‘This way to the exhibition’: genealogies of urban spectacle in Jean Rhys's interwar fiction

Christina Britzolakis

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In his essay, ‘Modernity and Imperialism’, Fredric Jameson describes the spatial dilemma of early modernism as the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of grasping the structural connections between the daily life of the metropolis and the absent space of the colony. ‘Colonialism means that a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere,’ writes Jameson, ‘beyond the metropolis, outside of the daily life and existential experience of the home country, in colonies over the water whose own life experience and lifeworld remain unknown and unimaginable for the subjects of the imperial power, whatever social class they may belong to. Such spatial disjunction has as its immediate consequence the inability to grasp the way the system functions as a whole . . . Pieces of the puzzle are missing; it can never be fully reconstructed.’1 Jean Rhys’s interwar novels foreground this ‘spatial disjunction’ as their very condition of possibility. Her hyphenated location between colonial and metropolitan spheres affords her a unique insight into, and riposte to, the perceptual dilemma described by Jameson. Rhys’s trajectory as a writer, like her fiction, dizzyingly telescopes different global spaces and temporalities, in the Caribbean, England, and continental Europe. While London and Paris alternate as her primary mise-en-scène during the interwar period, the novels construct an essentially syncopated, ironic relation to metropolitan periodization, marking a dual predicament of creolization and exile.2

Rhys’s first book, The Left Bank: Tales of Bohemian Life (1927), arose from her encounter with the expatriate coterie culture of 1920s Paris. The interwar novels, Quartet (1928), After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (1930), Voyage in the Dark (1934) and Good Morning Midnight (1939), are linked by the rootless and drifting ‘hotel existence’ of their various female protagonists.3 If, however, Rhys echoes her modernist contemporaries in placing estrangement at the centre of her work, she does so less from the perspective of the expatriate who pulverizes and refashions
metropolitan aesthetic codes than from that of the ethnic, or ethnicized stranger – the subaltern rather than the elite cosmopolitan – who is denied a passport within metropolitan culture. While her brand of modernist cosmopolitanism is clearly inseparable from an ambiguously creolized identity, it has a peculiarly negative character. This negativity, I shall propose, arises less from the familiar (and reductive) identification of her work with a female subjectivity overwhelmed by exile, trauma and loss, than from her persistent focus on objectification and spectacle as central to metropolitan culture.

The burgeoning and often distinguished body of scholarship on Rhys has devoted much attention to her rewriting, now widely recognized as inseparable from the colonial context of her work, of the sexual politics of modernism. Arguably, however, this project requires an account of modernist practices in the interwar period that moves beyond the narrowly Anglophone. While Rhys’s declared affinity with the nineteenth-century French literary tradition has been noted, her novels, in their treatment of urban space, suggest an active and sustained engagement with continental avant-garde formations. Their stress on the operations of the uncanny within metropolitan daily life aligns them with the Surrealist optic, which, as Walter Benjamin puts it in his 1929 essay on the Surrealist movement, ‘perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday’. Rhys’s dialogue with the movement, like that of the Francophone writers and intellectuals famously associated with Négritude, centres on Surrealism’s attraction towards non-Western cultures, as part of its generalized revolt against prevailing definitions of Western civilization. In particular, she engages Surrealism’s fascination with ethnography as a critical and diagnostic tool to be employed both within and against the institutional spaces of art.

In this article, I shall discuss the Rhysian spaces of the hotel, the exhibition and the street as related sites of the global modern: of a metropolitan culture mortgaged to a global circulation of bodies and objects. My argument will focus on Good Morning Midnight (1939), as the culmination of her interwar novel cycle, and as a relatively neglected watershed or conjunctural text in the history of modernism. Set in Paris in 1937, it crystallizes, as many critics have commented, the mood of imminent catastrophe in Europe on the eve of the Second World War. By 1937, the cosmopolitan avant-garde, across Europe, was either under attack or aligning itself with fascist or totalitarian movements. Like Rhys herself, Sasha Jensen, the novel’s narrator, visits the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, the Popular Front-sponsored world’s fair, which promoted a message of internationalism in a context of gathering international tension. If Rhys’s insertion of this event into her text signals a particular, highly charged moment of historical crisis, it simultaneously engages a
much longer, tangled history of exhibitory practices informing metropolitan spatiality. The ‘exhibition’, I shall argue, becomes a sign for the operation of commodity spectacle more generally. It provides a key articulation not only of Rhys’s relationship to a more broadly conceived modernist project, but also of the terms of Euro-American modernism’s encounter with the global horizon of an increasingly unstable late imperial world system.

Drawing on a range of Surrealist practices developed during the late 1920s and 1930s, Rhys reads the material culture of the 1937 World’s Fair against the grain, as heralding a more general commodification and technocratic management at work in the production of everyday life and of metropolitan identities. Its display of internationalism rejoins what she sees as a falsely self-naturalizing regime of metropolitan representation, based on practices of classification and display that move between the realms of the commodified, the ethnographic and the aesthetic. Good Morning Midnight explores the logic of these exhibitory practices, in the context of newly ascendant discourses of racial hygiene, which invest the figure of the urban ‘stranger’ with an urgent political significance. For Rhys, then, the Exhibition condenses historical event and metaphor, providing a powerful spatial image which allows her to reflect on the catastrophic modernity that links colony and metropole.

