

Mirrorworlds, Urban Spaces: Heterotopographies in William Gibson's  
*Virtual Light*-Trilogy

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In a general approach to recent science fiction (SF), one often encounters a lingering reductive binarism and repeating structure in some of the texts dealing with that field. Surprisingly enough, when it comes down to it, many SF-texts are still described in rather reductive terms, ultimately categorizing them as utopian or dystopian, and, in some cases, in terms of their more or less realistic content. The utopian writing tradition certainly provides a generic frame of reference, and the concern with content, with "releasing" topics within the lab-settings of fictional worlds, is certainly stronger than with formal stylistic experiment. But in spite or, as I would like to argue, by virtue of the "peculiar flatness", which Jameson criticizes in postmodern writing and cyberpunk, despite this flatness and "dirty realism", SF offers something more complex- and I will try to point towards that today.

It can be argued that re-evaluation of SF is overdue; and many efforts are already made towards a new perspective that takes into account the complexity of a changing literary scene - and, what's more, the potential interest that SF might have in a society, where the enormous speed of technological innovation and social change make our everyday experience sometimes seem like SF already.

Here SF is coming into its very own. I would argue that SF is per definition, more than any other literature, the genre of the thought experiment, of the speculative and of extrapolation. It is the genre of model-worlds and future scenarios. Its fictional worlds offer testing grounds for the hypothetical, room for fictive simulations and virtual social developments.

We are often diagnosed as situated at a moment of profound disorientation. The late humanist subject faces, according to many analyses of the Postmodern, multiple epistemic shifts and distortions in its event horizon, that result from a deep reaching re-figuration of social and topographic space. We encounter a simultaneity that points toward a new primacy of space over time that, according to Foucault - or Jameson for that matter - might be a distinctive characteristic of our age.

In this setting, literature, and SF in particular might be able to offer what Jameson calls a "cognitive mapping", which does not function as a normative, as it might follow from the

pedagogy of a utopian or dystopian project, but as a potential. It allows for forking paths and detours. Cognitive mapping does not have to do with actual content, with a realistic matching of fictive blueprint to future developments. It is not an exact linear trajectory laid out as obligatory travel route, but its didactics lies more in pointing towards a strategy of orientation, towards an emphasis on fissures and gaps, on the ever changing topographies of the interstitial. Attention is directed towards shifting moments of transgression, where, on the borders and margins of a seemingly totalized discursive order, openings occur into the alternative possibilities of space.

The resulting texts as I will argue, both the narrative and narrated spaces, closely correspond to what Foucault calls "heterotopian", a term I find immensely useful and productive, although (or maybe by virtue of) remaining sketchy in Foucault's own writing.

As Foucault claims in *The Order of Things*, utopian texts are essentially comforting, even if not real, as they open pleasant spaces of accessible cities and well-groomed gardens, while heterotopian texts are disturbing, heterogeneous and essentially undermine language. (comp. *Ordnung der Dinge* 19f). While utopian text tends to adhere to the basic structural traits of the fable, the heteropia refuses to produce homogenous meaning and establish clear, singular reference. Instead, our conventional means of producing semantic coherence are bound to fail against the disparate collocation of contesting and irreconcilable discourses that resist all attempts of subordinating them to order-producing categories.

In the Foucauldian sense heterotopian space is a mirror world, but not as a double, a parallel universe, a mimetic or inverted representation of our experienced *lebenswelt* (which would then in fact be utopian or dystopian), but rather as the mirror itself. The mirror is the material site of a disconcerting phenomenon of simultaneous representation and negation, a dis-placement of an image, which we recognize as reflection, but which nevertheless seems to open up a space that at the same time quotes, reverts and negates our own. This disclosing new space offers a virtual opening, it exists by recurring to other spaces, forging new connections that allow for a simultaneous presence of same and other while remaining as an imaginary "outside" of discursively ordered space (comp. "Of Other Spaces" 240f).

Foucault is very much interested in the spaces of potentialities, and the borders and fringes on which thought moves. But it is important to understand that these spaces are never stable, the openings only temporal, and it is the crucial moment of transgression than enlightens this peculiar relationship. Heterotopian opening and transgression do not per se have the force to change the discursive order of things. As moment of lightening in darkness, a fleeting moment of cognition

is made possible by shedding light on the very nature of darkness without permanently altering its shape, just pointing towards a possibility of an outside other.

