**‘What makes city life meaningful is the things we hide’: a dialogue on existential urban space between Marshall Berman and Orhan Pamuk**

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**Abstract**

**In this article we bring Marshall Berman’s writings on public space, politics and subjectivity into dialogue with a literary rendering of similar themes by Orhan Pamuk in his 2015 novel *A Strangeness in my Mind.* Our aim is to elaborate upon Berman’s undeveloped notion of ‘existential space’—first suggested in a review of an earlier Pamuk novel—through an extended encounter between the authors. This article begins by comparing the urban writings of Berman with Pamuk’s novel across three broad, overlapping themes: (1) the contingency of space; (2) authenticity and experience; and (3) openness, inclusivity and danger. In the analysis that develops out from this dialogue, we interpret existential space to imply any urban space—a room, a street, bar or square, for example—that is appropriated, in an act of struggle, by occupants or users as ‘an everywhere’: an inclusive place from which to connect with others and from where to pursue transcendent goals such as love, creativity, equality, justice or joy. This points to the fragile temporality of existential space, to how the meaning of the ‘present’ may be deferred or ‘hidden away in the back of the mind’ because such spaces are simultaneously concrete and preoccupied with another time (and place).**

**Keywords**

**Orhan Pamuk, Marshall Berman, Existential space, Istanbul, A Strangeness in My Mind, public space, literary**

# **Introduction**

**Marshall Berman (2017, 251) described Turkish author Orhan Pamuk as ‘one of the world’s great novelists’. Here, we present a critical reading of Berman’s writings on public space, politics and subjectivity, bringing these ideas into colloquy with a literary rendering of similar themes by Pamuk in his 2015 novel *A Strangeness in my Mind***[[1]](#footnote-1)**. The novel tells the story of Mevlut, a boza**[[2]](#footnote-2) **seller in Istanbul. Mevlut moves to Istanbul in the late 1960s from a small village in Anatolia. Like most rural migrants, he lives in a self-made gecekondu on Istanbul’s periphery, in a neighbourhood called Kültepe**[[3]](#footnote-3)**. The streets that Mevlut wanders over the next forty or so years selling ice cream, yogurt, chicken and rice and boza provide the means (and meaning) for his existence. The narrative centres around how Mevlut elopes with the ‘wrong’ girl from his village (Rayiha), the older sister of Samiha, a girl he had once exchanged glances with at a wedding. Mevlut writes love letters to Samiha for three years but his cousin Süleyman mischievously passes the letters to Rayiha. It is when Mevlut first encounters Rayiha, as they are about to run away to the city and marry, that he realises he has been hoodwinked. Mevlut keeps this a secret from Rayiha and they marry and fall in love, even though they never make it out of poverty.**

**Berman and Pamuk are fascinating authors (and urbanists) to bring together in dialogue. Merrifield (2018, 253) writes that ‘[w]henever Marshall talked about cities, he was really talking about literature, about books. Whenever he talked about literature, about books, he was really talking about cities.’ Moreover, the urban content of Orhan Pamuk’s fiction is undeniable, comparable in richness and analytical depth to many works of ethnography. This is why Andreas Huyssen (2008, 20-1) cherishes Pamuk’s accounts of the city, which veer between memoir, urban sociology, intellectual history and travel essay. One review of *A Strangeness…* claims that ‘[Pamuk’s] novels spill out of themselves, becoming part of the urban fabric’ (Day 2016). And, just as literature gives imaginative reality to the city, material urban change transforms or shapes the literary text (Lehan 1998). Berman and Pamuk are both captivated by (and, as writers, *protagonists in*) this dialectical process.**

The aim of this exercise is to elaborate upon Berman’s notion of ‘existential space’ through an extended encounter with Pamuk’s novel. Although existential space is a well-known concept in architectural theory (e.g. Norberg-Schulz 1971; Pallasmaa 2005; 2009), it has an alternative meaning in Berman’s work. It arrives in almost throwaway fashion in his review of Pamuk’s *Snow*, where he comments on the love affair between the two central characters Ipek and Ka (Berman 2009). The couple savour the prospect of leaving the remote Anatolian border city of Kars (and the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism) for a happier, freer life in Frankfurt. They imagine visiting restaurants and cinemas, relaxing in front of the TV and making love:

This fantasy is so sweet! One thing that makes their love so hot is our knowledge that they have had to build the bed themselves. If sexual love means, as John Donne says, that a couple “make this little room an everywhere,” we get to see this couple construct their room, create the *existential space* they share. Before they could be there, they have had to fight both others and themselves: he, to break out of his inner isolation and focus on another person; she, to break away both from a loving but enveloping family and from a domineering lover […]. In order for modernism to deliver on its human promise, it has to be shared. To reach that point of mutuality takes tremendous struggles, struggles that good people can easily lose through no fault of their own. (ibid)

Later, we expound upon what a Berman/ Pamuk inspired understanding of existential space entails; but, in short, we interpret it to imply any urban space—a room, a street or bar, for example—that is appropriated, in conditions of hardship and acts of struggle, by its users as ‘an everywhere’: an inclusive space from which to connect with others, oneself; and from where to pursue collective goals such as love, creativity, equality, justice or joy. Existential spaces do not appear on maps, but in exceptional circumstances can acquire a historical significance that makes them candidates for heritage projects[[4]](#footnote-4). They are distinct from a sanctified understanding of public space (e.g. Sennett 1977; Carr et al 1993; see Amin 2008 for a critique). In fact, even cities with few public squares are likely to cradle numerous existential spaces; places where we can expect to find a ‘thickness and intensity of human feelings, a clash and interfusion of needs and desires and ideas’ (Berman 1986, 484). Although Berman and Pamuk both value public space, the terrain they are instinctively drawn to is that where the private, public and collective; the interior and exterior; and the past, present and future flow into one another and crystallise in concrete form.

This article begins by comparing the urban writings of Marshall Berman on topics such as public space, politics and subjectivity with Orhan Pamuk’s *A Strangeness in my Mind,* a novel that provides a great deal of insight on such matters. This discussion is organised around three broad, overlapping themes: (1) the contingency of space; (2) authenticity and experience; and (3) openness, inclusivity and danger. We then reflect in greater detail upon this dialogue before returning, finally, to the notion of existential space.