The hotel

Homelessness is Rhys’s signature trope; as Helen Carr puts it, she ‘writes of an in-between world, where identities are indecipherable, uncertain, confused ... her characters live in transitory, anonymous boarding houses and hotels, strangers to those who surround them’. In these novels, the hotel is a space progressively invested with allegorical meaning. Sasha Jensen in Good Morning Midnight imagines both past and present as a succession of more or less squalid hotel rooms and boarding houses. She reflects on her daily existence:

Eat. Drink. Walk. March. Back to the Hotel. To the Hotel of Arrival, the Hotel of Departure, the Hotel of the Future, the Hotel of Martinique and the Universe ... Back to the hotel without a name in the street without a name. You press the button and the door opens. This is the Hotel-without-a-Name in the Street Without-a-Name, and the clients have no names, no faces. You go up the stairs. Always the same stairs, the same room. (GMM, 120)

The hotel, with its transient, international clientele, conflates local and global spaces; its business is the production of sameness and
interchangeability. As Siegfried Kracauer argues in his essay ‘The Hotel Lobby’, written in the early 1920s as part of an unfinished study of the detective novel, the behaviour of hotel guests in the lobby combines stasis and repetitive, meaningless movement. Removed from the everyday hustle and bustle of the streets, guests ‘disappear behind the peripheral equality of social masks’, and become ‘mannequins’, ‘ghosts’ or ‘marionettes’. The hotel lobby, he claims, is an inverted or negative church, ‘the setting for those who neither seek nor find the one who is always sought, and who are therefore guests in space as such – a space that encompasses them, and has no function other than to encompass them’. The displacement which the hotel lobby enshrines, its spatialization of temporal process, and its hollowing out of subjectivities, are, for Kracauer, allegorical of modernity: ‘What is presented in the hotel lobby is the formal similarity of the figures, an equivalence that signifies not fulfilment but evacuation’.10 The hotel evacuates space of social and ethical meaning, turning it into a limbo-like space of ‘nothing’. Metropolitan daily life becomes an abstract social mask, synonymous with the commodified space of modernity. It involves a relentless depletion or evacuation of meaning within the everyday.

Kracauer’s essay on the hotel lobby anticipates one of the central themes of postmodern cultural theory: the usurpation of historically sedimented ‘place’ by the increasingly abstract and homogeneous character of ‘space’ as commodity spectacle.11 The quoted passage from Good Morning Midnight points the moral: ‘never tell the truth about this business of rooms, because it would bust the roof off everything and undermine the whole social system. All rooms are the same’ (GMM, 33). However, Rhys sees the process of abstraction described by Kracauer in explicitly geospatial terms, as a global traffic in goods and people – ‘the Hotel of Martinique and the Universe’ – inaugurated by empire, and exacerbated by the Great War. Hence the syncopated or anachronous temporality of her novels, which ‘cuts’ between, for example, post-Emancipation Dominica, prewar London, post-Armistice Vienna or 1930s Paris. This syncopated temporality opens up, through the operations of memory and interior monologue, the problem of metropolitan culture’s relationship to those ethnic ‘strangers’ whose identity cannot be contained or determined within national boundaries. Their unhomely, or untimely, presence in urban space – the difficulty of placing them, or of identifying their cultural origins – marks a founding repression of other geographies and temporalities.12

In Rhys’s fiction, interwar Paris, the cosmopolitan capital par excellence, plays an ambiguous role as, on the one hand, a place of refuge for Europeans fleeing political or ethnic persecution, and, on the other, a site of increasing xenophobia and racial paranoia in a climate of political
and economic volatility.\textsuperscript{13} This crisis of cosmopolitanism is most obvious in \textit{Good Morning Midnight}, in which, as Rachel Bowlby argues, ‘national identities become part of a set of signs to be interpreted, personal coordinates available for deciphering, without there being any reason to suppose that they correspond to a truth of origin or legal fact’.\textsuperscript{14} Rhys presents the city as filled, like Kracauer’s hotel lobby, with anonymous ‘guests’ of different nationalities, shadowy, stateless or ‘displaced’ persons who ‘disappear behind the peripheral equality of social masks’. Sasha’s own history is placed under erasure: ‘no name, no face, no country’ (\textit{GMM}, 38). Most of her encounters in Paris – with the ‘Russians’, the Jewish painter Serge Rubin, and René – involve deracinated or nomadic subjects whose national origin, like her own, is either uncertain, or actively dissembled. The ‘Russians’, it is implied, are in political exile; Serge Rubin is in all likelihood fleeing anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. René, who like Sasha has passport difficulties, claims to be a French-Canadian deserter from the Foreign Legion, but may be Arab, or South American. Sasha Jensen refers to herself as one of the ‘\textit{Legion étrangère}’ and mentally replays the Foreign Legion marching tune, whistled by both her former husband Enno and by René.\textsuperscript{15} Anonymity becomes the sign under which the metropole contains and neutralizes the disruptively creolized identities created at its peripheries.

\textit{Good Morning Midnight} thus renders the ‘cosmopolitan’ anonymity of urban space uncanny, suggesting a hidden, collusive relationship to the rise of Fascist authoritarianism on the continent. The sinisterly oppressive ‘Mr. Blank’, the ‘English manager’ of the Parisian department store, interrogates Sasha as to whether she speaks German. Her hotel neighbour, the man whom she thinks of as the \textit{commis voyageur} or travelling salesman, is also an uncanny figure – ‘the ghost of the landing’ (\textit{GMM}, 13) – who gives her a ‘nightmare feeling’ (\textit{GMM}, 31). Associated, through the dressing gown he always wears, with a deathly whiteness, he is also described as ‘the priest of some obscene, half-understood religion’ (\textit{GMM}, 30). Ominously, this ‘priest’, lives, like Sasha, in proximity to the hotel’s soiled laundry, on a floor ‘cluttered up from morning to night with brooms, pails, piles of dirty sheets and so forth – the wreckage of the spectacular floors below’ (\textit{GMM}, 13). The \textit{commis} serves as an embodiment of the seemingly deracinated, abstract space of the hotel; at the same time he links this prototype space of capitalist modernity with a thematic of ritualized ‘sacrificial’ violence. Indeed, the novel’s ending, in which Sasha welcomes him into her hotel bed, has been persuasively interpreted as an allegory of European culture’s willed submission to fascism.\textsuperscript{16}

In Rhys’s novels, urban space shares the features of the hotel lobby noted by Kracauer. It is dully serialized and meaninglessly repetitive, crowded yet menacingly vacant. A regime of abstraction or unreality,
signalled by a cluster of related images – dream, shadow play, marionette theatre, cinema screen, mask – governs the daily life of her female protagonists. Julia Martin perceives the city as ‘the streets of a grey dream – a labyrinth of streets, all exactly alike’ (ALMM, 84), populated by ‘shadows ... gesticulating’ (ALMM, 16); this urban shadow play is mirrored by the cinema in which Julia repeatedly seeks refuge. Sasha, remembering a period of destitution in 1920s Paris, describes her younger self as ‘plunged in a dream, when all the faces are masks and only the trees are alive and you can almost see the strings that are pulling the puppets’ (GMM, 75). For Rhys’s women, the masquerade of femininity provides, via cosmetics and fashion, a form of protective/aggressive anonymity within a public space characterized by the hostile gaze of others. Julia sees make-up as ‘a mechanical process, a substitute for the mask she would have liked to wear’ (ALMM, 11). In these novels, femininity and its rituals serve, quite explicitly, as the fetish which underpins the visual eroticism of the street. Rhys grants her female protagonists a peculiar intimacy, indeed identification, with what Walter Benjamin calls, in his Arcades Project, the phantasmagoria of commodities.

