* complicated. Why shouldn't shopping centres be combined with hospices for example? (He tried it once, and after initial resistance people loved it.)

'There is no surprise in our cities.'

In some ways Self agrees. Cities make him think of termite heaps; maybe humans are social insects after all? One problem, Sennett points out, is that while people are all at the same level, all doing their best to survive from day to day, they will co-operate, help one another out. But the minute people get some money, the habits of co-operation disappear (he cites Delhi as an example.)

At this point Self goes off on a little sortie of his own, first likening the suburbs to oysters' marital beds, then enumerating the mentions of 'labial' in Calvino's book.

Sennett is like the slightly indulgent but ultimately cynical uncle (' Write all this down and see where it gets you.') You have to admire Self for his confidence – his argument wanders off on numerous tangents, peppered with anecdotes and thoughts about everything from sex to the size of taxi drivers'

hippocampuses (In his novel *The Book of Dave,* a cabby's notebook is found in a ruined city and its contents, ['The Knowledge'], are used to reimagine the place. Self has taken part in research on whether cabbies' extensive 'Knowledge' leads to an enlargement of part of the brain. His own hippocampus is, he assures us, '*huge*'.)

Sennett counters with his own diversion into Brexit, which he sees as catastrophic. Whilst he feels that change must surely come, he says that people need to find a new way to challenge the status quo. Growing up in a Communist household (his mother worked for the party for over 30 years) he saw that his parents' generation did not know how to answer the commodity fetishism of their day.

'Something is going to explode – but it needs a different answer.'

Were any conclusions drawn at the end of this interesting and enjoyable session? Self and Sennett clearly both love cities and decry what is happening to them, the stifling of their imaginative growth by the mega-powers of money and political control. Self, unlike many city dwellers, has no desire to move to the country, seeing the city as 'womb-like' and welcoming. (He of course can apparenty afford to live in it.) Just how to restore surprise and joy to the urban areas in which most of us now spend our days remains, however, elusive in the face of the juggernaut of capitalism.

In the introduction to *Invisible Cities*, Calvino describes;

'*the desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin, that corruption's gangrene has spread too far to be healed by our sceptre, that the triumphs over enemy sovereigns has made us the heirs of their long undoing*.'

But despite this depressing thought, Self heads off quite happily to the signing tent. He's still a rebel, still a

master of the sharp observation, the witty come-back, but you get the sense that even he has mellowed. In the end you have either to laugh or cry.

Draughtsmen Drafting is one of four EIBF events organised by LSE's Theatrum Mundi as part of the *Writing in the City* programme theme. In these sessions artists, architects and academics will investigate the city through speculative fiction and celebrate how writers inspire a city's future. More details on Theatrum Mundi's website here. Image of Will Self (c) Edinburgh International Book Festival.