Now for Foucault, heterotopia does not only refer to a the textual phenomenon, but also to an actual material phenomenon of spatiality, as he specifies in "Of Other Spaces", and there are two settings of future posturbanity I will use to discuss the mappings of cityscapes in Cyberpunk and William Gibson specifically:

On the one hand Los Angeles, as the traditional topos of apocalyptic post-urbanity. On the other hand we are presented with San Francisco or, more specifically, the defunct San Francisco Bay Bridge as a potential space of heterotopian qualities, which in its transgressive generation and its (generically) interstitial topography offers a potential outside of regulated urban space.

Gibson's Trilogy from the 1990s, which consist of the novels *Virtual Light*, *Idoru*, and *All Tomorrow's Parties*, generally drops us into a world of an imaginable yet estranged near-future, where a vaccine against HIV has been found and nanotechnology is the preferred state-of-the-art *dea ex machina* against everything from graffiti to earthquake damage, and where corporate power and state control has seemingly become total, while the less privileged are left to fight it out against drugs, gang wars, environmental pollution and contagious agents.

We enter the world of the *Virtual Light*-trilogy through a dreamlike fragment of text, disconnected from any yet discernible plot. The setting is initially diffuse, until we are able to place the detail. Atmosphere and style are surreal, leaving us with a sense of disorientation, where we share the global traveler's sense of non-space and exchangeable anonymity in global corporate hotel chains:

Hours earlier, missiles have fallen in a northern suburb; seventy-three dead, the kill as yet unclaimed [...] - business as usual, world without end.

The air beyond the window touches each source of light with a faint hepatic corona, a tint of jaundice edging imperceptibly into brownish translucence. Fine dry flakes of fecal snow, billowing in from the sewage flats, have lodged in the lens of night.

(*Virtual Lights* 1)

The unspecified protagonist imagines himself back in Tokyo (clean, air-conditioned, controlled), but opens his eyes in Mexico City to watch Russian porn on a split screen, parallel to US weather forecast and Islamic prayer channel.

This passage gives us few clues for the potential design of our fictional world, pointing maybe towards as emphasis on the global/local split, towards a diffuse "balkanization" not only of territory but of culture. There is threat of omnipresent contagions, of gang and police warfare on the battlefields of the post-urban – all seemingly part of everyday life. It is not until chapter 2, that

we get a sense of grounding, a setting and perspectivated view that furnishes us with some detail. Not until then does the text provide us with a beginning thickness of texture – the first lines of survey and mapping into the fictional world.

The cityscape of LA, which we then enter, forms a somewhat extreme pole in the trilogy's depiction of urbanity. I will only briefly discuss it, as it will counterweigh the more positive and in fact heterotopian space of San Francisco and its Bridge.

Los Angeles is, unsurprisingly enough, first introduced through the cultural detail of a car apparently built for an aggressively hostile urban environment, and consequently the text presents us with all the near-apocalyptic paraphernalia of the posturban city - as they are described by Edward Soja in his *Postmetropolis* (2000), a study of postmodern urban space: LA has turned into the megacity, the exopolis of suburban sprawl; it is a globalized Cosmopolis while internally polarized and fractured. It consists of gapingly discrepant enclaves and exclaves – some as fortresses for the economically privileged, who reside in secure and pleasantly secluded microcosms of self-subsistent up-scale urban living; their counterpart are carceral archipelagos, where mechanisms of control and containment confine the less desirable social elements to narrow spaces of concentrated poverty and violence. Gibson perfects the idea of the panopticed city of ultimate surveillance through the presence of the "Death Star", as people half-mockingly call the "Southern California [...] Law Enforcement Satellite." (*Virtual Lights* 14) – which is basically the epitome of total surveillance and computerized central control.

In the fictional geography of a California divided into NoCal and SoCal, the cityscape of Los Angeles is contrasted with that of San Francisco, and I will particularly focus on the spatial phenomenon of the San Francisco Bay Bridge as pictured by Gibson.

The bridge, as we encounter it, is closed down. Damaged by an earthquake, it has become dysfunctional as a relay of traffic. The suspended structure is of course symbolic as bridge per se, and even more so as former icon of the "Golden Gate" – which used to be the very embodiment of promising liminality and sense of entry. But now the Bridge is home to a community of urban nomads, lending their evolving make-shift camp a sense of dwelling, of paradoxical provisional permanence. The squatters are an arbitrary assortment of the desperate, displaced, the physically and mentally homeless – who were a dispersed minority and fell through the grid of regulated social space. This sudden opening of the bridge's literally interstitial topography, which they occupied in an act of transgression, offers them a place almost outside the constraints and economic pressures of the city's discursive order.