The iconography of the ‘unreal city’, and its symptomatic drama of urban femininity, rejoin a European modernist genealogy reaching back to Baudelaire. Rhys’s exaggerated, even parodic reinscription of this iconography is arguably inseparable from her anomalous place, as a Dominican Creole of slave-owning descent, within the racial and sexual hierarchies of the British Empire, and, more specifically, from its historical construction of the ‘white’ Creole subject. The colonial émigrée claims a certain ambiguous marginality to metropolitan culture, whose historical disavowal of the white Creole as ethnically impure stigmatizes her as an ‘unhomely’ figure in the imperial heartland. Late nineteenth-century European ethnographic discourses of the white Creole were built around the motifs of passivity, drifting and paralysis, as well as the degenerative perils of miscegenation. They allowed only a self-cancelling identity, dependent on the ‘imagined community’ of a ‘mother’ nation defined in terms of displacement. In this ethnographic discourse, it could be argued, the white Creole serves as the ghostly, melancholic double of metropolitan culture, which parasitically inhabits and estranges from within. The postures associated with this cultural space – rootlessness, symbolic destitution, empty repetition – mimic the contours of modernist anomie.

The impossibility of inserting white Creole subjectivity into any narrative of national identity invests Rhys’s fictional urban spaces with an increasingly abstract, mask-like character. Yet, at the same time, as critics have often noted, her writing actively dislocates the European
genealogy of metropolitan modernity through its engagement with the Afrocentric traditions of Caribbean carnival, reaching back to the slave era.\textsuperscript{20} The Caribbean past is encoded in recycled fragments and traces of expressive culture, which circulate within urban space, such as street music, spirituals and recorded popular songs. In Good Morning Midnight, carnivalesque tropes – masks, fairs and allusions to West Indian music – play a key role. The recording of Martinican Beguine music played by the painter Serge Rubin, and the impromptu masked dance he performs in his studio, ally him with Sasha, whose sexually transgressive presence as a solitary urban woman in public space is figured in terms of carnival performance. The embedding of these black musical and dance forms within the Rhys text is caught up in nostalgia for a lost or fantasized utopian moment of carnivalesque union.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, some critics point to a pattern of racial cross-identification or ventriloquy, which acts out the white Creole’s ambiguous predicament, through the trope of the black Caribbean as a lost or repressed maternal corporeality.\textsuperscript{22}

For Rhys, the metropolitan optic is conditioned by the ethnographic collection, and by ethnographic spectacle more generally. Ethnography links metropole and colony through a complex traffic in objects (including bodies), texts and modes of expression. Her protagonists find themselves inserted into a bohemian script, which secures its antibourgeois claims by linking prostitution, miscegenation and sexual perversity.\textsuperscript{23} Anna Morgan is depicted as reading Zola’s Nana, a novel about a society prostitute who spreads ‘degeneration’ within the body politic (VD, 9). Her initiation into an urban traffic in working class women conducted by bourgeois males is explicitly interwoven with the sexual imaginaries of slavery and ethnographic display. She is labelled ‘Hottentot’ by her fellow chorus girls (VD, 12) in reference to the exhibiting of black women, such as Sara Baartman, the so-called ‘Hottentot Venus’, in London and Paris during the nineteenth century. Rhys’s protagonists are viewed by others, and indeed often view themselves, through the prism of metropolitan and specifically modernist investments in the ‘primitive’. Julia Martin, for example, identifies with a nude model in a Modigliani painting, whom she describes as having a body ‘like a proud animal’ and ‘a face like a mask’ (ALMM, 40). Julia’s fantasy reflects the centrality of modernist primitivism to the cultural life of interwar Paris, the headquarters of art nègre.\textsuperscript{24} The novels of the 1920s and 1930s persistently link the sexual careers of their protagonists with a logic of ethnographic-cum-aesthetic display. By the time of Good Morning Midnight (1939), under the pressure of world crisis, Rhys has identified this history of exhibitory practices, which moves across disciplinary boundaries, and between high and low culture, as coextensive with metropolitan perception itself.
The exhibition

In Good Morning Midnight, Rhys’s references to the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, which took place in Paris in October 1937, and which she visited the same month, date the novel’s action with a specificity unusual for her.²⁵ The Exposition was devised by the Popular Front government to boost a stagnant national economy, and to promote peaceful cooperation and trade in the face of Depression and gathering international tension. It announced a new internationalism, being the first world’s fair to be named ‘International’ rather than ‘Universal’. Ironically, it is now famous chiefly for having provided a premonitory image of the coming world conflict: the colossal pavilions of the USSR and Nazi Germany confronting each other on either side of the Champs de Mars (Fig. 1). Intended to celebrate internationalism, then, the Exposition almost immediately became a signifier of global imperial crisis. As Arthur Chandler writes, ‘in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower, the two opponents faced off with self-aggrandizing monuments to their nationalistic spirits’.²⁶ The Exposition was committed to modernism as a rational-productivist enterprise; its stated

aim was to abolish the division between the arts and technology. Many of the pavilions celebrated a modernist ‘international style’ linked with a utopian vision of design and architecture as social arts, even if some of the most famous buildings exemplified a fascist return to the past by way of neoclassicism. The fair’s celebration of new technologies, such as the commercialization of the neon tube, was manifested in a network of pavilions – the Pavillon de la Photo-Ciné-Phono – dedicated to the media and communications, and featuring brand names such as Philips and Mazda.

