

Total Drift: Theses on Urban Space-Times

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Abstract

The coordinates of Global “North” and “South” lose their meaning under conditions of full dislocation of geopolitical tectonic plates. In Bagdad, París, Río, New Orleans, North and South coexist in the same territories. Cities and even whole nations may shift in the Earth's crust from one day to the next. Detroit, Greece and Spain used to be in the “North” and are now in the “South”. Shifts and cross-hatching are not limited to space, but also occur along temporal planes -unsuspected geometries link past, present and future forms of dispossession and resistance. In fact, in the rhizomatic spacetime of our *synchrony-city* the past is never dead, it's not even past; and the future is always already here, only unevenly distributed. As we become Blacks of Different Colours, in a whole neoliberal constellation of new, unevenly disempowered subjectivities of multiple kinds, our hope is symbolised precisely by the Black Jacobins who overcame Homo Sacer's vulnerability and revolted in Haiti.

Key Words: Global North/ South, capitalism, rhizomatic spacetime, neoliberal subjectivities, cross-hatching, synchrony-city, resistance, Black Jacobins

The past is never dead. It's not even past
W. Faulkner

The future is already here. Only it's unevenly distributed
W. Gibson

I

Total Magnetic Drift

Through the sort of *lapsus linguae* that may sometimes lead to serendipitous discoveries, somebody changed our group's name by mistake, transmuting *Magnetic Declination*¹ -which alludes to the discrepancy between geographic and magnetic North- into *Magnetic Derivation* -which is in itself an example of semantic drift or *dérive*, if not of conceptual derivation through *magnetism* between two terms. Now, in actual fact, the orientation of Earth's magnetic field is known to have reversed many times over the course of the planet's history, with magnetic north becoming magnetic south and vice versa. These geomagnetic reversals, in combination with catastrophic alterations in tectonic plates and the planet's rotational axis, leading to shifts in the location of the geographical poles, may have completely reshuffled what we now call North and South on numerous occasions. Perhaps in our days we are no longer in a period of simple uncertainty, of mismatch or “declination” between two Norths, or between two concepts of North, but rather in a phase of complete geopolitical dislocation. How can we tell North from South anymore? Let's forget the compass and the maps; let's take to the streets and smell the scents of the air, bringing true signs of the places the wind is blowing from. Some quarters in New Orleans -or in Bagdad, or Paris, or Rio- belong to the North while others are sheer South. Any given neighbourhood, any particular street anywhere in the world may shift from being

Northern to being Southern almost from one day to the next, reformatting buildings and lives in the style of the nightly retuning of cityscapes in Alex Proyas' *Dark City* (1997); a film that was anterior and yet, arguably, pre-emptively superior to *The Matrix*. Whole cities may suddenly vanish and reappear in some other continent, much farther to the North or to the South: the Northward shift is sometimes called the "Bilbao effect"; the Southward move may be termed the "Detroit effect". Entire countries may be affected too: Greece and Spain used to be quite *northerly*, and have now become *southerly* -their location upon the Earth's crust has been readjusted. This is precisely the subject of Roland Emmerich's grossly underrated *2012* (2009), which far from being just another disaster blockbuster as is widely believed, is actually a crypto-political essay: with accelerated tectonics modelled after the meltdown of financial markets rather than actual geology, Emmerich displaces and reshapes the continents over the face of the Earth in a matter of hours, amid mega-tsunamis, globe-spanning quakes and huge volcanic eruptions. The 1% elite -whom we had not yet learned to call by that name-take refuge in giant, secretly built arkships to which the minimum admission fee is one million Euros. Among the European leaders in one of the arkships there is a German chancellor who looks unmistakably like Angela Merkel. After the catastrophe, the South Pole is now in Wisconsin, and the old/new masters of the world and their lackeys set out to repopulate the Earth, beginning with a new settlement in former South Africa. The Eurozone Crisis erupted barely a year after the film was released.

