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Urban Scenarios: Gone Vacant, Virtual, and Violent

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All materiality is alive, it is unique and distinctive rather than formless; as French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari state, in one of their major collaborative works, *A Thousand Plateaus*, “[c’est] une matière-mouvement qui comporte des singularités ou heccécités, des qualités et même des opérations” (it is not dead, insensitive, homogeneous matter, but a matter-movement bearing singularities or haecceities, qualities and even operations: Deleuze and Guattari 638). If what we take to be inert materiality is indeed animate, as they argue, then materials such as stone, wood, iron, and brick that make up the buildings, streets, underground corridors and pavements of our cities are perhaps capable of transforming us, of connecting to our bodies through events, as if they were living and aging with us within a common process of entropy. If matter may indeed be deemed as “autopoietic”—a term etymologically derived from the ancient Greek verb of *poiesis*, and alluding not only to “poetry” proper, but to all processes of creating, producing, and transforming—the forms in which all materials are shaped may carry latent possibilities of differentiation and transformation. Materialized city form has therefore immanent aesthetic-political effects and potentialities.

Within this understanding of the liveliness of materials in both imaginary and concrete urban spaces, in this article I want to reflect upon three works of fiction that share a Symbolist/post-Symbolist aesthetic, namely the novella *Bruges-la-morte* (1892) by Belgian Georges Rodenbach, the novel *A Caverna* (2000) by Portuguese José Saramago, and the film *Inland Empire* (2006) by U.S. director David Lynch. Rather than evaluating the cityscapes expressed in these works in terms of the usu-

al modernist/post-modernist, industrial/post-industrial oppositional categories, I want to examine the sensory interaction that the three distinct urban scenarios articulate between the human lived body and its immediate material surroundings, as a means of performing an aesthetic/political critique of the normative anthropocentric view of urban culture. In order to relate these aesthetic cityscapes to politics, I draw upon contemporary philosopher Jacques Rancière's considerations when he states that a poetics—especially in the “aesthetic regime of art”¹ to which these Symbolist/post-Symbolist works belong—is also a politics. And it is politics in the sense of disagreement with the ordinary mode of the sensible/perceptible, a politics that resists the normative partitions of the sensible, or the organization of spaces and possibilities of time ordered by what Rancière calls the political regime, or la police.² By inscribing perceptive new worlds into the existing normative one, such an aesthetic/politics battles for visibility concerning things that should be looked into by a community of individualized human beings. In this article I will thus inquire into how these three fictive urban scenarios—which I view as vacant, virtual, and violent—may be perceived as aesthetically political.

In Georges Rodenbach's fin-de-siècle Symbolist novel, *Bruges-la-morte*, the medieval city of Bruges figures sensorily, as if it were organic and human. More specifically, the city is equated to the seductively dead body of the protagonist's spouse, to an irreversibly lost lover. Everyday the novel's obsessive hero, Hughes Viane, sets out from his old house for a solitary walk through the city. Everywhere he finds reflections of his deceased wife, and of his longing for her, in the city's winding cobblestoned streets, in its gabled roofs and empty squares, in the “cold silence” of the deserted alleys, in the shadows cast over the pavement by the tall towers, in the shuttered houses with dead windowpanes like eyes, staring at him. Everyday, everywhere, the hero wanders through Bruges retrieving the image of his lost lover, until the whole city mysteriously comes to resemble her: “Bruges était sa morte. Et sa morte était Bruges” (Rodenbach 14).

The urban scenario enacted in *Bruges-la-morte* is essentially vacant, but concerned with a subjective impassionedly filled emptiness. Rodenbach explored the desolate atmosphere of the city at a time when it was almost emptied of residents, after centuries of decline brought about by the silting-up of its old sea-canal, which disconnected its access to the ocean, and caused local merchants to abandon the once lively town, leaving behind them an economic “dead city.” Although the world is currently becoming urbanized at an extremely fast pace, vacant cities now abound. Many historical centers are becoming as deserted of residents as fin-de-siècle Bruges, even if filled with tourists by daylight, who are paradoxically seeking an old city that is slowly ceasing to exist.

