

TIME-SPACE AND THE GLOBAL NETWORK OF VIRTUALLY CONTROLLED AMBIGUITY IN WILLIAM GIBSON'S BIGEND TRILOGY

The global capitalist Empire shuns divisions; “[i]t is thwarted by barriers and exclusions [...] [and] thrives instead by including always more within its sphere” (Hardt, Negri, 2000, 190). By substituting the imperial dialectic of the inside and the outside with its politics of inclusion, Empire strengthens its sovereignty and ensures the smooth and efficient functioning of the capitalist market. The consequences of this substitution reach, however, far beyond the spheres of global power relations and economy, and, to quote from Jaak Tomberg, “can also be elevated to a general level of philosophical or cultural-theoretical thought” (Tomberg, 2013, 274). As Tomberg argues in “On the ‘Double Vision,’” as a result of Empire’s tendency to “incessant internalization [...] most of the conceptual categories that were earlier perceived as opposites (on the inside-outside axis) [...] enter a ‘zone of indiscernibility’” (Tomberg, 2013, 274) (the term Tomberg borrows from Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (1995)). Within this (postmodern) zone, the clear-cut distinctions between such previously binary opposites as right and wrong, nature and artificiality, reality and fiction, etc., blur and even disappear.

In this article, I focus on the multiple ways in which in the so-called Bigend Trilogy (*Pattern Recognition* (2003), *Spook Country* (2007), *Zero History* (2010)) an American-Canadian writer William Gibson examines the notion of indiscernibility with reference to the categories of time and, especially, space. In the trilogy, I argue, Gibson novelizes time-space compression and demonstrates that the post-compression change in the experiencing and representation of the world which David Harvey identifies in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Harvey, 1989, 240) stems from the blurring of the opposition between conceptual categories pertaining to the understanding of time and space, i.e. the present and the future, the physical and virtual realities. The acceleration in the experiencing of time, Gibson suggests, makes the present as unpredictable as the future; following IT and digital developments, the virtual becomes indiscernible from the physical reality.

Throughout the Bigend Trilogy, Gibson chronicles the manifestations of both the displacement of the future by the present moment, and the infusion of reality by the virtual world. Arguing in favor of “a phase change” (Konstantinou, 2009, 80) in the experiencing of reality, in the trilogy Gibson shows how in the world of simultaneity and volatility it is no longer possible to imagine a future. All there is, Gibson insists, is the present. In order to demonstrate late capi-

talist changes in the perception and experiencing of space, Gibson elaborates on the process of the internalization of technology, and, using the example of art, introduces the concept of “the everting of cyberspace.” In late capitalism, Gibson argues, as cyberspace permeates the boundaries of the physical world, the opposition between the real and the virtual is replaced with “mixed” or “augmented reality” (Raulerson, 2010, 111). Though cyberspace has not yet fully everted, Gibson demonstrates in the Bigend Trilogy, it has already contributed to the emergence of what Manuel Castells calls “the culture of real virtuality” (Castells, 2010, xxxi). Real virtuality changes Gibson’s characters’ perception of the world, their sense of belonging, as well as the way they define who they are. The IT network which grounds real virtuality acts not only as a tool the characters use to interpret and experience reality (whether to their benefit or not is for them and the readers to decide) but also as the basis for the late capitalist “society of control” (Deleuze, 1995, 174). Acting as a powerful system of surveillance, the network allows those in power, “them,” to infiltrate the characters’ everyday, thus invalidating concepts as freedom and private space.

TIME FLIES

In the Bigend Trilogy, the future is now; due to advancements in information and communication technology (ICT), the characters no longer experience time as a gradually unveiling sequence, but rather as a stream or flow of moments, fleeting and thus almost simultaneous. As the velocity of the passing of time “collapse[s] [...] the future into the over-accelerated [...] present” (Tomberg, 2013, 266), the characters, just like the inhabitants of contemporaneity, are forced to replace predictions with careful reading of the current moment.