## **The contingency of public space**

When discussing public space, Berman suggests it is not *space itself* that is important —in fact, public spaces often lend themselves towards the ritual and/or exploitative—but rather the dynamic relation that is (or is not) permitted to develop in the city between private, public and collective lives. The ‘marvellously rich human mix’ found in Madrid’s Plaza Mayor captures his imagination (Berman 1986, 479). It is, he claims, ‘all that open-minded public space should be’ (ibid). However, Berman does not use these public spaces of the ‘old world’ merely to castigate North America’s retreat into privatism. Rather, he argues that public space is contingent: all spaces are the products of social relations. In the case of Plaza Mayor, ‘in its splendid openness, it has become something radically different from what it was meant to be’ (ibid). The Plaza, built at the very end of the 16th-century was designed for ‘public spectacles [*auto-da-fé*] that would dramatise the power and glory of inquisitorial church and an absolutist state’ (ibid.). The Plaza was used for ceremonial torture and murder; with many victims being Marranos, descendants of Spanish and Portuguese Jews forced to convert to Christianity. In the plaza, masks were torn away, people stripped naked, exposed and destroyed publicly ‘for being what they privately knew themselves to be’ (ibid). Even the most expansive, sunlit and vibrant public space can become a grisly arena for rituals of penance, in which people are not free to show themselves as they are. As such, it is not space that determines the quality of public life; rather, successful public spaces are contingent upon a political culture of ‘modernist liberalism’ (Berman 2009).

Another great, compromised public space that fascinates Berman is Times Square, a space ‘where everybody is unveiled’ (Berman 2006, xxiv). Growing up in the Bronx, Times Square was to the young Berman, ‘an invitation to live, to share in a life that was at once easy—you could get there on the subway—and overflowing’ (ibid). The right to the city spectacle is ambivalent: to be thrilled—to experience how consumer culture brilliantly dramatizes collective dreams—but also, sometimes, to be reduced to docility.

[Times Square] presents the modern city at its most expansive and intense. It gives people ideas, new ideas about how to look and how to move, ideas about being free and being oneself and being with one another […] [Times Square] has enticed and inspired all sorts of men and women to step out of line, to engage actively with the city, merge their subjectivity into it, and change the place as they change themselves [...] Sometimes this has crushed the self […], but sometimes it has brought joy and creative triumph […]. (ibid)

Many will baulk at Berman's portrayal of Times Square, one of the world’s most brazenly capitalist urban spaces, but Berman draws inspiration from Marx, the Marx who is awestruck by the revolutionary forces of capitalism and by the huge range of processes, powers, expressions of human life and energy that capitalism creates (Berman 1982, 93).

Having been personally harassed by security guards for ‘hanging out’ in Times Square, Berman is dismayed by the growing intrusion of aggressive corporate control (Berman 2006, 221). But, such is his belief in the dialectic, he argues that self-discovery and collective human enlargement find other urban spaces to flourish. Indeed, the story of the birth of hip-hop amidst the ‘ruins’ of the South Bronx during the 1970s is used regularly by Berman to illustrate how a global urban culture can emerge from the most lowly and repressed spaces of the city: ‘The kids of those neighbourhoods […] created because they had to; they couldn't help themselves, they couldn't stop. […] In the midst of dying, [the Bronx] went through rebirth’ (2007, 74).

*Contingency, urban space and subjectivity*

The public space in Istanbul that receives most attention in *A Strangeness…* is Taksim Square. The square is written as a politically contingent space, possessing few ‘stable’ qualities of its own. On one hand, it is a welcoming, liberal space. For example, Mevlut remembers being transfixed by a billboard advertisement as a child, where a ‘light-skinned, fair-haired kindhearted woman […] had offered him Tamek tomato ketchup and Lux soap […]. Mevlut liked the way she smiled at him’ (Pamuk 2015, 400). Taksim later becomes a site of refuge for the homeless following the 1999 earthquake (Pamuk 2015, 620). But Taksim is also an authoritarian space. Following the military coup of 1971, Pamuk describes how ‘[…] booksellers were banned from the streets. All this was bad news for street vendors’ (ibid: 101). Vendors like Mevlut were barred as Taksim Square effectively became ‘an army cantonment’ (ibid, 102). The novel also reflects how urban renewal compromises inclusivity. For example, the construction of the six-lane Tarlabaşı Boulevard in the late 1980s, which connects the neighbourhood with Taksim Square, includes concrete barriers and metal railings which make it impossible for Mevlut to push his cart across the road (ibid, 421). Later, during the regeneration of Tarlabaşı, Mevlut’s chicken and rice cart is impounded and destroyed by municipal police (ibid, 428). After losing his cart, Mevlut works as a manager in the Binbom Café, just yards from Taksim Square (ibid, 449). Curiously, Pamuk writes that ‘[t]he five years Mevlut had spent running the Binbom café *had kept him from the city*, turning him into a man of sorrow’ (ibid, 471 added emphasis). The distance and sorrow, we suggest, is that Taksim Square, for Mevlut, is a void whose content or mood is contingent on the politics or events of the time. The more enriching, enduring activities, exchanges and traditions of Istanbul are found in the adjoining working-class neighbourhoods where he prefers to roam.

Pamuk extends his focus on contingency by interrogating individual subjectivity. Whereas for Berman, in every individual can be found the modern spirit for self-development, Pamuk casts Mevlut as someone who is easily swayed by the political forces of his time. As a young man Mevlut pastes revolutionary posters onto neighbourhood walls with his Kurdish communist friend Ferhat and then, under duress, writes “God Save the Turks” over the same posters just days later with his nationalist cousins (ibid, 142). Mevlut enjoys left-wing debate but often opts against participating (ibid, 158, 165 and 466). The courage of Tiananmen Square protestors on TV impresses him, ‘though he felt it important not to go too far protesting against the state, especially in poorer countries, where, if not for the state, there would be no-one looking after poor people or street vendors’ (ibid, 445). Ferhat chides Mevlut for having a capitalist instinct and ‘Mevlut would feel proud of himself, even though he knew it wasn’t a compliment’ (ibid, 126). Pamuk explains that

[Mevlut] gets mixed up with politics, but he is not a political man, in the sense that he thinks he has a mission, nor is he a militant. He has political ideas but they are soft. […] The fact that he doesn’t have strong political and moral ideas helped me, so that he can go to all corners of Istanbul society without much of a problem (Robbins 2015)

The link between flânerie and ambivalence is not new (see Bairner 2012; Van Leeuwen 2017). Our view is not that Mevlut is apolitical, rather that he engages with politics through his relationships with acquaintances, friends and family. Mevlut’s relationship with ideas is more sensuous and practical than rational or intellectual. The characters, streets, walls, media and currency of the city are the medium/s through which Mevlut *experiences* rather than ‘thinks’ politics (see Kittler 1996 on ‘the city as medium’). Despite his poverty, Mevlut is not regretful. As Pamuk offers, Mevlut ‘is a victim, but he doesn’t feel like a victim’ (cited in Carroll 2015).