The Great Expositions were concerned with ordering and presenting the material and human resources of empire for a metropolitan public. Although their heyday was the second half of the nineteenth century, they enjoyed something of a revival on both sides of the Atlantic during the Depression years. They sought to synchronize global and local spaces through an ideology of national and international progress, and technological innovation. Notoriously, the inclusion of displays representing the colonies and the activities of their subjects made the display of ‘native’ bodies, alongside commodities, one of their major attractions. The cités indigènes had featured on a grand scale in the 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale, which had sought to recreate, in microcosm, the French Empire in the very heart of Paris. It was during the 1930s that Walter Benjamin, in his Parisian exile from Nazism, developed an influential account of the world exhibitions as commodity spectacles. His 1935 expose of the Arcades Project describes them as avatars of ‘the entertainment industry’. They are ‘places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish’, providing ‘a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted’. An addition to the revised 1939 expose underlines their ideological function as ‘a school in which the masses, forcibly excluded from consumption, are imbued with exchange value to the point of identifying with it’.

For Benjamin, as for more recent historians and cultural theorists of modernity who have built on his insights, the cultural work done by the world’s fairs is intimately related to the emergence of commodity culture, with its reliance on spectacle and advertising. Tony Bennett describes them as ‘places in which the crowd, itself become a spectacle, found the spatial and visual means for a self-education from the point of view of capital’. As urban spectacles, and cities-within-cities, the expositions sought to re-present the metropolis, effectively, to itself. They heralded the nineteenth-century remaking of the metropolis as a space of consumption and commodity display, a notable example being Baron Haussmann’s imposition of a grid of well-lit city boulevards on the pre-existing chaos of Paris’s medieval neighbourhoods. At the same time, their claim to present, metonymically, the whole world, past and present, through an assemblage of objects and people, constructed an
image of the metropolis as dreamscape or locus of utopian futures. The allegorical representation of technological ‘progress’ and ‘peace’ as national and international destiny provided an imaginary basis for metropolitan culture, meeting capitalist modernity’s need to legitimate itself through representations. The representational dilemma of imperial culture pointed out by Jameson – the structural dependency of the metropolitan centre on a colonial periphery – could therefore be said to have found a solution, of a kind, in the world’s fairs.

Rhys’s reference to the 1937 Exhibition highlights the widening chasm between everyday life, especially for those eking out a marginal existence as immigrants or refugees, and the staging of progress as commodity spectacle. The passage in which Sasha visits the Exposition at night with René offers an absolute minimum of descriptive detail:

We go in by the Trocadero entrance. There aren’t many people about. Cold, empty, beautiful – this is what I imagined, this is what I wanted.

‘What’s that light up there?’ he says.

‘That’s the Star of Peace. Don’t you recognize it?’

He stares back at it.

‘How mesquin! It’s vulgar, that Star of Peace.’

‘The building is very fine,’ I say, in a schoolmistress’ voice.

We stand on the promenade above the fountains, looking down on them. This is what I wanted – the cold fountains, the rainbow lights on the water . . .

He says again, ‘It’s mesquin, your Star of Peace.’

We stand for some time, leaning over the balustrade. He puts his arm through mine. I can feel him shivering. When I tell him so he answers: ‘Well, it’s cold here after Morocco.’

‘Oh yes, of course, Morocco.’

‘You don’t believe I’ve come from Morocco, do you?’

Whatever else is a lie about him, it’s certainly true that he isn’t dressed for this weather.

The lights shimmering on the water, the leaping fountains, cold and beautiful. . . . (GMM, 137)

The exhibition grounds are represented in terms of vacancy, coldness and formal abstraction; the only objects Sasha mentions are ‘the cold fountains, the rainbow lights on the water’. She welcomes the scarcity of visitors on the site, describing it, in terms repeated throughout the passage, as ‘cold, empty, beautiful’. Puzzlingly, it is this vacancy or absence which Sasha identifies, retrospectively, as the goal of her visit to the Exhibition: ‘this is what I imagined, this is what I wanted’. In doing so, she implicitly
assigns to the exhibitory space a phantasmatic function linked with a modernist idiom of formal abstraction.

Rhys’s depiction of the exhibitory space is dominated by the spectacular light imagery, which, in the rhetoric of the world’s fair, yokes together technology, progress and the civilizational mission of empire. Illuminations were indeed a key part of the 1937 Paris Fair’s spectacle (Fig.1), and central to its conception and marketing as a revelation of triumphal modernity. ‘La Lumière’, predicted that Edmond Labbé, the General Commissioner of the Fair in 1936, ‘will descend among us as the sublime spirit of the Fair.’ However, the dialogue between Sasha and René undermines the celebratory image of Paris as the cosmopolitan City of Light. He interrupts her reverie with a factual query about one of the illuminated pavilions, ‘the Star of Peace’. The reference is to the Monument de la Paix, the only pavilion not dedicated to any one nation, which stood surrounded by flags behind the Esplanade. René’s response to the so-called ‘Star of Peace’ – his belittling of it as mesquin (‘trivial’ or ‘worthless’) – expresses scepticism, shared by the contemporary press, towards a message so obviously belied by the symbolism of the Nazi and Soviet pavilions.

The layout of the 1937 Paris Exposition offered a panoramic view of the Champs de Mars and of Paris beyond, with the Eiffel Tower facing the viewer. The esplanade of the Palais de Chaillot on the Trocadero, through which Sasha and René enter, oversaw both the exhibition grounds and the city. Yet the pair take up their viewing position not on the esplanade itself but within the area of the Champs de Mars overlooked by it, on the promenades above the fountains, ‘leaning over the balustrade’. James Herbert, in his study of the 1937 Paris Exposition, argues that the commanding visual panorama offered by the Trocadero esplanade projected a totality of industrial production and consumption, assuming the spectator’s identification with the nation as transcendent subject. If so, it is significant that neither Sasha nor René take up this identification. The passage effectively reverses the direction of the exhibitionary gaze, as a specular structure modelled on the commanding view; it positions the couple as objects rather than subjects of the spectacle. René’s response, when Sasha first suggests the visit to the Fair, is telling: ‘What should I do at the Exhibition?’ (GMM, 136); at the fairground, he is described as ‘shivering’, and complains of the cold. His (implied) comment on the exclusive or inhospitable nature of the exhibitory space forms a counterpoint to Sasha’s appreciation of its formalist aesthetic. Both responses undermine the Exhibition’s claims to a global inclusiveness of representation. It becomes an allegorical signifier which places metropolitan life under the sign of that absent totality which it both represents and mystifies. In its limbo-like summation of
time and space, the histories of Sasha and René themselves – for instance his alleged residence in Morocco – become fictive and tenuous.