Following time-space compression, Lee Konstantinou argues, the way people interpret reality “undergo[es] something like a phase change, moving from large, discrete ‘Events’ to a barrage of small, complexly interconnected events or ‘total flow’” (Konstantinou, 2009, 80). In the Bigend Trilogy, Gibson elaborates on the consequences of the change Konstantinou describes. The absence of large grounding events, Gibson argues in the trilogy, coupled with the changeability and fleetness of “total flow” hinder any attempts at the anticipation of the future. “We have no idea, now,” Hubertus Bigend says in *Pattern Recognition*, “of who or what the inhabitants of our future might be. In that sense, we have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which ‘now’ was of some greater duration” (Gibson, 2003, 57). The volatility of the present, Bigend argues, is too rampant for it to ground anything past the “now” (and, sometimes, even it). Lacking in proper foundation, Gibson’s characters grapple with the everyday:

in addition to rarely making plans and rather acting instinctively — “There are times,” Cayce says, “when you can only take the next step. And then another” (Gibson, 2003, 119), the characters live in constant “time-trouble,” or *Zeitnot*, always pressed to “get up to speed” (Gibson, 2003, 196). Over time [sic!], the characters learn to navigate the present moment by, as Tomberg poignantly surmises, supplanting “empirical mechanisms of future-oriented expectations” with “mechanisms of present-oriented recognition” (Tomberg, 2013, 265), a strategy Gibson seems to be recommending also to his readers.

SPACING OUT(WARDS)

In the Bigend Trilogy, the present accelerates to the point where it replaces the future as the measure of unpredictability. Still, as Manuel Castells reminds in *The Rise of the Network Society*, in late capitalism it is “space [that] organizes time” (Castells, 2010, 407). Hence, the acceleration of the present and its assumption of the form of total flow directly correspond to recent changes in the experiencing of space. The changes, Gibson suggests in the Bigend Trilogy, include the internalization of technology (especially the ICT) into the fabric of the everyday, and the consequent effacing of the boundary between the physical world and virtual reality.

The Bigend Trilogy is pervaded by state-of-the-art technology. This technology, Gibson argues, is far from alienating; on the contrary, due to its prevalence it becomes an integral part of the characters’ everyday. The characters in the Bigend Trilogy rely on computers, mobile devices, and specialized software; they navigate highly technologized environments and make frequent references to cyberspace and virtual reality. The ubiquity of technology has a familiarizing effect; as Jaak Tomberg rightly notices, in the trilogy “the high-tech scientific developments of contemporary late-capitalist culture [...] become so smoothly and thoroughly integrated into [the characters’] [...] understanding of the everyday environment” that their presence becomes “near-natural and unnoticeable” (Tomberg, 2013, 277). The integration of technology into the fabric of the everyday results in it losing its status as a figure of cognitive estrangement. No longer perceived as “the other,” technology slowly comes within what Darko Suvin calls the “implied [...] norm[s] of reality” (Suvin, 1979, 64).

Gibson analyzes the (spatial) consequences of the de-estrangement of technology in *Spook Country*. In the novel, Gibson examines a phenomenon which he first identifies in *Pattern Recognition* and which he refers to as “the everting of cyberspace.” Using the examples of artistic practices of eeparespatial tagging and locative art, Gibson demonstrates that in late capitalism technology permits for the colonization of the real world by virtual reality. What is more, Gibson

seems to be arguing in the trilogy, if the colonization continues, it might lead towards the ultimate amalgamation of the two realms.

In *Spook Country*, Gibson defines the everting of cyberspace as a process whereupon the online and virtual realities “manifest physically in the world” (Gibson, 2007, 198). The process is a direct result of the familiarization of technology; once technology is accepted as part of reality, Gibson argues, the virtual environments it mediates begin to permeate the boundaries of the physical world and lay claim to realness. Gibson examines the mechanism of such permeation on the example of art. Both eeparespatial tagging and locative art rely on the overlaying of the physical world with a virtual dimension. Although the environments which the artistic practices project can be accessed only with the right equipment, on the level of reception they seem almost indiscernible from reality.

Eeparespatial tagging entails layering everyday objects with hyperspatially tagged information or personalized narrative: as one of the characters, Odile, says in *Spook Country*, “[o]ne simple water glass [can] ha[ve] twenty tags” (Gibson, 2007, 131), depending on the relevance it bears to the person tagging. The mechanics of locative art are similar. As Steven Shaviro writes in “Hypermediated Realism,” locative art consists of real-life “site-specific multimedia installations that only exist virtually, and that [just like the eeparespatial tags] can [...] be accessed by wearing a virtual-reality helmet with a WiFi connection” (Shaviro, 2007, 16); once a person puts on a helmet, Shaviro explains, they are able to see “spectral 3D images (bodies, furniture, architecture) overlaying actual physical locations” (Shaviro, 2007, 16). Both eeparespatial tagging and locative art involve the virtual overwriting of reality; they aim to artistically augment the essence of things and locations by a virtual dimension. Despite their virtuality, both the “annotated environments” (Gibson, 2007, 131) created through eeparespatial tagging and the images projected by means of locative art frequently seem almost real and generate a cognitive and/or emotional response of the same or even greater intensity than that prompted by real-life objects, locations, etc.