Mevlut’s deepest commitment is to the city, the torn, frayed palimpsest where he makes his impression night after night. When he walks the neighbourhoods of Istanbul selling boza—a commodity that is a symbol of Istanbul’s tension between modernity and tradition—he engages the strangeness in his mind. The final chapter is titled ‘The Form of a City: I can only meditate when I’m walking’. This appeal to movement opposes the stasis of public space and the confinement of working in one place (i.e. the Binbom café or later, The Brothers-in-Law Boza Shop); pointing to a more dialectical and existential space between private and public spheres and subjective and material worlds.

**Authenticity and experience**

Berman never deviates from an argument first made in *The Politics of Authenticity* (1970) that as capitalism individualises and estranges us from one another, modernity is responsible for the countervailing notion that we can seek to become authentic individuals. Capitalism destroys all we hold dear but, for Berman, ‘modernity is when man [sic] is ﬁnally in a position to recognise, and to act upon, his [sic] freedom, untrammelled by ﬁxed social roles and custom’ (Seth 2015, 1384). This paradox generates a dialectical form of radicalism that aims to overcome capitalism but ‘not to abolish the ideals and possibilities of modernity, but rather to fulfil them’ (Berman 1970, 314). Berman (ibid, 315) is convinced that the modern city, with its abundance of opportunities for interaction and encounters (be they social, intellectual or erotic) is the best milieu for authentic self-expression and individual growth.

An indivisible part of the modern urban experience is the encounter with others. The most crucial form of openness is openness to the poor: ‘[a]nyone who wants to claim a share of public space in a modern city is forced to share it with [the poor], and so to think about where he [sic] stands in relation to them’ (Berman 2006, 480). In its ability to explore such encounters, Berman (1986) praises Baudelaire’s poem ‘The Eyes of the Poor’ (see Baudelaire 2009, 51-52). The poem tells the story of a couple seated at an outdoor café on a newly completed Haussmannian Parisian boulevard. Indeed, the new boulevard is not quite finished; there is still a pile of rubble on the street, perhaps all that is left of the working-class district that has been demolished. This new kind of urban space, where the couple ‘could be private in public’ (Berman 1982, 152) opens the city to a novel form of reciprocity where ‘as they [the couple] see, they are seen’ (ibid, 153). Suddenly, a family in rags steps out from the rubble—perhaps they are investigating what became of their old neighbourhood—and walk towards the lovers:

The three faces were extraordinarily serious, and the six eyes contemplated fixedly the new café with an equal admiration, but shaded differently according to their age. The father’s eyes said: “How beautiful it is! […] But it’s a house only people who aren’t like us can enter”. (Baudelaire 2009, 51-52)

As Berman explains, ‘the lovers are embarrassed by the immense social gulf between them and these ragged people who, thanks to the new boulevard, are physically close enough to touch’ (1986, 481). Baudelaire’s protagonists must respond, not only to the ragged family in their midst, but also to how this family makes them feel about themselves. The male narrator expresses sympathy, but his female companion finds the family ‘unbearable’; she cannot bear the presence of ‘their big saucer eyes’. In discussing the poem, Berman poses the question of ‘a category of people that is going to be very large in modern history: people who are in the way—in the way of history, of progress, of development; people who are classified, and disposed of, as obsolete’ (Berman 1982, 67). He reminds us how, ‘the people in this class don’t want to go away; they, too, want a place in the bright light’ (Berman 1986, 481).

The poor appear often in the work of Berman, but never in stereotypical Leftist depictions as victims of capitalist exploitation (although Berman agreed they are exploited) or as the heroes of socialist realism, primed to lead the revolution (Walzer 2017). Rather, it is their presence as ‘moderns’ that Berman wants us to take seriously. He exemplifies this maxim in his response to Anderson’s (1984) critical review of *All That is Solid…*, in *New Left Review*. In defending his idiosyncratic reading of Marx, Berman provides sketches of ordinary New Yorkers: there is Larry, a muscular grad student who reads Hegel by day and drives a taxi at night; a hard-up Lower East Side sculptor called David; and Lena, a 17-year old Puerto Rican who has just been excommunicated by her church for her views on abortion and women’s rights. Together they comprise a city

crowded with human passion, intelligence, yearning, imagination, spiritual complexity and depth. It’s also crowded with oppression, misery, everyday brutality, and a threat of total annihilation. But the people in the crowd are using and stretching their vital powers, their vision and brains and guts, to face and fight the horrors; many of the things they do, just to get through the day and night, reveal what Baudelaire called ‘the heroism of modern life’. (Berman 1984, 122)

Amin (2012) is sceptical that co-presence among strangers is enough to deepen knowledge of ourselves or of the other. Rather, a progressive city is forged through co-operation. It is only by engaging in productive activity together, by cooperation, that a sense of trust between strangers can be forged. Whilst convincing, the consequences of the uncomfortable, internal dilemmas that people confront when encountering others—some of whom they will never collaborate with in their lives—should not be underplayed. As Berman (2006, 39) explains, ‘a mix is more than different people “side by side” […] When you are in the mix [...] ego-boundaries liquefy, identities get slippery’. Changes in subjectivity, whilst not visible, public or falsifiable are integral to the totality of urban experience.