Seeing the bridge through the somewhat detached and naïve perspective of Rydell:

It looked like a carnival, sort of. Or a state fair midway, except it was roofed over, on the upper level, with crazy little shanties, just boxes, and whole housetrailer winched up and glued into the suspension with big gobs of adhesive, like grasshoppers in a spider-web. You could go up and down, between the two original deck levels, through holes they'd cut in the upper deck, all different kinds of stairs patched in under there, plywood and welded steel, and one had an old airline gangway, just sitting there with its tires flat. Down on the bottom deck, once you got in past a lot of food-wagons, there were mostly bars, the smallest ones Rydell had ever seen, some with only four stools and not even a door, just a big shutter they could pull down and lock. (*Virtual Lights* 193-94)

This gives an impression of the outside appearance of the Bridge, its make-shift character of patchwork, its very heterogeneous materiality, juxtaposing and re-appropriating the discarded fragments of a throwaway society in a process of endless layering.

The reference to the bridge as a "carnival" also points towards a heterogeneous social structure and ethnic composition, and it implies essentially non-hierarchic public space. The centripetal, subversive forces of the Bakhtinian carnival come to mind, where society enters into a time of suspended order, inversion and the grotesque.

In fact the quality of structure surprises our observer Rydell, who experiences a slight onset of the unsettling forces of an encounter with the heterotopian:

But none of it done to any plan, not that he could see. Not like a mall, where they plug a business into a slot and wait to see whether it works or not. This place had just *grown*, it looked like, one thing patched onto the next, until the whole span was wrapped in this formless mass of *stuff*, and no two pieces of it matched. There was a different material anywhere you looked, almost none of it being used for what it had originally been intended for. He passed stalls faced with turquoise Formica, fake brick, fragments of broken tiles worked into swirls and sunbursts and flowers. One place, already shuttered, was covered with green-and-copper slabs of desoldered component board.

(*Virtual Lights* 194)

This passage reflects the potential genesis of the bridge's anachronistic habitat as an essentially emergent structure. But the passage mirrors also the habitual perspective of the observer to whom the synthetic, top-down constructedness of the mall - the epitome of central planning and optimizing logic of economic positioning - seems to be the rule, while a "grown" structure of bottom-up decentral urban development is the strange exception. Rydell is so used to the economic order of corporate environments and its privatizing forces, that the very sight of "unregulated" public space confuses him. Presented through this perspective, the hybrid space of the bridge is encountered as essentially transgressive, outside of and disturbing to habitual discursive order. But Rydell is also instilled with an unconscious sense of elation, as he finds himself "somehow grinning" (*Virtual Lights* 194).

In one instance, one of the protagonists, the bike messenger Chevette, looks up at the bridge:

She looked up, just as she whipped between the first of the slabs, and the bridge seemed to look down at her, its eyes all torches and neon. She'd seen pictures of what it had

looked like, before, when they drove cars back and forth on it all day, but she'd never quite believed them. The bridge was what it was, and somehow always had been. Refuge, weirdness, where she slept, home to however many and all their dreams.

(*Virtual Lights* 145)

This particular, personalizing gaze can be read as signaling not only Chevette's personal sense of belonging and spatial attachment but also its symbolic value - not as ideal space but as open to individual appropriations and projections: Such a space eludes the homogenizing forces of totalizing order through its sheer patchwork heterogeneity and palimpsestic history of make-shift layering.

It is repeatedly emphasized, how the population of the bridge forms a community, almost tribal in its outward appearance and rituals, but based on rites of assent rather than descent. The uniting factors are the unique structuring forces of the bridges topography, of squatting, claiming a scarce bit of space, positioning oneself within the interstitial matrix. The ordering principles of generic lineage, of birth, legal or social status, are replaced by voluntary affiliation. The internal structure resembles a grown network, and individual positions are linked to what Foucault associates with the site as spatial category - In an age dominated by the simultaneity of space, it is not the temporal linearity of genealogy but negotiations of collocation and proximity that become dominant.

The community has no explicit laws or written statutes, its codes of behavior emerge from the immediate needs and demands of life on the bridge. Very often there is not even a negotiation of consensus but, as an old inhabitant of the bridge puts it "Just common sense..." (*Virtual Lights* 280). This counters readerly tendencies to stylize the bridge-people in to some sort of grass-roots democratic community, since the nomadic appropriation of a gap, a fissure in economized cityscape was mainly driven by the push-factor of need, not an abstract utopian endeavor. Thus the textual process of narrative heterotopia stays always disconcerting to all sides.