As Gibson stipulates in an interview with Mary Ann Gwinn, the everting of cyberspace, of which eeparespatial tagging and locative art are examples, involves “turning virtual reality outward, into the real world” (Gwinn, 2014, 179). Leading to the augmentation of physical reality, the process introduces a change in the character, as well as the perception and ontological status of (virtual) reality. In *Spook Country*, just as technology is no longer “the other,” the virtual is no longer an extremity on the real-virtual axis. Rather than function as “a place ‘over there’” (Seegert, 2010, 40), it becomes a new dimension of reality. As a result, the once binary opposition between the real and the virtual is replaced by what Joshua Thomas Raulerson calls “augmented” or “mixed reality.” According to Gibson, this change in the character of reality is a step towards

a new ontological perspective, one involving the ultimate effacing of the distinction between two previously separable realms of realness and virtuality. “My guess,” Gibson says, as quoted by Lev Grossman, “has always been that the thing our great-grandchildren will find quaintest about us is that we made the distinction between here and the Internet [...] ‘Here,’” he adds, is being “colonized by what used to be the other place” (Grossman, 2010). In *Spook Country*, Gibson uses a conversation between Hollis and Bobby Chombo to speculate about the end result of this colonization, that is the final eversion of cyberspace and the amalgamation of mixed reality. “[O]nce it everts,” Bobby Chombo says referring to cyberspace, “then there isn’t any cyberspace, is there? There never was, if you want to look at it that way. It was a way we had of looking where we were headed, a direction. [...] One day [...] we’ll have internalized the interface. It’ll have evolved to the point where we forget about it” (Gibson, 2007, 64-65). The eversion of cyberspace, Gibson seems to suggest, will involve its complete equation with reality. It will result from the final internalization and de-estrangement of technology and will retroactively nullify the artificial distinction between the real and the virtual. Thus, mixed reality will amalgamate, and cyberspace will no longer be an alternative, but will become reality.

INSIDE REAL VIRTUALITY

In *Spook Country*, Gibson anticipates the eversion of cyberspace and the consequent amalgamation of mixed reality. While still a process in progress, in the Bigend Trilogy, the everting of cyberspace is already far advanced. It is facilitated by the ubiquity of (especially digital) media, and it manifests in the emergence of a new type of culture, “the culture of real virtuality.” In the culture of real virtuality, Manuel Castells argues, “digitized networks [...] become so inclusive of all cultural expressions and personal experiences that they [...] [make] virtuality a fundamental dimension of [...] reality” (Castells, 2010, xxxi). In the Bigend Trilogy, Gibson illustrates the influence of the culture of real virtuality as threefold, affecting not only people’s perception, but also their sense of belonging, and individuation (identity formation).

The culture of real virtuality, Gibson argues in the Bigend Trilogy, increases the subjectivity of people’s perception and experience of reality, and as a result disjoins the world into metaphorical “channels.” In *Spook Country*, Bobby Chombo predicts that if locative art spread and became the norm, “[t]he world [...] [people] walk around in would be channels” (Gibson, 2007, 64). While far from literal, in the Bigend Trilogy, the “channeling” of reality is already ongoing. The multiplicity of options media and technology offer enable not only such advanced activity as annotation or locative art but also everyday subjective overwrites of reality in the form of blog entries, vlogs, social media comments, uploaded video recordings, etc. Disseminated virally, such

overwrites assume the role of “channels” which people cruise and use as interpretative lenses on reality. The result, to use Dave Itzkoff’s term, is “a disjointed world,” where everything is a matter of perception and “where anyone can experience reality as he chooses to see it, and no two people’s observations of the same place or event need coincide in any way” (Itzkoff, 2007).