## *Authentic Istanbul*

## Ferhat confides to Mevlut that ‘what makes city life meaningful is the things we hide’ (Pamuk 2015, 592-3). First, the things we hide can be taken to mean the poor who must be included if public space is to be authentic. Second, Ferhat’s statement refers to those aspects of our internal life that ‘lie in wait’ to animate the city. Our ideas, passions and capacities for expression, which are often hidden behind Simmel’s (1964) ‘reserve’, animate the city for each of us and for each other. Ferhat’s riddle is unravelled each night by Mevlut in his boza cry which announces his presence to potential customers.

[…] after a day in the ceaseless din of the restaurant and in the hubbub of Beyoğlu, walking down a dark and silent sloping street in the back of Feriköy felt to Mevlut like a homecoming, a return to a familiar universe. […] “Bozaaa,” Mevlut would cry out toward the eternal past. Sometimes, when he happened to look into a little house through a pair of open curtains, he would dream about living in just such a place with Rayiha someday and picture all the happiness that lay ahead. (ibid, 185)

Mevlut’s nocturnal perambulations deliberately ‘place’ himself in the city’s history. In communicating this association with his boza cry, Mevlut understands himself as part of the city’s past and present, but also its future. He fantasises about living happily in the neighbourhoods he walks through with his own family, but also living as neighbours with other inhabitants, sharing a community. Mevlut ‘knew that every time he cried out “Boo-zaaa” with a particular sentiment, the people of Istanbul felt the very same emotion in their hearts, and that was why they asked him upstairs and bought his boza’ (2015, 378). This reveals a reciprocal relationship. Mevlut shares *his* experience of the city just as he *creates it for others*. In Honneth’s (1996) framework of recognition, Mevlut experiences ‘a state of communicatively lived freedom’ (ibid, 5), a state integral to ‘the intersubjective recognition of […] identity’ (ibid). Mevlut opens-up experiences of authenticity on several levels: where contemporary society and romantic Ottoman nostalgia meet; where different classes encounter each other; and where Mevlut finds—at this juncture between the ‘eternal past’, the present and his projected future (‘all the happiness that lay ahead’)—a way to be recognised, and to recognise others. Since his ‘homecoming’ is always encountered ‘on the move’, Mevlut’s cognizance has more to do with ‘routes’ than ‘roots’ (see Hall 2015). His experience is more profound and/or transcendent than a feeling of belonging to a place.

But urban encounters are also ‘unavoidably risky and unpredictable’ (Wilson 2017, 464). In chapter one, set in 1994, Mevlut is attacked by muggers in a Beyoğlu side-street[[5]](#footnote-5). That Mevlut has lived and worked in the city for twenty-five years does not hold any positive connotation for the robbers. On the contrary, they accuse him of ‘looting the city’; he is the ‘unwanted poor’, just another rural migrant (ibid, 38-41). Mevlut’s uneasiness began earlier in the night with the realisation that Beyoğlu had ‘upscaled’, causing him to feel out-of-place: ‘[t]he quiet browbeaten folk in gray and drab clothes had been replaced by rowdy, energetic, and more assertive crowds’ (ibid, 22). His sense of displacement was reinforced by an unpleasant encounter with an affluent customer whose house guests viewed Mevlut as an anachronism, an object of fun. Back on the streets, Mevlut immediately sensed a malevolent presence, believing he was being followed by street dogs. As Thomson (1990, 331) explains, in late nineteenth century Parisian art, roaming dogs are symbols of the fears evoked by growing individual freedoms. The ‘dogs’ are the price Mevlut pays for the open urban spaces he participates in creating (he is a ‘roaming dog’ too). But on this occasion the dogs turn out to be thieves. With a switchblade pressed against his stomach, Mevlut is robbed of the night’s takings and his Swiss watch. He opts not to tell Rayiha about the incident.

Whenever (and wherever) Mevlut is unsettled he feels wary of dogs. In a pivotal scene, Mevlut returns to his old village under the cover of darkness to run away with Rayiha, believing her to be the girl he had been writing letters to. While passing through the village, the dogs unceasingly bark at him. What does it say about Mevlut (and his intentions) if the dogs in his own village do not recognise him? Is it because he is acting furtively, or because he senses he is about to come face-to-face with the consequences of his cousin’s trickery? Is it because he has become an *urban* being, just another anonymous Istanbullu? Understood this way, the dogs are a recurring and foreboding symbol of Mevlut’s search for authenticity in each place he inhabits or traverses, a desire both intimately personal and dependent on the recognition of others.

## **Openness, inclusivity and danger**

In Berman’s view, there are no limits as to how inclusive public space should be. Exploration of the limits of toleration is core to the modern search for authenticity. But how easy would it be to live in a city premised upon ‘the free development of each’? If the right to the city is granted to *everybody* then we must be prepared for the eventuality of ‘unknown human spaces with no limits at all’ (Berman 1982, 114). The open future promised by Marx is exhilarating but also ‘problematic, scary, dangerous’ (Berman 1999, xi). Understood this way, the right to the city is the outcome of a profusion of unsettling encounters between alternate or submerged experiences. It is an outcome we must *learn* to appreciate. Encounters enable people to ‘[...] enlarge who they are and learn to live in peace’ but the truth is that ‘none of us is capable of identifying with other people until we can identify with the dark side of ourselves, until we can bring our shadows into the light and find ways to live with them’ (Berman 2006, 29). Returning to Baudelaire’s ‘Eyes of the Poor’, Berman (1982, 152) comments that the more the couple ‘participated in the extended “family of eyes”—the richer became their vision of themselves’. Berman (1986) wants people to seek out suffering, conflict and trouble. He cites Kafka's *Parables and Paradoxes*: ‘you can hold back from the suffering of the world, […] you have free permission to do so […] but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could have avoided’ (ibid, 485). The city, for Berman (ibid), is the one place we can engage suffering together and be transformed into a public.

