Local Time, Real Space: Lost Cities

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After pouring over the latest figures, statistics, tabulations, and projections of the most recent U.S. census, the mainstream media are declaring the good news: Cities are making a comeback. Or at least some of them are. After years of shrinking populations, American cities like Chicago, Atlanta, Denver, and Boston are growing again, as young professionals, families, and recent immigrants move in. Tempted by the cultural offerings usually lacking in suburbia, fed up with interminable commuting distances, and emboldened by the decrease in urban crime, the cities once again beckon as centers. Or do they? For the growth is not part of a nation-wide trend, and meanwhile a city like Detroit now boasts only a single movie theater. Furthermore, a concurrent development, most noticeable in the South where development is not hampered by geographic and environmental factors, suggests that our traditional notion of the relationship of the city to the suburb, or the center to the periphery, must be entirely rethought. Here one finds pockets of population density that are no longer anchored by the ’old-fashioned’ city and thus are not formed in contiguous patterns radiating outwards from a core, but rather can be pictured more like a loose and disconnected chain that follows the form of the interstate highway system. In other words, these demographic areas are, as one ’urbanist’ has pointed out, "suburbs without urbs" -- a periphery without a center. As a former railroad junction, Atlanta’s name may have once been Terminus -- both a start and a finish point -- but these newer suburban megalopolises are more like decentralized points of transit. More and more attention is also paid to the developments of the so-called ’New Urbanists’ -- the Duany/Plater-Zyberk designed beach town of Seaside (http://www.seasidefl.com/) in Florida and the newer Kentlands (http://www.kentlandsusa.com/) in suburban Washington, D.C., or the Calthorpe Associates’ Laguna West (http://www.lagunacentral.com/) development outside of Sacramento -- and their vision of creating more authentic and community-oriented living spaces after the sterility of the long suburban American nightmare. However, on closer inspection one is led to suspect that ’community’ and the other social values they promote are merely the surface effect of architectural standards (in true Disney-like fashion). Lacking context and continuity, they seek to imitate an historical past from which they are totally severed. All of which leads one to question the extent to which it is possible to say that the ’cities are back’ -- as if it were ever possible to go back - but must rather reconsider the manner in which this space is defined and conceptualized, as the very manner in which we think about cities has changed drastically.

One route we might take is the urban archaeology of Paul Virilio, who considering himself an "urbanist" as opposed to a philosopher (such as Paul Ricoeur or Gilles Deleuze), plots the historical organization of the city both through its relationship to the materiels of war and through technological modes of proximity.[1] In this narrative we find that if the city was once defined through and limited by the ’immediate proximity’ of the agora and bodies in space, and enlarged to ’metabolic proximity’ via the movement of horses, these limits were further extended through the ’mechanical proximity’ afforded by successive generations of transportation (the railroad and especially the automobile). The telecom revolution of the last decades, however, forces us to discard the notion of a limit or of the boundaried space of the city as terminus as a result of the ’electromagnetic proximity’ occasioned by the vast digital network through which we exchange goods, currency, data, jokes, love -- in short, information. The paradoxical nature of the term ’electromagnetic proximity’ thus reveals the degree to which the underlying assumptions of the preceding stages are rendered obsolete, for it no longer assumes or assures the very real proximity or nearness of people in a specific geographical location in a shared local time (much like the nodal structure of population densities displaces the contiguous relationship of center and periphery). In other words, the long-distance meeting of telepresent interlocutors constitutes a virtual proximity which destroys a reality once understood as the coincidence of time and place. The ’urbanization of regional space’ is thus succeeded by the

’urbanization of time’ via the global electronic network, resulting in what Virilio terms the ’metropolitics of instantaneity,’ or a denial of the here in favor of the now. ’Metropolization’ refers then to this virtual ’world city,’ of which every so-called real city is only a ’suburb,’ and thus undermines the geopolitical reality of real space and posits the haves and the have-nots as those who are either inhabitants of the virtual city of real time or the inhabitants of the real space of local cities of local time.

Virilio’s argument is clearly a component of his larger catastrophic narrative tracing a Fall into technology, the exponential increase of speed and its negative impact on society, and here, more specifically, the collateral damage done to the *ethos* of reality and the vulnerable public space in which individuals responsively interact, which inevitably leads him to reject the much-touted democratization of the electronic network because of the manner in which it undermines the requisite intersubjectivity of traditional political systems. One might argue against Virilio that his idealized space of proximal bodies has for millennia hardly engendered the democratizing spirit which he would ascribe to it. Far more interesting, however, may be to consider the manner in which the fundamental characteristics of what he calls the ’world time’ of the late twentieth century differ from those of its start. For this change addresses one aspect of the split between (what we conveniently label) Modernity and Postmodernity and reveals the manner in which this split is implicated in the dominant media technologies of the periods in question. It is perhaps already a commonplace to state that the perceptual conditions of Modernity are governed by the dual attributes of simultaneity and transitoriness, both of which describe an acute sense of the present as the constitutive element of experience in the urban centers from which the period is indistinguishable. It is the kinetic activity of the city which not only threatens its citizens with shock or the sensation of the ever-new, but further is, as Walter Benjamin already realized, the "formal principle’ of that medium which will be most closely allied with the changing conceptions of time and space in the new urban arena at the beginning of the twentieth century -- namely, the cinema. Early twentieth-century technologies, especially film, are often evoked as indeed paradigmatic of the experience of the Modern metropolis because of their properties of speed, motion, simultaneity, and the predominance of visual sensory perception. If the cinema is to some extent viewed as a privileged medium for communicating this changed relationship to time and space, to what extent must we rethink our media model in light of the changing technological conditions which define our current situation?