The ease with which the characters in the Bigend Trilogy switch between different channels of perception corresponds to a general sense of familiarity Gibson’s characters feel when confronted with spaces of real virtuality. In the culture of real virtuality, Gibson demonstrates, digitized spaces and virtual communities tend to replace real locations and social groups in anchoring people’s sense of belonging. In the trilogy, this trend is most visible on the example of the Fetish:Footage:Forum, which one of Gibson’s main characters, Cayce, frequently visits in *Pattern Recognition*. For Cayce the forum is first and foremost a community where she forms her most important social bonds. Cayce compares the forum to “a friend’s living room” (Gibson, 2003, 3); entering it she “automatically scan[s] titles of the posts and names of posters in the newer threads, looking for friends, enemies, news” (Gibson, 2003, 4). What is more, for Cayce, who tends to live out of a suitcase, the forum provides an equivalent of domesticity. “It is a way now,” Cayce reflects in *Pattern Recognition* “approximately, of being at home. The forum has become one of the most consistent places in her life, like a familiar cafe that exists somehow outside of geography and beyond time zones” (Gibson, 2003, 4). Thus, despite its status as a mere “simulator of proximity” (Virilio, 2002, 41), a medium designed to replace or feign face-to-face communication, the Fetish:Footage:Forum allows Cayce to both forge strong ties (e.g. find her life partner) and find permanence in her otherwise chaotic everyday.

Apart from altering people’s perception of the world and enabling them to familiarize or even domesticate virtual spaces, the culture of real virtuality also affects Gibson’s characters’ and, by metaphorical extension, contemporary people’s identity formation. To quote from Ben Jarvis, in the Bigend Trilogy, “identity protocols are wedded to information technology: internet search engines, e-mail and text messaging, social networking and chat forums” (Jarvis, 2012, 239); people are only to the extent and in the manner they function online. In *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce’s unusual abilities can be identified through a simple Google search. In *Zero History*, in turn, Milgrim is able to keep a low profile only by having his past erased not only from his memory but most importantly from all online data aggregators — “[y]ou don’t seem to have left much of a trail, Mr. Milgrim. [...] Zero History history, as far as ChoicePoint is concerned” (Gibson, 2010, 83-84). The more active a character is in the spaces of real virtuality, the more visible a virtual trail they leave; the lack of such trail amounts to the character having “zero history” and thus being virtually unidentifiable (which, however, happens really rarely).

NETWORKED CONTROL

Although in the Bigend Trilogy the everting of cyberspace is still a process in progress, virtuality already pervades various spheres of Gibson's characters' lives. What makes this pervasion possible is the digital network real virtuality rests upon. The global, de-centered IT network mediates people's experience of the world, their social connections, and individuation. It is, however, exactly the pervasiveness and mediative status of the network that also open it to abuse, making it a powerful tool for control and manipulation. Thus, in the Bigend Trilogy, Gibson demonstrates the clearly menacing consequences of the infusion of reality by technology and the virtual. By prioritizing communication and connectedness, Gibson illustrates, the global IT network, with all its technological and virtual dimensions, can not only augment people's experience of the world, but also serve to violate their privacy and thus to considerably curb their freedom.

In the Bigend Trilogy, the global IT network serves as a powerful apparatus of surveillance. It provides the basis for what in *Negotiations* Gilles Deleuze calls the "society of control" (Deleuze, 1995, 174). In *Negotiations*, Deleuze contrast the late capitalist society of control with the disciplinary society of the late 19th and early 20th century. According to Deleuze, unlike the disciplinary society, which, as Michael Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), was based on the idea of panopticism — constant visibility enforced within a range of confined spaces, ranging from prisons and army, through factories, shops, to schools and hospitals — the late capitalist society of control, "no longer operate[s] by confining people, but through continuous control and instant communication" (Deleuze, 1995, 174). Whereas panoptic structures were idiosyncratic in their disciplinarian gaze and operations, and remained detached from one another, surveilling systems of the society of control form one interconnected and dynamic network. This network, to quote from Steven Shaviro, "has no single privileged point of reference. [Its] [...] apparatus of surveillance is fragmented, multiplied, and widely distributed. Like God [...] its center is everywhere, and its circumference nowhere" (Shaviro, 2003, 36).