The most strikingly vacant city of today is perhaps New Ordos (or Kangbashi) in Inner Mongolia, China.³ State-sponsored by the Chinese government to apparently bust the country's GDP, the city was erected thirty kilometers away from historical Ordos, and practically completed four years ago. New Ordos is overflowing with brand new apartments, bungalows, office towers, entertainment and sports facilities but still stands entirely empty. Projected to house one million inhabitants, and although every housing unit has been sold, no one resides there except for some construction workers and security personnel. It is a vacant city of virtual residents. Visitors to the new urban complex describe it as an apocalyptic landscape: only sporadically do they see a solitary pedestrian pacing along the city's wide streets, like some lone survivor of a massive disaster. Like Rodenbach's dead city, it stands as an empty landscape ready for the allure of a lost love.

Rodenbach's celebration of Bruges as a voluptuous vacant body, however, is tied to his decadent yearning for the city as an aesthetic landscape of solitude where the person, the individual body—and not the crowd—is allowed to flourish. Contrastingly, New Ordos is a vacant city that was projected within an economic mechanistic concept of “people” in mind. The overwhelming majority of economic, political, geographic and cultural research being done at present is predominantly concerned with “macro-level” phenomena: macro-economics, macro-politics, global interdependence and so on. At this level, the individual is fractured into a myriad of intersecting “subject positions” associated to particular strata: of ethnicity, income group, religion, age, and so on. Accordingly, while the concept of “people” is addressed in nearly every urban planning study today, the consideration of the person, as a body distinct from the people, remains opaque. In contrast, what we are given through the aesthetic regime of art is a focus on individual differentiation, on micro-level questions of affect, enabling the city to become materially identified with a human lover. Although equally vacant, Rodenbach's Bruges is aesthetically and politically contrasting to New Ordos.

For what is the topography of this lover that is Rodenbach's Bruges? It is dark, silent, ailing, mysterious, resisting possession; it is marked, damaged, injured, unclean, incoherent, and disjointed; it has textures and wrinkles, as any other material or body filled with memories. It is absorbed in deep thought, but also playful, taking one down and up narrow passageways, into the unknown, into obscurity, into discovery, into oblivion. Its arteries are not meant to be mere connecting sectors allowing blood to flow, but rather slow-moving canals of a holistic labyrinthian circulatory system. It is a landscape of inner subjective desire, *un paysage d'âme*, a Symbolist soulscape.

Not so the city of New Ordos. New Ordos is widespread, clean, functional, aseptic, “Disneyfied.” It is blocked, distrustful, and defensive, like a fortress. In effect, what

the urban landscape of New Ordos calls to mind, both aesthetically and politically, is the dystopian city imagined by José Saramago in his novel *A Caverna* (*The Cave*). The author describes this model city, called “the Center,” as sitting on a gated mega-site, like a colossal wall to those who see it from the outside (Saramago 17). This wall is in fact the exterior windowless side of a gigantic quadrangular building (a mass of forty-eight floors high, and ten floors below ground) that constitutes the Center. Inside, the residential part of the Centre is made up of vertical, parallel sequences of apartments, “dispostas como placas de baterias ou de colmeias, as interiores ligadas costas com costas, as exteriores ligadas à parte central pelas estruturas das passagens” (arranged like cells in a storage battery or honeycombs in a beehive, the interiors joined back to back, the exteriors joined to the central structure by the corridors: 278). In complete contrast to the flat façade of the outer wall, the Centre’s inner part “está crivada de janelas, centenas e centenas de janelas, sempre fechadas por causa do condicionamento da atmosfera interna” (is peppered with windows, hundreds and hundreds of windows, thousands of windows, all of them locked shut because of the air conditioning inside: 100).

As in the case of existing corporate paradises, and recently projected new cities, the residents of the Center are offered daycare for young and old, fitness clubs, game rooms, artificial indoor parks, shopping malls, cultural amenities, health facilities, and spas. This wide range of benefits and services encourage employees to be highly productive and first-rate *consumers*, while ensuring physical security and constant entertainment for the multitude. As a result, the residents of the center are a socially distinct caste in relation to other human beings living in the never-ending radiating suburbs. These territories surrounding the Center include: The Industrial Belt, or a continually expanding network of pipes, “projectada por um furioso e executada por um alucinado” (designed by an eccentric and built by a maniac: 254); The Green Belt, a depressing sight of plastic greenhouses stretching out as far as the horizon (89, 253); and an unstable territory of shantytowns under permanent demolition work and constant vigilance, where “criminals” reside.