This transformation takes on a metaphysical and romantic character in Berman’s later writing.[[6]](#footnote-6) In both the Athenian Agora and Biblical Eden he identifies a paradox in that those who feel most at home can also be driven away, banished or excluded. In Eden, Berman emphasises the Fall of Adam and Eve, through which they come to realise:

how much they have in common, and how good it is to trust each other. They have gone beyond God, who trusts nobody. […] As Adam and Eve survive divine malice, they find themselves enlarged. […] It took centuries before people could see this inner change, this *human expansion*. (ibid 356-357, emphasis in original)

Eden—the first ‘suggestion or intimation of a public space’ (ibid, 352)—was ‘a place whose look of openness was a lie, a cosmic and metaphysical lie’ (ibid, 358). But this deception—common also to the pseudo-public spaces found in our own neoliberal cities—also has positive consequences. It leads, out of necessity, to ‘human expansion’ (ibid, 357) and the creation of new spaces based on shared feelings, thoughts, and deeds.

*Inclusive space: the stalking of Neriman*

As a rural migrant who merely scratches a living in the city, Mevlut *is* the ‘eyes of the poor’. Pamuk (cited in Robbins 2015) describes Mevlut as a character from a Flaubert novel; an observer, a moving ‘centre’ from which to see, hear and explore the city. Yet, as much as Mevlut is the eyes of the poor, he is not representative of the *all* to which public space should be open. One example illustrates this clearly. As a youth Mevlut begins stalking a woman; an activity described as typical for boys of his generation and class in Istanbul and evidence of ‘the patriarchal strands within a subordinated culture’ (Fraser 2000, 112). He follows the woman across the city, learns to recognise her, determines her brand of cigarettes and even gives her a name: ‘Neriman’. Desire and fear are fused into one as Mevlut worries about Neriman’s reaction should she find out. His desire becomes problematic, revealing of a ‘dark side’ that he must reckon with, only once he has acts upon it in public:

[…] [O]f course Neriman wouldn’t be happy […]; perhaps she would even think he was some sort of pervert. […] If someone in the village were to follow his sisters as he followed Neriman, he would want to beat the bastard up.

But Istanbul was not a village. […] In a city, you can be alone in a crowd, and in fact *what makes the city a city* is that it lets you hide the strangeness in your mind inside its teeming multitudes. (Pamuk 2015, 134 added emphasis)

Pamuk posits a moral dialogue between intention/action, private/ public, self/ other and rural/ urban. Mevlut compares reactions to expressions of desire in urban crowds with (rural) villages. The boys who stalk women through the city—and who share stories of this ‘private’ practice—and the unknowing women they follow are the city’s ‘teeming multitudes’ among which all this ‘strangeness’ is hidden; and yet stalking is also a public (and political) issue. Does it matter that Neriman *does not know* she is being stalked? No. Her mask of anonymity, which like Mevlut she is entitled to wear and enjoy, is removed. She loses *her* right to be ‘alone in the crowd’ and to have personal tastes; she is ‘stripped naked’ like the Marranos in Plaza Mayor. There is no mutuality, no exchange of glances in Neriman and Mevlut’s individual struggles for recognition, even if it is an important learning experience for Mevlut.

A complication arises when we consider Neriman’s confidence to confront the threats that, as a lone woman in the city, she is exposed to. She is an emblem for ‘women’s right to the carnival, intensity and even the risks of the city’ (Wilson 1991, 10). Mevlut feels jealous when Neriman shares a joke with two men idling on the pavement (Pamuk 2015, 135-6). As Berman (2006, xvii) suggests, when discussing the chorus girl used on a poster to advertise Times Square at the beginning of the twentieth century (and this applies also to Neriman): ‘she does not want to be rescued from what she is doing’. As Secor (2003, 160) explains, rural migrant women typically view Istanbul as an arena, in contrast to the village, where they can communicate freely with different types of people. They do not wish to return to village life. The public presence of women in the city causes most fear for men; in this case, it involves Mevlut’s fear of his desires being exposed and/or rejected. This and the concomitant fantasy of *protecting* the vulnerable (urban) woman from other men can lead to the exclusion of women from public settings or to intensified paternalistic controls (Wilson 1991, 10).

Pamuk’s androcentric focus is relevant also in his depiction of Rayiha. Shortly after their wedding, Mevlut buys a television ‘so Rayiha wouldn’t get bored while she waited for him at home in the evenings’ (Pamuk 2015, 299). The role of Rayiha as a new wife in the big city is domestic in contrast to Mevlut’s labour which takes place, generally, on the streets. However, Pamuk’s utilisation of character point-of-view vignettes elucidates Rayiha’s domesticity as concerned with socially reproductive labour:

Just before going to bed, I would give the chickpeas a good soak and set the alarm for three in the morning, so I could get up and see that they’d softened properly before putting them in a pot on low heat. After I took the pot off the stove, Mevlut and I would embrace and go back to sleep with the comforting gurgle of the pot cooling in the background. In the morning, I would fry the rice a little in oil, just the way the man from Muş had taught us, and then leave it to simmer in water for a while. While Mevlut was out buying groceries, I would boil and then panfry the chicken […] removing the bones and skin with my fingers, adding as much thyme and pepper as I liked, perhaps one or two cloves of garlic if I felt so inclined […] (Pamuk 2015, 301).

Pamuk’s novel critically engages with the political imaginary of the ‘the neat spatial divisions between production (public) and reproduction (private)’ (Bhattacharya 2017, 9). Here, we see Mevlut and Rayiha participating in a gendered division (of labour, of space) that is structurally exploitative but also shared in the sense that they *work together* to make sense of this relation. The relation between labour and socially reproductive labour is a source of oppression but also, *at the same time*, joy. It is in between and during the repetitive reproductive tasks—the gurgling of the pot—that their romantic embrace can occur.

Mevlut is often used as a ‘naïve’ container for exploring tensions between urban space, history, politics and subjectivity. But Mevlut’s is not the only possible perspective on this dynamic. For example, Neriman’s experience is left unexplored by Pamuk. The perspective of Samiha, the sister to whom Mevlut believed he was writing, is developed only in short sections, and always in relation to Mevlut; Rayiha similarly appears only occasionally. Fundamentally, the novel offers a male perspective on the city. Berman and Pamuk are writers who, like ‘Benjamin concentrate on their own experience of strangeness in the city, on their own longing and desires […]’ (Wilson 1991, 6). And it is not only gender that is important here. Mevlut’s Kurdish communist friend Ferhat is not painting political slogans out of boredom; he is an activist fighting for his and other Kurds right to the city. Communicative acts have consequences. Later, just like the journalist Celâl Salik who was shot dead in 1979—an incident mentioned twice in the novel—Ferhat is murdered.