The godlike nature of the surveillance network Gibson describes in the Bigend Trilogy (i.e. its omnipresence and limitlessness) stems from its structure and multifocality. Using its subnetworks' points of intersection, the network promotes the exchange of data and surveillance between seemingly unconnected fields; managed by unspecified but powerful "them," the network functions as a diffused controlling system. In the trilogy, the network of surveillance consists of numerous subnetworks, each of which supports the circulation of flows pertaining to a specific sphere of life or field of activity. When seemingly divergent flows intersect, they create what David L. Ulin calls "ganglia," the nodes of power, "where unlikely connections may arise" (Ulin, 2010) Ganglia provide the possibility of both instant exchange of strategic intelligence

(data, imaging), which subnetworks gather while monitoring their flows, and mutual infusion by unrelated subnetworks, e.g. organized crime, advertising and art (*Pattern Recognition*, *Spook Country*), fashion and the military (*Zero History*). Together, the subnetworks create an all-encompassing and ever-expanding system of control and surveillance, in which power is exercised by the so-called “them,” those who find, or more often position themselves at the intersection of the greatest number flows. Who “they” are remains unspecified. When in a conversation with Hollis Garreth tries to explain who controls the ganglia he admits that “[a]nswering that would require a very woolly discussion of what ‘they’ can mean. [...] [I]t’s literally impossible to say who’s doing it. It’s enough to say it’s being done” (Gibson, 2010, 346). In addition to being elusive and unspecified in their identity — They Are that they Are, to paraphrase Exodus 3:14, “they” function in collusion, unofficially supporting each other’s interests: “there’s [...] a gentlemen’s agreement,” Garreth tells Hollis, ‘What gentlemen?’ ‘Your usual suspects. The industry, the government, that lucrative sector [...] that might be either, or both.’” (Gibson, 2010, 302).

All flows, whether concrete (i.e. of goods, people) or abstract (i.e. of capital, information), depend (either directly or indirectly) on human activity. Control of flows requires the monitoring of everyone involved. Thus, in the Bigend Trilogy, those privy to the “gentlemen’s agreement” surveil both the real world and cyberspace in order to keep track of all potential human assets. Although this surveillance is secret, it is taken for granted, for, to quote from Tom Henthorne, in the globalized “post 9-11 America,” Gibson describes, “people [...] come to assume that their every action, their every word, is being recorded if not observed” (Henthorne, 2011, 112). In the trilogy, examples of surveillance abound. In *Spook Country*, for instance, Milgrim is observed by Brown, who, while being himself observed by the CIA, constantly observes a Cuban crime family. Hollis, in turn, is being monitored by Bigend who has a GPS tracker installed on her car and a scrambler placed in her phone, paradoxically under the pretext of ensuring her messages are encoded and thus not intercepted by third party. Ample surveillance is also exercised online. In *Pattern Recognition*, the characters talk about Echelon, a special analysis program government agencies use to scan online traffic (Gibson, 2003, 244), Dorotea Benedetti infiltrates the Fetish:Footage:Forum Cayce frequents, and Russian mob, having traced Cayce via her post’s internet service provider, penetrate her apartment and install devices to monitor her e-mails and chat activity. While in the trilogy observers take great care to keep a low profile and raise no suspicions, the observed are well-aware of the possibility of their privacy being breached; sometimes they even stare back (Shaviro, 2003, 31). Thus, in *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce realizes that no matter how homely it feels, the Fetish:Footage:Forum is full of as many friends as enemies: “[t]he site, Cayce admits to herself, “had come to feel like a second home, but she’d always known that it was also

a fishbowl; it felt like a friend's living room, but it was a sort of text-based broadcast, available in its entirety to anyone who cared to access it (Gibson, 2003, 65). In *Zero History*, Hollis intentionally avoids learning the name of the Hounds maker, in order to both maintain plausible deniability, and avoid unknowingly divulging any information to Bigend. Finally, in *Spook Country*, aware of being watched, the Cubans retaliate by feeding their observers false information stored in an intentionally dropped iPod. In the Bigend Trilogy, Gibson seems to suggest, privacy is a matter not of exclusivity, either it is or it is not, but of degree. As Bigend concludes in *Spook Country*, nothing is “really private;” things can be only “more private than... not” (Gibson, 2007, 266).

CONCLUSION

All three Bigend novels explore the present moment. All three, as well, having as their author a science-fiction writer, engage in an ideological dialogue with the reality they project. The technologization of the present and its consequent acquisition of futuristic qualities, William Gibson argues in the trilogy, are the direct effect of the late-20th and early 21st-century restructuring of capitalism and the globalizing processes which accompanied it. Whether people realize it or not, Gibson shows on the example of his characters, the changes the present undergoes directly influence the quality of people's lives; as time ceases to be sequential and as cyberspace everts people's experience of the world augments, however ambiguously.

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