

# “‘Anywhere Out of this World’: Cognition, Perversion and Arbitrariness in Paul Auster’s Metaphysical Detective Stories”<sup>1</sup>

Antoine Dechéne

Université de Liège, CIPA, Belspo, PAI

Abstract:

Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy* (1987) is one of the most striking examples of the “anti-detective” or “metaphysical” detective story as described by Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (1999). *City of Glass*, its opening part, displays “an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps” (NYT 4) where the detective loses himself, fails to solve the mystery and is ultimately confronted with broader ontological and epistemological issues pertaining to the very nature of reality. Auster’s labyrinthine city thus appears as a liminal space which urges us to reconsider the mechanisms of cognition as well as of our ability to reflect upon the conditions which determine the acquisition of knowledge.

This essay aims to examine Auster’s obsessive quests and urban spaces in a way which exceeds accepted definitions of the postmodern, metafictional detective story. In doing so, my theoretical and methodological apparatus will comprise theories of space by Gaston Bachelard, Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel de Certeau alongside Petra Eckhard’s recent *Chronotopes of the Uncanny*. Special attention will also be given to the figure of the flâneur which is one of the missing links between Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” and Auster’s *Trilogy*.

Key words:

Metaphysical detective story, flâneur, cognition, perversity, space, time, identity

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