**Berman and Pamuk in Dialogue**

By comparing Berman’s writings on public space, politics and subjectivity with Pamuk’s literary meditations on the city we gain a sense of the multitude of urban spaces (and times) that evade cartographic or historical representation and which blur boundaries between the private, public and collective. First, Berman and Pamuk are sceptical of any ‘pure’ notion of public space, pointing to the political and historical contingency of such spaces and the wide-ranging subjectivities they foster (not all of which are ‘good’ or progressive). Second, recognition is seen by both as integral to authenticity, not necessarily in terms of an *a priori* abstract identity, such as class, gender or race, but in terms of *specific material histories* (see Haider 2018). Recognition for Berman and Pamuk is at once intimate and transcendent. They emphasise urban inclusivity whilst not ignoring its risks (not least, the misrecognition of identity and the pain of experiencing oneself as *in*authentic). But, *without* *the other*, individual authenticity is impossible. Third, Berman and Pamuk explore the limits of inclusivity, pointing to how freedom is often gained at the expense of others. They also consider how individual and collective pain or shame is necessary to an expansion of the self.

Mevlut repeatedly questions whether motives of the heart take precedence over what has been expressed in words, whether intention and action can ever be reconciled. Ultimately, the novel shows that in time they can and they do, which is a subtle, dialectical critique of structuralism—be it language or urban planning—that Berman would have approved of[[7]](#footnote-7). Indeed, at the end of the novel, in a quiet street close to the Feriköy cemetery, Mevlut realises ‘what he wanted to tell Istanbul and write on its walls’ (ibid, 734). This is where he finally affirms his love for his (now deceased) wife Rayiha, the woman he eloped with ‘by mistake’. It is also an expression of Nietzsche’s (1968) notion of *amor fati* or love of one’s fate. Mevlut’s life—his poverty, his labour, his experiences of loss, his complicity in the deception of others—has all been worth it, just for *this* moment, this realisation that despite everything, Mevlut *had* loved authentically.

Pamuk wants us to take Mevlut seriously, just as Berman wants us to evade Leftist stereotypes and consider the urban poor as fully fledged ‘moderns’. The activity of working and all that it involves—communication, being mobile, gaining access to new spaces, struggling for recognition—makes Mevlut an example *par excellence* of Berman’s urban modernism. Mevlut’s daily and nightly travails across the streets of Istanbul with his cart or boza poll are the means through which he earns a living and, paradoxically, the source of his freedom.

There are also productive contrasts between Berman and Pamuk, arising primarily from Berman’s fondness for an almost essentialist reading, an ideological humanism even, whereby ‘the city’ is claimed to possess a ‘capacity for deep feeling’ (Berman 1970 323); the city is the undisputed terrain to recover ‘every man’s [sic] sense of his own unique, irreducible self’ (ibid). This certainty—regarding city and the self—is not shared by Pamuk, who doubts whether we possess the means to fully grasp either the city or our place (and time) in it. He explains that ‘[a]nything we say about the city’s essence, says more about our own lives and our own states of mind. *The city has no other centre than ourselves.*’(Pamuk 2005, 316 original emphasis) Pamuk’s works illustrate the impossibility of a fixed, singular and linear understanding of a sprawling and complex city such as Istanbul; which ‘rather appears as fragmented, constantly changing, shifting, and hence preventing a firm and absolute definition’ (Gurses 2012, 59). Pamuk writes about Istanbul as if he is inseparable from a city that always evades him:

I am reminded that what gives a city its special character is not just its topography or its buildings, but rather the sum total of every chance encounter, of every memory, letter, colour and image jostling in its inhabitants’ crowded memories after they have been living on the same streets for fifty years, as I have. (Pamuk 2005, 99)

This explains Pamuk’s technique of bringing together and connecting different voices and perspectives in the modernist narrative of *A Strangeness….* It is the crowded (private) memories of these inhabitants that give the city its special (public) character. Pamuk’s Istanbul is a ‘world I had made with my own hands, this world that existed only in my head, was more real to me than the city in which I actually lived’ (Pamuk 2006, 9). There is no essential quality to this city or to urban living. Rather, there exists an accumulation of encounters, memories, buildings, imaginaries and so forth to be captured and circulated via a literary form which (re-)creates and casts these worlds in the world of the novel. Pamuk’s *oeuvre* creates ‘a milieu that is in constant formation, drawing on disparate connections’ (Ong 2011, 3).

Even if Pamuk finds Western views of Istanbul beguiling, ‘as exotic to me as ours are to them’ (Pamuk 2005, 261), he also understands writing Istanbul as a way of resisting the East-West dichotomy (Husein 2012). Pamuk explains how as a child and young man, Istanbul felt far from the centre of things, as if one were living life in the provinces or on the periphery (Pamuk 2006). The desire to overcome this marginalisation comes from the fear of being forgotten, but also the belief that ultimately, ‘all human beings resemble each other’. For Pamuk, the gesture of writing—a productive activity capable of making or transforming urban imaginaries— ‘suggests a single humanity, a world *without* a centre’ (ibid, 7 emphasis added).

On the face of it, Berman is much less humble, suggesting *his* city, New York City, is a theatre, a production ‘whose audience is the whole world’ (Berman 1982, 288). Berman is known best as a *New York* intellectual, but he sees the modern everywhere, cutting across boundaries of geography and class. Having grown up in the Bronx, he identifies too with the margins. In St. Petersburg, for example, he enthrals in a modernism of *under*development, an expression of modernism full with the sense that modernisation is happening *elsewhere*: ‘[t]he modernism of underdevelopment is forced […] to nourish itself on an intimacy and a struggle with mirages and ghosts’ (ibid, 232). Here, he circles closer to Pamuk who admits that his Istanbul novels engage with an ‘incomplete modernity’ (Pamuk 2013). Such a modernism comes from the underground, from those, like Mevlut, with ‘shadow passports’ (Berman 1982, 286) to the modern city. Pamuk has experienced this himself. In 2005, he was placed on trial in Istanbul for stating in a newspaper interview that ‘a million Armenians and thirty thousand Kurds had been killed in Turkey’ (Pamuk 2005). Pamuk’s ‘crime’ was to have ‘publically denigrated Turkish identity’ (ibid).