For Rhys, the fair’s dominant idiom of modernist abstraction colludes with the rhetoric of capitalist modernity itself as a triumphal ‘progress’, which simultaneously opens up urban space to visibility, and polices its internal and external boundaries. The Exposition, as I have already mentioned, trumpeted its commitment to the discourse of technological modernization; the *Palais d’Hygiène*, for example, offered contrasting dioramas of a *logement insalubre*, or slum dwelling, and a *logement sain*, a clinically ordered, modern apartment interior. If the commodity spectacle of the world’s fair seeks to reconfigure, and sanitize, the spatial relations between capital city, nation and globe, *Good Morning Midnight* insists, conversely, on waste and the issue of waste disposal. Sasha’s wanderings around Paris circle compulsively around places of waste disposal, and bring her into proximity with other abjected urban marginals such as the homeless destitutes sleeping in a café, and the impoverished woman whose job is washing dishes in a restaurant (*GMM*, 35, 87). She is obsessed with public toilets as places of refuge from the hostile gaze of others. Remembering her ambition to write a monograph linking women and toilets, she comments on the queue of women waiting to use the toilets: ‘Now that’s what I call discipline’ (*GMM*, 10). Sasha, as Katherine Streip points out, tends to think of herself as synonymous with waste, and of her alcoholism and ageing sexuality as forming a blockage to the circulation of urban desire. She draws upon a pervasive discourse of disease and contamination which threatens language itself with symbolic collapse:

Yes, I am sad, sad as a circus-lioness, sad as an eagle without wings, sad as a violin with only one string and that one broken, sad as a woman who is growing old. Sad, sad, sad . . . or perhaps if I just said ‘merde’ it would do as well. (*GMM*, 39)

Rhys’s fiction claims an anachronistic affinity with the French bohemian tradition, symbolically organized around the bourgeois artist’s attraction towards the city’s liminal spaces, and identification with those excluded by its power centres. Bohemianism maps the city in terms of a strategic revaluation of urban ‘waste’, drawing on an image repertoire including the sewer, the nomad, the prostitute and the carnivalesque. What Sasha calls the ‘*nostalgie de la boue*’ – the bohemian ‘craving for the gutter’ – represents, at one level, a doomed, nostalgic attempt to pit an alternative, revitalizing modernity of dirt against bourgeois economic rationality.

In *Good Morning Midnight*, dirt, which according to Mary Douglas symbolizes ‘matter out of place’, is both sexualized and racialized.
Sasha’s obsession with the possible or actual vermin infesting hotel rooms – she recalls waking on her first night in Paris to find ‘the wall covered with bugs, crawling slowly’ (GMM, 105) – becomes increasingly ambiguous as the uncanny presence/absence of ethnic strangers is transposed into the register of racial ‘hygiene’. The novel contains many enfolded stories of urban detritus, such as Serge’s anecdote of the Martinican woman ostracized as ‘dirty’ (GMM, 81) by her London neighbours. Sasha’s and Serge’s discussion of Parisian jazz venues and ‘negro music’ includes a casual reference to a Montparnasse club as a ‘dirty place’ (77). The Jewish Serge is of course himself a refugee, one of the ‘polluters of the city’, who has, according to his friend Delmar, ‘lived in the gutter’ (‘la crasse’, 156). The painting Sasha buys from Serge features a banjo player, described as an ‘old Jew’ (GMM, 83), standing in the gutter. After viewing his studio, she likens his paintings to a catalogue of circus freaks:

The pictures walk along with me. The misshapen dwarfs juggle with huge balloons, the four-breasted woman is exhibited, the old prostitute waits hopelessly outside the urinoir, the young one under the bec de gaz (GMM, 84)

The spectacle of the abject and the marginalized is underlined through the novel’s repeated use of the word ‘exhibit’. Sasha fears above all ‘making an exhibition of herself’ by crying in public. She recalls a friend who, in the 1920s, took her to a café where the homeless and destitute pay for a place to sleep: “Would you like to go in and have a look at them?” he said, as if he were exhibiting a lot of monkeys’ (GMM, 35). The poor are converted, metaphorically, into ethnographic spectacle, implying an analogy between the cité indigène, the roped-off areas of artisanal activity within the world’s fair, where the colonized become human exhibits, and Paris’s interwar working class and immigrant ghettos.

This phantasmatic conflation of urban and exhibitory space is, I shall argue, a move typical of interwar Surrealist cultural politics. Through Sasha’s disturbed, frequently paranoid perspective, Rhys turns inside out the sanitizing dreamscape of the Paris World’s Fair. She looks beyond the Popular Front message of global ‘co-operation’, and reads the event in terms of its apparent antithesis: a fascist imaginary which demarcates metropolitan space into zones of pollution and cleanliness. For her, the site’s attempted yoking together of global and local spaces, like modernity itself, relies on a representation of the colony as the metropole’s internally disavowed, ‘ethnographic’ residue. Surrealism’s aesthetics of dream and automatism, together with its use of ethnographic tactics, offer crucial, if
highly ambiguous, strategies for uncovering the interdependence between metropolitan and colonial spaces within daily life.

The street

Nobody else knows me but the street knows me. (GMM, 89)

In *Good Morning Midnight*, dream constitutes an organizational principle inseparable from the novel’s interior monologue, most obviously in the series of dream episodes framing the visit to the Exhibition. Urban locations such as the hotel, the underground station, and the department store are drawn into this dream text, whose spatial *ur*-form is the labyrinth. As I have already suggested, Rhys’s interest in excavating a buried psychic topography within urban space shows the impact of the Surrealists, of whom Walter Benjamin wrote, in 1929, that ‘the most dreamed-of of their objects’ was ‘the city of Paris itself’. Discussing the oneiric city depicted in the novels by Breton and Aragon, *Nadja* (1928) and *Paris Peasant* (1926), Benjamin writes that ‘ghostly signals flash from the traffic, and inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day’. He sees the Surrealists as developing a new kind of urban semiology, which, like the Freudian dreamwork, calls for, even while it frustrates, interpretation. For him, the Surrealist urban uncanny seeks to mobilize a collective historical and political unconscious, which in 1929, could still harbour hopes of apocalyptic revolutionary transformation. By 1937–8, of course, when Rhys was writing the novel, this collective unconscious had become unmistakably linked with the threat of fascist violence and its ritual ‘cleansing’ of the body politic.