Although the Bridge offers its inhabitants a certain amount of undisturbed freedom, it is never outright idealized. It is clearly a dangerous area to outsiders, regarded as a place outside the law, a quietly tolerated enclave and avoided by the average citizen. Its inhabitants are comparatively poor, living conditions are rough, and they never fully escape the economic and political factors dominant beyond the bridge. The liminal is not fixed but temporary, its status always threatened by outside forces, like changes in urban landscaping; for the bridge is - despite its peculiar marginal location and internal structure - itself a site, dominated by relations of proximity. It can never exist but relational, formed in collocation with surrounding sites.

In the third novel, *All Tomorrow's Parties*, we return to San Francisco. After many other settings and global travel beyond the Pacific Brim – most of the second novel, *Idoru*, has taken place in Tokyo – our first re-encounter with The Bridge is instilled with a sense of homecoming:

The man opens the door and steps from the cab, straightening his coat. Above him, beyond the tank traps, lifted the ragged swooping terraces, the patchwork superstructure in which the bridge is wrapped. Some aspect of his mood lifts: it is a famous sight, a tourist's postcard, the very image of the city. (*Virtual Lights* 18)

The unusually idyllic moment also contains a sense or foreboding, a foreshadowing of a potential outcome of the bridge's history, as too much of tourist and economic interest becomes a threat to enclaves of subculture, threatening them with death by commodification. The freezing into a static popcultural iconicity is bound to smother the necessary dynamics of shifting and exchange in heterotopian space.

He stands looking up at the bridge, at the silvered plywood of uncounted tiny dwellings. It reminds him of the favelas in Rio, though the scale of the parts is different, somehow. There is a fairy quality to the secondary construction, in contrast to the alternating swoop and verticality of the core structure's poetry of suspension. The individual shelters – if in fact they are shelters – are very small, space being an absolute premium. [...]

But now he allows himself to anticipate the sight that awaits him, past the last rhomboid: the bridge's mad maw, the gateway to dream and memory, where sellers of fish spread their wares on beds of dirty ice. A perpetual bustle, a coming and going, that he honors as the city's very pulse.

And steps out, into unexpected light, faux-neon redline glare above a smooth sweep of Singaporean plastic.

Memory is violated.

[...He] stares bleakly at this latest imposition: LUCKY DRAGON swirling in bland script up a sort of fin or pylon whose base seems comprised of dozens of crawling video screens.  
(*All Tomorrow's Parties* 18/19)

Characteristically, it is not the light of state regulated surveillance and control which interrupts, but of global capital, the imperialism of a franchising chain. A convenience store is located right at the entry of the bridge, it offers anything from net-access to ramen noodles to diagnostic kits. Its in-store politics are fine-tuned by a team of cultural anthropologists, and its wall of interactive video screens links it directly to a changing dozen of other franchises all over the world – unsurprisingly enough, the majority of customers reacts to this instilled notion of global network and local simultaneity with indifference, with the universal finger or adolescent pranks, gleeful at the idea of a "global mooning".

But with this store a first outpost of late capital puts a grapnel into the shifting liminality of the bridgespace, tying it more closely to the economic and social structures of the order at the very margin of which it exists. In fact, the store occupies the very threshold of the bridge, in a strange act of mimicry of the bridge's own liminality. But this gate functions not as a gateway but a toll-station, making the public flow productive for economic exchange. It remains open, whether the

bridge will ultimately be co-opted into the regulated space of consumerism, but the spawning of the franchise, in its uncanny ability to mimic and appropriate, poses an even more cunning threat than the novels larger conspiracy plot of urban planning.

The characters of the trilogy are global nomads, not as part of a jet-set society, but due to their position in a dynamics of late capital. Even as the Bridge - as an epicenter of resistance to commodification and large scale real-estate speculation - is burned down, the ending is lined with a strong sense of obstinate endurance and survival. The patchwork of social mini-structures might very well re-adapt to change.

Ultimately, the essential significance of the Bridge does not lie in a precise fixed location, although there is always a sense of nostalgic attachment to the historic local, but in the potential of its interstitial structure. It is important as a nomadic site of heterotopian opening, somewhere on the margins of discursive order and the measured grid of regulated space, where, through an act of transgression, a glimpse at an alternative other becomes possible.



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