Whereas Berman is forthright about embracing a ‘largeness of vision and imagination’ that engages people’s ‘own lives and works and their place in history’ (1982, 33-4), *A Strangeness…* offers a more restrained deliberation upon the adequacy of language to express intent or desire or to make sense of one’s predicament. Pamuk’s endeavour is ‘[…] to seize the meaning of the city by reading it, walking its streets, and painting it. […] writing allows the narrator to illustrate the constant displacement that is at work in his Istanbul.’ (Gurses 2012, 57) Unlike Berman, Pamuk circumvents melodrama (Pamuk in Robbins 2015), but via the fragments, detours, mystifications and personal deliberations of *A Strangeness…* we gain access to an urban troposphere that is reducible neither to the self or the public life of the city. As Huyssen (2008, 21) puts it, in Pamuk’s literary urbanism, subjectivity and mood ‘becomes palpable almost as a material reality’ [[8]](#footnote-8).

# **On Existential Space**

Our original example of existential space—from Berman’s review of *Snow*—hints at the ambiguous terrain between the private and public, the subjective and the historical-material. Another example, from *A Strangeness…* is included below. This time it is Samiha’s voice that we are granted access to:

There was a place behind the Ali Sami Yen football stadium where he used to wait for me under a mulberry tree. There were some old stables there where homeless people lived. There was a little shop where Ferhat would buy me a bottle of Frutko orange soda and we would check under the cap to see whether we’d won anything. I never once asked him how much he made in the restaurant industry, whether he had any savings or where we would live. That’s the way I fall in love.

Once I got in the taxi […] we turned back towards Taksim Square […] from there we went down to Kabataş, where I admired the simple deep blue of the sea, and as we drove over Galata bridge I was entranced by the sight of all the ships with their passengers and all those cars around us. At one point, I felt like crying at the thought of being separated from my father and my sister and going to a place I didn’t know, but at the same time I felt in my heart that this whole city was now mine and that I was starting a very happy life. (Pamuk 2015, 346-7)

There are two existential urban spaces that we encounter here. The first is under the mulberry tree, near the stables where Samiha would meet Ferhat (Samiha could only do this in secret, beyond the controlling gaze of her father and her possessive boyfriend Süleyman). Here they drink orangeade and dream about winning a big prize, although it is Ferhat’s *lack* of material wealth and the inauspicious surroundings—even the proximity of the homeless—that Samiha reflects upon and enjoys.

The second existential space is created on the move; from the passing views of the city, the bridge, the ships, people and cars from the back seat of the taxi. Automobiles bridge the gap between private and public space, between stasis and mobility (Gudis 2004). Somehow this journey resonates with Samiha’s inner conflicts; instigating ‘reverberations’ between subject and objects (Bachelard 1969). Samiha contemplates how she felt both sad and elated at the same time. She was broken and yet could feel the whole city in her heart. Reliving this bittersweet moment, Samiha is reminded how the taxi ride prompted her to sense, momentarily, the ‘very happy life’ she was about to live with Ferhat[[9]](#footnote-9).

Existential urban spaces are always a creative response to structural constraints and/or personal dilemmas that can be traced to prior decisions and actions. They are made in the simultaneous experience of one’s present predicament and the sensing of a yearned for future; of living with disappointment, sadness and/or anger at the same time as hope. As Pamuk writes of his early adulthood and arguments with his mother:

My fury gave me a dizzying vitality that pushed me out of myself; I felt a wondrous ambition—so vast it surprised even me—to leave the house and run into the street. […] My legs would take me up and down the uneven pavements, past streetlamps […] to the melancholy of the narrow cobblestone alleys, and there I would enjoy a perverted happiness at belonging to such a sorrowful, dirty and impoverished place. Walking without end, fired by rage, ideas and images filing past me like figures in a play, dreaming of the great things I would do someday. (Pamuk 2005, 328)

It is interesting how Pamuk details the material features of the city in this account. These do not sketch a grand public space; rather, they re-construct the shabbiness of the everyday, the worn patina against which ambitions can be measured. Details are more than context; they are *the substance* of Pamuk’s existential space. Istanbul’s melancholy streets are cherished because they inspire the vital feeling of being pushed outside of oneself, revealing a connection between existential space and immanent critique, ‘an object of realization [that] lies outside itself’ (Harvey 1990, 5).

Existential urban spaces are integral to the modern experience of ‘perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish’ (Berman 1982, 15). As such, an existential space is not a *utopia* in any straightforward sense, since ‘utopian thought seeks to create a closed, homogenous, all-absorbing political cosmos [that is] antithetical to the dynamism, heterogeneity and openness of modern life’ (Berman 1970, 318). To borrow from Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*, existential space is experienced through ‘practical, human-sensuous activity’ rather than is a product of design. There are however affinities with what Ernst Bloch (2018) calls ‘concrete utopia’, a ‘wide field occupied by matter itself, as a “being-in-possibility”, as a potentiality pregnant with new *though distant* modes of life […]’ (ibid, 172 added emphasis).

Existential spaces articulate a relation *between* times and spaces. For example, an existential space is likely to only be acknowledged after its ‘time’ has passed. For example, Pamuk writes that, ‘[t]hese were the moments when Mevlut could sense that these were the happiest years of his life, but he usually kept this knowledge hidden away at the back of his mind. If he allowed himself to think about how happy he was, he might lose it all.’ (2015, 394) Alternatively, an existential space may only be acknowledged as having existed, or be recognised as meaningful, after the ‘failure’ of that desired alternative present (the excerpt above, involving Samiha, being an example of this). This points to the uninhibited temporality of existential space, to how the meaning of the ‘present’ may be deferred or ‘hidden away in the back of the mind’ because existential spaces are always preoccupied with another time (and place). Those who inhabit and share an existential space are simultaneously in and out-of-time (and in and out-of-place), since the full meaning of that space is always located *elsewhere,* in the moment and place when and where they are acknowledged or remembered.