A significant advantage of living inside the Center is that every organic setback or sensory disturbance of the human body either has been eliminated or alleviated through scientific means: death, for instance, is barely noticed (122). Best of all, one travels to the most dangerous and exotic places without having to leave the complex; one can experience “natural” phenomena such as rain, snow, and wind in secure settings (308); one can even have animals that do not defecate or need to be fed, since they are fittingly devoid of bones and organs (233). Like a Moloch god, the Center swallows streets, squares, and whole blocks; it is like a bloated organ “inside” the city but “bigger” than the city (259).

In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato’s cavern begs the ethical question between

truth and illusion, the original and the copy, the real and the simulacrum, theoretically revealing a higher “reality” which the appearances or shadows on the cave’s wall both conceal and disclose. Within an aesthetic regime of art, Saramago’s cavern raises a different political-ecocritical challenge. The problem herein lies not in a binary antagonism between the virtuality of the spectacle offered inside the model city and the actuality of life in the countryside. Differently, Saramago’s cave calls into question the design, currently being promoted in the name of progress, of a *virtual human body* absorbed in an ocularcentric culture; it denounces the rigidity and lethargy of bodies whose senses are controlled by *spectacle*, shut off from their surrounding non-anthropocentric nature, from the possibility of wandering, from the free exercise and unbound use of the entire range of their sensory faculties. Thus, what this fictional cityscape evokes is a political resistance to the idea of a



person as *consumer* and *spectator*; the idea of a person “zoned” according to specific partitions of the sensible; a person, or a body, organized by what Rancière calls “la police.” Further, what seems to be at stake in Saramago’s fable is the urgent need for an ecocentric ethics, or for a full spectrum ecology that is not just environmental, but also mental and social, as Félix Guattari argues.⁴

Going back to New Ordos, to that Chinese inland city of wide multi-lane empty streets, where nothing apparently moves or varies except for the traffic lights: a haunting and hypnotic landscape, not without allure and beauty. A void automated landscape similar to those that recur in David Lynch’s works, namely in his latest film. Its title—*Inland Empire*—seems to indicate that the film is set in the inland district of Southern California (which includes a part of the Greater Los Angeles area), a region notorious for being a center of methamphetamine production, and with a crime rate over twice that of the U.S. national average. Within the aesthetic regime of art to which the film belongs, however, what both the title and images suggest is that we are probing into the central core of “Empire,” uncovering *the city of angels*’ most inner soulscape or *paysage d’âme*. And what do we find there? Nothing but the never-ending interior of a film studio: with divisions, corridors, and houses seemingly made of cardboard; and where everything is but the scenery of some dismal theatre stage.

The film’s protagonist (a movie star) traverses the various locations—her luxurious home, the studio, the set, the movie theater, the offstage offices, a stage where rabbit-headed humans are performing a sitcom, and finally the street—as if they were contiguous rooms, within an uninterrupted and surrealist *mise-en-abîme*. These consecutive boxes inside other boxes give rise to a pattern of dreamlike connectivity among all the distinct elements and characters of Lynch’s fiction. As a result, Hollywood celebrities seem inextricably linked to the financial mafia and its sex traffickers, as well as to the homeless prostitutes, pimps, drug addicts and criminals lying about in Hollywood Boulevard’s walk of fame. It is upon this sidewalk, on the intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street, upon this iconographic location embedded with celebrities’ names set in golden stars, that the protagonist gets stabbed with a screwdriver, falls down, and finally confronts the surface of the city face to face. While dying in a pool of her own blood she is comforted by a black homeless woman who insanely prattles about the impossibility of ever getting away from the endlessly sprawling city. The cityscape of *Inland Empire* offers no outside space, no landscape of release, and everything in it seems fastened by one strong binding factor: global and local human violence.