Breton’s *Nadja* (1928), published the year after Breton joined the Communist party, marks the moment of Surrealism’s greatest emphasis on the liberatory aspects of desire. The novel celebrates the inspiring and erotic power of Nadja, the ‘free spirit’ whose natural element is the street, yet who ends the novel incarcerated in a sanatorium. It links the chance encounter on the street with the motif of *le merveilleux*, as a code for the possibilities of revolutionary social transformation. As many critics have pointed out, it is the wishful scenario of a woman emancipated from practical concerns by her social marginality and mental fragility that allows this recoding of the everyday. Surrealism’s politics of subversion, here as elsewhere, is tied to a (fetishized) notion of femininity as a privileged vehicle of the unconscious. Despite the narrator’s obsessive observation, Nadja herself remains an absence, apprehended only through displaced objects, texts and localities. Hence, the text’s interpolated illustrations and photographs – Parisian venues, ‘automatic’
drawings, reproductions of indigenous and other artefacts – while superficially serving a documentary purpose, become collage-like traces and clues which obscure more than they reveal, underlining the narrator’s suspicion that ‘life needs to be deciphered like a cryptogram’.48

Rhys’s depiction of urban space relies heavily on the ‘cryptographic’ practices of the Surrealist city narrative, which displace the narrative or diachronic level of the text onto the predominantly synchronic, visual register of the everyday. The enigmatic or unreadable character of metropolitan culture is underlined by the incorporation of indexical elements such as city signs, street names or café names. At the start of After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, for example, the business card of the Hotel St Raphael, where Julia Martin is staying, is reproduced graphically within the text. The card stands in for, even as it occludes, her previous history and provenance. Similarly, in Good Morning Midnight, Sasha Jensen dreams of a London tube station adorned with placards bearing the sign of a pointing finger, and announcing ‘This Way to the Exhibition’. Another passage reproduces the numerical retail codes, or ‘hieroglyphics’ (GMM, 26) of a shop where Sasha served as an assistant. The proliferation of these indexical signs emphasizes the abstract, mask-like character of urban space. Arguably, the Exhibition itself constitutes such a sign, being an ideological concept-city or spectacle which substitutes itself for the lived communal spaces of Paris.

The ‘cryptographic’ surrealism of Good Morning Midnight centres on the trope, repeatedly invoked by Sasha, of the street itself as an ambiguously gendered, treacherous and possibly even sadistic lover. Indeed, the novel’s anti-romance plot bears a complicated parody relationship to the Bretonian fantasy of submission to chance, Paris and the feminine. Sasha’s liaison with René, ‘the gigolo’, who mirrors aspects of her past self, reassigns the feminized ‘métier’ of prostitution, and the status of fetishized object of desire, to the male. Her cynical metacommentary, meanwhile, empties out the eroticism of the street, and marks the considerable distance travelled from the utopian moment of Nadja. Sasha’s and René’s quasi-fraternal exchanges turn out to be, like those between Breton and Nadja, a missed or failed encounter; they are accordingly supplanted by a darker fantasy of paternal seduction, leading to Sasha’s final, violent sexual encounter with the sinister commis. Far from being liberatory, then, the hidden script of the dream narrative is disclosed as one of confrontation with arbitrary and irrational power.

Rhys’s orchestration of the novel’s dream text around the spatial image of the Exhibition acknowledges the fact that, by the late 1930s, the exhibition space itself was highly politicized. A few weeks after the close of the International Exposition of 1937, the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme opened at the private Galerie Beaux-Arts in January and
February 1938. Designed by Duchamp, the show, which contained artworks by Dali, Magritte, Ernst, Cornell and others, attacked the site of the museum itself as an embodiment of cultural authority. Its manipulation of the space of the gallery produced disorientating inversions of interior and exterior, up and down, day and night. Coal sacks were suspended in near-darkness from the ceiling, the floor covered with dead leaves, dirt and vegetation, and Dali’s *Taxi Pluvieux* installed in the courtyard. This Surrealist city featured a corridor lined with a collection of female department store mannequins ‘dressed’ by the various Surrealist artist-participants. The mannequins were posed against a wall bearing posters, photographs, publications, and street plaques inscribed with the names of real and fictive Parisian streets (Fig.2); one of these street signs, a pointing index finger, also appears in a key dream episode in *Good Morning Midnight*. During the Exhibition’s opening night, the dancer Hélène Vanel simulated ‘hysteria’ in a main hall whose four corners were occupied by beds. Her convulsive dance, titled ‘The Unconsummated Act’, was performed to a soundtrack, combining recorded screams – purportedly of asylum patients – with loudspeakers blaring German parade marches.

The event was designed as a visual and aural installation, whose sensory attack on the spectator sought to break down the gap between art and everyday life. Elena Filipovic has argued, in her discussion of the exhibition, that ‘the street – Breton’s strategic point of disorder and that site so important to the Surrealists as the ground of revolutionary energies, collective action and chance encounter – was brought intra muros’. With its recurrent motifs of darkness, dirt and hysteria, the show obviously refuted the official Exposition’s faith in enlightenment rationalism as a guarantuor of global ‘progress’. At the same time, as Filipovic points out, it formed a riposte to the Nazi *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition, which had opened in Munich less than six months earlier in July 1937, and which pilloried modernist primitivism and abstraction. Refusing modern and Nazi exhibition practices alike, it challenged the categories and taxonomies of the art gallery and museum, and highlighted their politicized nature within the increasingly volatile public sphere of the 1930s. Surrealism thus sought to confront the public with the spectre of a crisis-ridden international and national body politic, by deranging the exhibitory space itself.