For the fundamental attributes of simultaneity and transitoriness are transformed under conditions of ’electronic proximity,’ as Virilio instructs us, into ubiquity and instantaneity, both terms which reject the localization of time and space. Interacting in real time in virtual space, instantaneity, or the sending of signals or information without any perceptible lapse of time (despite the delay *your* modem may still encounter), becomes the condition of possibility for a ubiquity which refers to the capacity of being everywhere at the same time. Or rather, nowhere. For with the lack of delay (the hyper-extension of a process already begun, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch as shown, with the technology of the railroad), ’real’ space disappears along with the historical city and traditional theories of urbanization. If the great ’cinematic’ novels of Dos Passos and Döblin present us with the experience of the Modern city, we might turn our attention to the manner in which the ’city’ novels of the end of the century deploy the fundamental assumptions of our changed technological condition. How is the topography of the city recorded and retransmitted through the literary work? How does not merely the loss but the evacuation of the fixed coordinates of (local) time and (real) space impact the psychic and perceptual apparatus and the formation of individual and cultural identity, particularly as a function of memory?

It is perhaps not unreasonable to expect at this point that we might draw attention to any of the generation of so-called ’cyber novels’ of the last twenty-five years and perform an examination of cyberspace, the metaverse (which made its first appearance in Neil Stephenson’s novel *Snow Crash*)

or any of the other virtual realms that would seem to evoke the condition of ’electronic proximity.’ However, I will step just outside of this data stream and briefly examine a complex book that might be said to address both sides of the digital divide. Although a less explicitly digitally inscribed work, I maintain that it is no less involved with the subversion of the topographical and temporal landscape which might reflect our ’virtual cities.’ For perhaps we must ask ourselves, as we join electronic communities and shopping sprees, what remains of the relationship between our bodies and the material space they continue to occupy?

Steve Erickson, an American writer who has lived most of his life in and around Los Angeles, is best known perhaps for his series of what have been labeled post-apocalyptic novels, though the nature of the catastrophe remains ambiguous. From *Days Between Stations* (1985) to *Amnesiascope* (1996) to his most-recent *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, Erickson’s works combine dream-like elements set in an environment of uncertainty and radically shifting temporal and spatial registers, in order to evoke not only millenial anxiety but more specifically the crisis of memory and individual identity. Often called a successor to Pynchon (who also blurbs his books), Erickson is no less tied to the generation of cyberpunk writers at least by virtue of the fact that he was first published by the same San Francisco press that released the early works of cyber-masters like Bruce Sterling and William Gibson. And his surreal, fluid landscapes suggest a world no less transformed by media at the end of the century, where memory is not the trove of authentic experience, but rather, in the absence of context or a unified consciousness, is constructed by the technological sources which inform our waking life and dream states. A description Erickson gives of his relationship to his own past is paradigmatic perhaps of the condition of uncertainty he seeks to evoke with his novels -- and it is a passage that could just as well have been drawn from the interior monologue of one of his fictional characters as from the interview with Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi in which he speaks about the problem himself:

> "I’m sure the way my narratives work so disjunctively has a lot to do with growing up in Los Angeles, watching the landscape change constantly. I grew up in the San Fernando Valley in the 1950s, before it became the perfect metaphor for modern American suburbia. My neighborhood was very rural--there were ranches and horses and orchards and strange white mansions standing alone out on open plains. We moved into a tract house in one of those neighborhoods that were springing up all over the L.A. suburbs, and then within ten years the neighborhood was gone -- the dust and horses and orchards and eucalyptus trees that had totally disappeared and were replaced by lawns and pools and malls were all finally replaced by a freeway. Later I went back to see the house where I grew up and the house was gone but the swimming pool was still there, along with my next-door neighbor’s house -- the new freeway had just missed it. So there you had the ultimate symbol of my relationship to my childhood -- only part of it was still there at all, this patch of blue shimmering in the twilight, and it was claimed by the next-door neighbor’s chainlink fence, while everything else seemed like a dream. The point is that while I was growing up, this kind of radical change simply was part of my experience of the way things operated. And these metamorphoses weren’t occurring just on a year-by-year basis but day by day, until by the time I was a teenager there was literally nothing around me to connect me with what I had known as a child. Later when I went to Europe, at the age of twenty, where I found myself surrounded by buildings and streets that hadn’t changed for hundreds of years, I recognized that this acceleration of time and physical change was unusual. That’s when I realized what a truly peculiar place Los Angeles is."[2]