Gone vacant, virtual, and violent— these are the three urban scenarios that I chose for reflection today, in both reality and fiction. Walking the *vacant* city as if

one were caressing a lover; feeling oneself being swallowed by the *virtual* consumeristic city, as if by a gigantic artificial organ; or else dying pathetically upon the *violent* surface of the urban sidewalk, as in some cheap drama performed on a decayed theatre stage. All three cityscapes are striking examples of how material space does not just reflect and/or sustain cultural and social identities, but likewise aesthetically performs subjective and political transformations. Moreover, all three cityscapes are a reminder of how the planning of city form is never merely a case of designing an assemblage of urban functionalities for a mass of anonymous occupants, but rather implies the intensity of an artistic-poetic endeavor, since the aesthetics of urban materiality politically impacts upon individual lived bodies and psyches. In this sense, I will now end with George Rodenbach’s expressive words, from *Bruges-la-morte*:

Pénétration réciproque de l’âme et des choses! Nous entrons en elles, tandis qu’elles pénètrent en nous. Les villes surtout ont ainsi une personnalité, un esprit autonome, un caractère presque extériorisé qui correspond à la joie, à l’amour nouveau, au renoncement, au veuvage. Toute cité est un état d’âme, et d’y séjourner à peine, cet état d’âme se communique, se propage à nous en un fluide qui s’inocule et qu’on incorpore avec la nuance de l’air. (Mutual penetration of the soul and things! We enter into them as they penetrate us. Cities in particular have something like a personality, an autonomous spiritual self, a character that corresponds to joy, to new love, to neglect, to grief. Every city is a state of soul, and this state of soul is catching, like a fluid inoculated in our body through the subtle tinge of the air. My translation: Rodenbach 71).

NOTES

¹ For Rancière the *aesthetic regime* designates “a specific system of art, opposed to the representative system. The representative system distinguishes, among the different arts (different in the sense of ways of doing), those arts with a common goal—imitation—and from there it defines genres, norms of “fabrication,” criteria of appreciation, etc. The aesthetic system distinguishes the artistic domain based on how artistic productions are sensible/perceptible. The aesthetic system transforms this into the manifestations of a specific mode of thought, in a sensibility that is itself uprooted from the ordinary mode of the sensible/perceptible.” Jacques Rancière, “Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement,” 12.

² Rancière contrasts politics (*la politique*) with police (*la police*). La police is “a form of intervention which prescribes what can be seen and what cannot be seen, what can be said and what cannot be said,” whereas politics must break with this partition/distribution of the sensible/perceptive, and create modes of

the sensible/perceptive that did not exist beforehand. Jacques Rancière, “The Cause of the Other,” 25-33.

³ See <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1975336,00.html#ixzzojySIScoV> and <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/11/chinas-empty-city>. Accessed May 14, 2011.

⁴ “The ecological crisis can be traced to a more general crisis of the social, political and existential. The problem involves a type of revolution of mentalities whereby they would cease to invest in a certain kind of development, based on a productivism that has lost all human finality. Thus the issue returns with insistence: how do we change mentalities, how do we reinvent social practices that would give back to humanity—if it ever had it—a sense of responsibility, not only for its own survival, but equally for the future of all life on the planet, for animal and vegetable species, likewise for incorporeal species such as music, the arts, cinema, the relation with time, love and compassion for others, the feeling of fusion at the heart of cosmos?” Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, 119-20.

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Literary Spaces

Fiction is unavoidably part of the architectural process; when conceiving a building there's always a speculative projection into the future. Once the building is completed, time doesn't stop; just as a body rushes towards death from the moment of birth, time alters the finished product and contradicts the architect's original intentions, even when the building is in the hands of the most careful and faithful owners. Is timelessness a remote possibility? Without doubt it is an ideal to aim for, to dream about, but ultimately isn't it a complete fiction?

Each of the three papers that follow offer a reflection on architectural work in general and in particular on such questions, and they do so by focusing upon literary works of fiction: *House of Leaves* by the American Mark Z. Danielewski (b. 1966), *La Vie mode d'emploi* by the Frenchman Georges Perec (1936-82), and novels by the Austrian Thomas Bernhard (1931-89). All three papers offer provocative considerations on the issue of temporality, a concept very much at the heart of the tension between narrative and architecture: as the text in its linearity evokes places and buildings, words intersect with images, time with space, the diachronic with the synchronic.

The projection into the future that is at the heart of architectural planning is all about taking into consideration the ways in which the building will be used; but, since nobody can truly predict the future, blueprints essentially present stable and immutable entities. They are mere attempts at representing the unrepresentable which is, according to Stylianos Giamarelos, the message of Danielewski's labyrinthine book *House of Leaves*, a poignant reflection on the impossibility to represent a space that is in constant flux but also of conveying one's experience of it. We thus witness a succession of people trying to do so – and in a variety of media – but “each