Romantic love permeates Berman’s and Pamuk’s examples of existential urban space. For Berman, love is intertwined with the modern desire for self-development and is connected, through loss, to tragedy. From this loss, however, comes a ‘human expansion’ (ibid, 357) and the creation of a new space based on shared feelings, thoughts and deeds. This enlargement marks a journey ‘from private to public life, from intimacy to activism, from communion to organization’ (Berman 1982, 61). His reading of Gretchen in Goethe’s *Faust* is particularly instructive, since it puts forward an understanding of Gretchen not as a symbol of innocence and purity but as an individual, through her intense love for Faust, who *wills* her own downfall. She accepts how she must accept the cruel, barbaric punishment of her friends and family to assure the future freedom of other young women from her village.

[Gretchen’s] self-destruction is a form of self-development as authentic as Faust’s own. She, as much as he, is trying to move beyond the rigid enclosures of family, church and town, a world where blind devotion and self-abasement are the only roads to virtue. […] Gretchen’s successors will get the point: where she stayed and died, they will leave and live […] Ironically, then, the destruction of Gretchen by the little world will turn out to be a crucial phase in the destruction of the little world itself. Unwilling or unable to develop along with its children, the closed town will become a ghost town. Its victims’ ghosts will be left with the last laugh. (Berman 1982, 58-9)

In Berman’s reading, romantic love relates to risks, freedoms, sacrifice and to *urbanization*. Today, like Gretchen, or rather *because* of girls like Gretchen, ‘young people head for great cities, for open frontiers, for new nations, in search of freedom to think and love and grow’ (ibid, 59). Indeed, this is what Ipek and Ka dream of; it is the promise that makes the mulberry tree and taxi existential spaces for Samiha and it is the tragic aspects of her love for Ferhat and the freedom she desires—that people and places must be cast aside—that make her weep. Rayiha, much like Gretchen, remains ‘a woman who is poor and embedded in family life [and thus] has no room to move at all’ (ibid, 58). The gendered inequality of their social positions leads Faust to acknowledge his responsibility for Gretchen’s unjust fate, and to recognise—albeit too late—the necessary but always complicated interwovenness of one’s existence with others. While Mevlut also agonises about the pretences under which he married Rayiha and brought her to the city, Pamuk’s narrative reveals the couple accepting, living with and even taking pleasure in the manifold, imperfect and sometimes deceitful connections—to the city, to labour, to friends, *to each other*—that they share. (Rayiha eventually realises that Mevlut’s letters were sent to Samiha, but keeps this to herself (Pamuk 2015, 522).)

If you ‘only have eyes for world-historical Revolutions in politics and world-class Masterpieces in culture’ (Berman 1984, 123), then existential spaces will, no doubt, exasperate you. Love alone is insufficient in a world that is unjust[[10]](#footnote-10). But then, it is difficult to imagine any revolutionary movement existing *without* the confluence of existential spaces; places where new relationships are forged, plots hatched, ideas rehearsed and performances honed (see also Goldfarb 2006). Existential spaces are always already political, inferring a politics of hope that is mediated through the nurturing of inclusive, personal relationships. They play host to the working through of what Goldfarb (ibid, 10) calls ‘details of democracy’. Existential urban spaces also counter the denigration of the private sphere prevalent in mainstream (male) political (and urban) discourse. Following Benhabib (1992, 110) we suggest the arbitrary separation of public (political) and private (non-political) urban space discredits or devalues the political substance and/or experience of spaces such as interiors, homes or ‘sanctuaries’ associated with femininity and/or expressions of intimacy (Goldfarb (2006) points to the importance of the kitchen table for instance). Watson (2000, 102) also points to how women have sometimes been denied an urban sociality and civic subjectivity. Or, as Harding (2008, 197) puts it, the separation of the public and private spheres, and the subsequent *de-urbanization* of the private sphere, disempowers women. The most convincing arguments in this respect are made by hooks (1990) who explains how black women in the US made the domestic home a site of resistance to racism. The ‘idea of “home” that black women consciously exercised in practice, obscures the political commitment to racial uplift, to eradicating racism, which was the philosophical core of dedication to community and home’ (ibid, 387). Structured by racist domination and oppression, domestic space and ‘private’ relationships within a family are, for hooks, a crucial site for organising and forming political solidarity.

As this dialogue between Marshall Berman’s urban writings and Orhan Pamuk’s *A Strangeness in my Mind* reveals, existential urban spaces encompass those terrains where new ways of conceiving intimate human relationships are experimented with; ways that may also be generative of public and collective life. These are the (extra)ordinary spaces, recognised retrospectively, where people live their lives—spaces between the present and the future; between here and elsewhere—and where fate (or structures of oppression) are apprehended, re-understood or re-envisioned. Put another way, and to once again channel the wisdom of Ferhat, these are the (hidden) spaces that make city life meaningful.

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1. We also draw upon *Istanbul: memories and the city* (Pamuk 2004)*, Snow* (Pamuk 2004), Pamuk’s Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance speech (Pamuk 2006) and a series of interviews with the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Boza is a traditional Turkish drink made from fermented wheat with a very low alcohol content. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mevlut’s Istanbul is a ballooning city, its population growing from 1.7 million in the late 1960s to around 13 million by the book’s close. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, Graves-Brown and Schofield (2016) discuss the rooms in Denmark Street, London where punk band The Sex Pistols first rehearsed, pointing to the recent listing of this building, which brings its punk artworks—such as John Lydon’s wall sketches and graffiti—under statutory protection.  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This occurs, according to the precise chronology in the back of the novel, three days after Recip Tayyip Erdoğan is elected mayor of Istanbul. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. His final, uncompleted book was to be titled *The Romance of Public Space*, sections of which are published in *Modernism in the Streets* (Berman 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Berman (1982, 33) argues that structuralism wipes the question of self and history off the map. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The mood specified here is *hüzün*: ‘the tristesse and black mood that is shared among Istanbul’s residents since the dismembering of the Ottoman Empire and the loss of past glories’ (Huyssen 2008, 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. By the end of this section Samiha has explained how the reality of her life in Istanbul was actually a disappointment; that she experienced loneliness and fear when Ferhat left alone at home while he was at work. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jefferies (2016: 38) uses this phrase in assessing Max Horkheimer’s novella *Spring*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)