If there is nothing around to connect one with what one had known as a child, if that world has so thoroughly disappeared that nothing remains of the past, this not only obliterates the possibility of memory but further engages a systematic crisis of identity. And so, it is perhaps not at all surprising, that in Erickson’s first published novel, *Days Between Stations*, the male protagonist, Michel (or Adrien? a question left deliberately ambiguous by the novel), wakes up in a state of amnesia so total

that he not only does not know where he is but has lost any sense of who he is -- his identity is entirely blotted out. There is one teasing remainder, however, for he finds one clue beside his bed -- a book titled *Les grands auteurs du cinéma* -- but as we well know, not only is the period of the 'grands auteurs' over but also the power of that medium to serve as training ground in this new world. The novel may foreground this early twentieth century technology - there are no video cameras, no computers, no electronic communication -- but only to portray the conditions of its loss and, along with it, the great city spaces in which it was developed.

The novel traces a search in two directions from the beginning and end of the century, the quest of two men and two films. Adolphe, raised in a Parisian brothel at the turn of the century, will be drawn to film, as Benjamin could have told him, because it mimics the fragmented nature of his experience as the bombs fell around him during the first World War. In filming his doomed masterpiece, *La Mort de Marat*, he will maintain that filming the strict reality of the material world will be paradoxically less real -- and therefore, his efforts to create a film which is fully real will begin to affect the crumbling consensus reality of the film set itself. Here the novel suggests that experience was already a surface effect best rendered by the flat screen. Meanwhile Michel/Adrien, possibly Adolphe's grandson, will seek to restore his identity from the fragments of a short reel of a student film that he may possibly have shot and starred in himself. In the grand epic, one hopes to find the story of the twentieth century and in the modern short film the story of an individual -- and although both contain the figure of a woman who seems to provide the tantalizing link, any wished-for unity is left an open question as the novel pursues the lost time and space of the intervening decades.

The terrain of the novel is constantly in flux -- from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and the Kansas plains, to Paris, Venice, and a forgotten village on the French coast. But something is inherently wrong with these physical spaces in that their coordinates are unfixed from both space and time. In the opening pages, we are directed to Pauline Boulevard, a street in San Francisco that does not exist on any maps, directories or atlases of the city, and like Erickson's own childhood home, will totally disappear as both a physical location and a mental recollection in the memory of the city's inhabitants. Los Angeles is portrayed as a city under the throes of some unnamed catastrophe: a city with no clocks, interrupted by power outages and the total breakdown of travel, gradually buried by a series of sandstorms -- in other words, the dream-factory itself is obliterated. Meanwhile, Paris is in the grips of a deep freeze, where the inhabitants have no choice but to light bonfires onto which are heaped all combustible materials including architectural structures, furniture and, of course, their own diaries and family portraits. And finally, Venice that already labyrinthine city is now made impossible to navigate by a fog in which both the city's inhabitants and a group of bicycle racers are lost in a scene that reproduces that futile search for origins and destinations that constitutes the novel as a whole. In the totality of the illusion of these urban spaces, the territory is thus both more fluid and more constrained, suggesting the breakdown of the Modern city which implodes into its own decrepitude.

The novel culminates in the scene from which its title is drawn, where the protagonist, Michel, experiences a train ride without destination and outside of time, hurtling forward though never leaving its departure point, as the outtakes of his past flash through the windows of the train. "What is the importance of placing a memory? [...] Why spend that much time trying to find the exact geographic and temporal latitudes and longitudes of the things we remember."[3] The inability to map the space is concurrently his inability to map his position within it. The reader glimpses only local places -- an apartment at the top of a hidden staircase in a street cut off from traffic, a small secret room within a brothel that can be found on no Parisian street, a shelter under a bridge around which the rest of Venice has vanished -- the places of outcasts, the lost, those searching. One is reminded of Fredric Jameson's recognition of our "Need for Maps", for "the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves."[4] The inability to map the urban space, however, is not only a function of the

psychological malaise of the individual but rather a component of a larger problem, namely the inability to position oneself within the decentralized communication networks of capitalism -- that is, the real time, virtual world.

Footnotes

[1] Cf. Paul Virilio; Sylvère Lotringer (Ed.): *Politics of the Very Worst. An Interview by Philippe Petit*. New York: Semiotext(e) 1999. Also, *L'Espace Critique and La vitesse de libération* [*Open Sky*].

[2] Larry McCaffery and Takayuki Tatsumi: An Interview with Steve Erickson. In: Contemporary Literature 38:3 (1997) 414.

[3] Steve Erickson: *Days Between Stations* New York: Henry Holt 1985.

[4] Fredric Jameson: Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. In: New Left Review 146 (July-August 1984) 89.

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