Although there is no evidence that Rhys, during her stay in Paris, visited the 1938 Surrealist Exposition, *Good Morning Midnight* shares its tactical surrealization of urban space. In both, a phantasmagoria of commodities renders street, bedroom and psyche interchangeable sites, threatening to colonize the furthest reaches of interiority. The novel is filled with frozen and fetishized part-objects, including the shop-window full
of artificial limbs in the Gray’s Inn Road, and the shoes of the *commis voyageur* placed outside his hotel door. Sasha is fascinated by simulacra, such as the mannequins in Mr Blank’s department store, where she once worked as

**Figure 2.** Photograph captioned ‘The corridor of mannequins’, *Exposition Internationale du Surrealisme*, Paris 1938. Raymond Cogniat, ‘L’exposition internationale du surrealisme,’ *XXe siècle*, 1 (1 March 1938), p. 27. By permission of the Bodleian Library
a sales assistant. She identifies with the store mannequins, thinking ‘what a success they would have made of their lives if they had been women’ (GMM 16). She also describes herself, at the outset, as ‘a bit of an automaton’ (GMM 10), and repeatedly refers to consciousness and memory in mechanical or automatist terms, as her ‘film-mind’ (GMM 147), or as a ‘gramophone record’ playing in her head (GMM 14–15).

The Surrealist fascination with mannequins and automata has been seen as a strategic response to the Taylorist and Fordist disciplines of the industrial body. Once removed from the context of industrial production and circulation, these objects disclose their uncanny, compulsive aspect. During the 1930s, this ‘becoming machine and/or commodity of the body’, in Hal Foster’s phrase, is increasingly overtaken by that of ‘the armored body become weapon-machine’. Images of mannequins and automata frequently appeared, during the 1920s and 1930s, in the photo-assemblages of magazines such as La Révolution surréaliste and Minotaure, juxtaposed with other machines and with tribal, folk or childhood objects. This tactic, which drew on evolving ethnographic practices of display, sought to short-circuit the notion of the modern as rational, ordered and productive. It depends on a Marxist-Freudian displacement of the ethnographic language of fetishism, through which objects and practices encountered in colonial contact-zones have historically been read and represented in the metropole. Surrealism’s heterogeneous mixing of ‘primitive’ and modern objects characterized a number of other exhibitions during the 1930s, notably the 1931 counter-exhibit, ‘La Vérité sur les Colonies’, a direct response to the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris, and the 1936 Exposition surrealiste d’objets at the Galerie Ratton. Yet despite the avowedly anti-colonial politics informing these interventions in the exhibitory space, the movement’s investment in ethnographic discourses, as a vehicle of critique, remains controversial.

Surrealist practices of juxtaposition rely heavily on the mask as both object and figure of ethnographic inquiry. Inhabiting the registers of dream, fantasy and the unconscious, it becomes a key avant-garde device for estranging metropolitan forms of sociality and daily life. Indeed, many of Rhys’s novels refer, obliquely or explicitly, to the key role played by African and Oceanic masks in the evolution of avant-garde aesthetics. When Sasha visits the painter Serge Rubin’s studio, she notices what appear at first sight to be West African masks but turn out to be his artworks. When she inquires whether the masks are West African, he ironically replies, ‘Yes, straight from the Congo . . . I made them’. The status of the masks in the scene is unclear, oscillating between ritual object, artefact and commodity. They elicit a moment of terrified, or paranoid, recognition on Sasha’s part: ‘He takes it down and shows it to me. The close-set eyeholes stare into mine. I know that face very well; I’ve
seen lots like it, complete with legs and body” (GMM, 76). Her response deploys a register of visual juxtaposition, or collage, akin to the Surrealist ‘photo-spreads’; the mask becomes, for her, a sign of the menacingly abstract, indeed dehumanized character of metropolitan daily life.

The juxtapositional and ethnographic tactics of Surrealism also inform the pivotal dream episodes in Good Morning Midnight. These dreams, which frame Sasha’s visit to the Exhibition, translate its message into the predominantly iconic terms of a Fascist imaginary. In the first, which occurs early in the novel, Sasha finds herself in a crowded passage of a tube station in London, looking in vain for the exit:

I am in the passage of a tube station in London. Many people are in front of me; many people are behind me. Everywhere there are placards printed in red letters: This Way to the Exhibition, This Way to the Exhibition. But I don’t want the way to the Exhibition – I want the way out. There are passages to the right and passages to the left, but no exit sign. Everywhere the fingers point and the placards read: This Way to the Exhibition. I touch the shoulder of the man walking in front of me. I say: ‘I want the way out’. But he points to the placards and his hand is made of steel. I walk along with my head bent, very ashamed, thinking: ‘Just like me – always wanting to be different from other people.’ The steel finger points along a long stone passage. This Way – This Way – This Way to the Exhibition. (GMM, 12)

Rhys’s use of the tube station as a dream substrate of the city exploits the psychic anxiety evoked by subterranean spaces, with their interauterine/deathly coding. Here, the labyrinth maps out a disciplinary scenario, with a distinctly persecutory aspect. When the protagonist asks for the way out of the station, a man with a steel hand – an automaton – points at the message on the surrounding placards (‘This Way to the Exhibition’); in response, the speaker ‘walk[s] along with . . . head bent, very ashamed, thinking: “Just like me – always wanting to be different from other people”’. In this interpellation, the subject is at once ‘recognized’ by an ideological apparatus which at once dictates the terms of subjectivity, and threatens punishment for deviation. The paranoid perspective enforced by the dream models a collective self-observation. It conflates two different urban centres, Paris and London, making the time-space of the Exhibition seem total and inescapable. Metropolitan space itself becomes a labyrinth to which the only possible exit is supplied by totalitarian politics.

The dream episodes of Good Morning Midnight highlight not only the disciplinary function of commodity spectacle, but also its reliance on technologically mediated forms of mass communication. In the final dream
episode, at the end of the novel, Sasha drunkenly hallucinates an ‘enormous machine’:

All that is left in the world is an enormous machine, made of white steel. It has innumerable flexible arms, made of steel. Long, thin arms. At the end of each arm is an eye, the eyelashes stiff with mascara. When I look more closely I see that only some of the arms have these eyes – others have lights. The arms that carry the eyes and the arms that carry the lights are all extraordinarily flexible and very beautiful. But the grey sky, which is the background, terrifies me . . . And the arms wave to an accompaniment of music and song. Like this: ‘Hotcha – hotcha – hotcha . . . ’ And I know the music; I can sing the song. (GMM, 156–7)

The novel’s other spaces – hotel, street, department store, exhibition – are subsumed by this despatialized machine-body, which resembles a mutated swastika. In its confusion of the realms of human and mechanical, living and dead, the image evokes the Surrealist aesthetics of dream and automatism. It condenses or collages in dreamlike fashion an array of key motifs in the novel, such as whiteness, the pointing steel hand, cosmetics, the bodily deformations of Serge’s paintings, the fair’s illuminations, and jazz music. Moreover, the apotropaic and iconic elements of the ‘machine’ – particularly the arms tipped by eyes – identify it as a mask or fetish, a textual parallel to the Surrealist object.

The ‘machine dream’ alludes on many levels to the dominance of technological forms of spectacle in the modern polis. On the one hand, the conjunction of multiplied body parts, lights, cosmetics and synchronized music suggests forms of mass entertainment, such as an industrialized chorus line; on the other, these elements point towards the fascist rally with its synchronized mass salutes. Its hieratic and visual character elides performance and spectators, drawing together the commodity spectacle and the racialized cult of the nation. As in the tube station dream, the armoured machine-collective offers a solution to a puzzle constructed by the urban dream text. Rhys depicts the space of the commodity spectacle on the verge of collapsing into its seeming antithesis, the ritualized space of irrationalist politics. This view of the spectacle, as uniting capitalist and fascist modernities, resonates with Walter Benjamin’s insights of the same period on fascism as the aestheticization of politics.58

As a product of what Tyrus Miller has called ‘late modernism’,59 Good Morning Midnight announces the passing into history of the avant-garde’s utopian aspirations. Its conversion of the 1937 Paris Exposition into a dream text, conflating urban and exhibitory space, at once pays tribute to Surrealism and makes explicit the failure of its emancipatory project.
The ongoing Surrealist critique of the politics of public display confirms and extends Rhys’s long-standing intuition of the role of ethnographic thinking as a crucial link between capitalist and fascist modernities. Her hyphenated location between colonial and metropolitan spheres enables her, from the outset, to inquire into the conditions of knowledge – particularly the ethnographic collection – that enable metropolitan spati-ality, and to place the latter, notably in *Good Morning Midnight*, under the sign of catastrophe.

Timothy Mitchell has argued that ‘the colonial-modern involves creating an effect we recognize as reality, by organizing the world endlessly to represent it.’\(^{60}\) The 1937 Paris Exposition sought to shore up the authority of a late imperial global order through an imaginary dreamscape based on the commanding gaze. Mounted in the shadow of imminent world conflict, it could not help but reveal its staging of ‘international’ modernity as an ideology effect in crisis. It encoded, instead, a crisis in the specular structure through which the metropole seeks to hold and taxonomize its colonized subjects within its gaze. This crisis is reflected in Rhys’s treatment of urban space as a cryptogram, which interrogates the self-legitimating claims of modernity and draws attention to the constitutive role, in the establishment of these claims, of a history of exhibitory practices. Her concern to anatomize what Mitchell calls the ‘colonial-modern’ leads her to demarcate the time-space of the interwar European city as a haunted terrain, in which the histories of metropole and colony interpenetrate, and which she persistently discloses as constitutive of modernism itself.

*University of Warwick*

**Notes**


3 Jean Rhys, *Quartet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971); *Voyage in the Dark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969). Titles of Rhys’s novels in parenthetical references are henceforth abbreviated as follows: *Q, ALMM, VD, GMM.*


7 On Surrealism’s dialogue with the Caribbean, and its impact on Francophone black Caribbean writers and intellectuals in the 1930s, see Michael Richardson, *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996).


argues that, as immigration increased during the 1930s, the presence of foreign nationals in the capital – especially the increasingly visible immigrant minorities from the North African colonies, and Jews from Germany and the Soviet Union – was seen as a burden on the Depression economy.


15 See Stovall, ‘National identity’ on popular representations of the Foreign Legion, and their role in bolstering French imperial prestige in the interwar period. A body made up largely of foreigners from Europe and America, allowing recruits to the Legion to enlist under an assumed name (the anonymat), it was historically deployed in the pacification of French colonial territories. In 1937, the year in which GMM is set, the Legion was stationed in North Africa and involved in the suppression of nationalist revolt in Morocco.


18 See J.A. Froude’s The English in the West Indies, or, The Bow of Ulysses (London: Longmans, Green, 1888), pp. 159, 145, for a key example of the ethnographic discourse of the white Creole, which laments that the whites in Dominica ‘have lost heart, and cease to struggle against the stream’, leaving the island to ‘drift along’ in a ‘state of torpid content’.

19 Raiskin, Snow, p. 149.


21 See Rhys’s memoir Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography (London: André Deutsch, 1979), p. 50 for a description of black Dominicans as ‘more alive,
more a part of the place than we were’; cf. Anna Morgan’s comment: ‘being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad’ (VD, 27).


28 The literature on the World’s Fairs is of course extensive; see Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas*, and Findling, *Historical Dictionary*, for a historical overview of the major events.


35 Cited in Herbert, *Paris 1937*, p. 27.

36 Ibid., p. 31.

37 Ibid., p. 19.


43 The paucity of recorded comments by Rhys on her reading, particularly before 1940, makes it difficult to establish with certainty the extent of her knowledge of Surrealism. However, her frequent periods of residence in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s, noted in Angier, *Jean Rhys*, pp. 353–4, would have familiarized her with its major manifestations. The short-lived *transatlantic review*, edited by her mentor and lover Ford Madox Ford, in which her first publication, the story ‘Vienne’, appeared in December 1924, featured both Philippe Soupault and Tristan Tzara, frequently claimed as Dadaist precursors of Surrealism. See *Transatlantic Review*, Vols 1 and 2 (January–December 1924).


45 See Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 228–9, on the importance of the work of interpretation to the Surrealist project.


51 See Herbert, *Paris 1937*, p. 124