II

The Past is not Past

Harvard Business School researcher Caitlin Rosenthal had set out to study business practices in the early 1800s and their connection with modern management techniques. To her dismay, she made a startling discovery that took her away from the mythology of "free" markets and landed her right in the middle of the harsh reality of slave plantations. While going through the meticulous records and account books kept by slave owners, she found a parade of innovations in business management -whether in a pioneering, embryonic form, or as fully developed practices- that she had assumed to be typical of today's Capitalism². Now, this is epistemologically akin to the paradigm shift in Palaeontology that completely revolutionised our vision of dinosaurs: from cold-blooded, slow-moving, dim-witted reptiles, to warm-blooded, avian-like, gracefully lethal veloci-raptors -the kind of perfect killing machines that only the random occurrence of an asteroid collision could wipe from the Earth. Much in the same fashion, far from harbouring the archaic remnants of an obsolete system of exploitation, slave plantations were harbingers of sheer modernity, true avant-garde laboratories of advanced Capitalism where the management tool-kit and the productivity-enhancing strategies taught at business schools today were first being developed. After having decayed during the Middle Ages, Slavery and Imperialism were re-invented and re-tooled by Capitalism within the crucible of coloniality and -like dinosaur DNA in today's birds- their genome is still there today, ready to be recombined and redeployed in a myriad ways in Neoliberalism's present day genotype. Karl Marx understood this nexus and kept a correspondence with Abraham Lincoln through common friends³. *The past is never dead. It's not even past.* Around 1830, slave owners were already resorting to sophisticated financial innovations to fund their operations. They set up banks to import

capital, and then they used their slaves (whose worth as assets was calculated on the basis of their productivity, yielding either whole or fractional numbers of a measurement unit called *hand*) as collateral for credits, effectively mortgaging them. The mortgages were then subsequently securitised into bonds that could be traded in the derivatives markets throughout the world's financial centres. Thanks to bond speculation in London, Amsterdam or Paris, securitization-inflated prices resulted in slave-asset bubbles. One of the most wildly successful firms in this trade was a bank founded in Alabama. Its name was Lehman Brothers⁴, and 180 years later, at the time of the writing of this text, a former CEO of its European branch is a minister in Spain's cabinet⁵.

III

Unevenly Distributed Future

Lenin, Einstein, Gandhi, Heisenberg, Hitler, Picasso, Mussolini. They were there already. Around 1910, when most of the world was still asleep, the force fields that were to shape the 20th Century were already there, visible for those who could put the pieces of the puzzle together. Virginia Woolf proved to be one of the prescient few who were able to see that -as she famously put it, in a widely misunderstood statement- "on or about December 1910 human *character* [had] changed". We must likewise understand our future not as the as-yet-to-come [French *avenir*; Spanish *porvenir*], but as a force that is already here, though unevenly distributed in scattered shards that an archaeology of our tomorrows must piece together⁶. In Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium* (2013), mid-22nd Century humankind is split into sharply distinct biopolitical categories: most people endure a hardscrabble existence in the overpopulated waste-dump that Earth has become, while the ultra-rich 0.001% dwell in a luxury orbital enclave, where advanced health-care technology keeps them forever young and fit. Actually, they are nearly immortal and they literally live in the heavens. Theodor Adorno once said that the truth of psychoanalysis resided in its exaggerations. By the same token, the grossly oversimplified and literalised portrait of class division in *Elysium* has the virtue of cutting through the chit-chat of ideology and affording us a glimpse into the brutally simple, naked truth of Neoliberalism's ultimate goal as a world-historical project of class domination that seeks to transmute the Master/ Slave dialectic into something closer to the biological schism between gods and mortals. The temporality of this future is not in the as-yet-to-come but in the already-here. The film's Earth-bound scenes were shot in a dump in the Iztapalapa district on the outskirts of Mexico City; the overall design of the space habitat is based on the blueprints for the Stanford Torus, a concept for a massive ring-shaped space station first proposed in 1975⁷; and some of the buildings that can be seen within the habitat itself exist right here in the present day: for example, *Elysium*'s "Marine Opera House" is actually Santiago Calatrava's City of Arts and Sciences in Valencia⁸. The film's most lasting visual impact might perhaps reside precisely in its ability to make it impossible for us to continue to see these actually existing cityscapes and built spaces in the same light. They are not what they are -they are what they will be. All those features in the outlines of Calatrava's landmark buildings that made us discern the bleached carcasses of dinosaurs rotting in the sun acquire now a contrary signification: they are quite clearly the growing exo-skeletons of beasts from the future, gradually materialising before our eyes; first the spine, then the muscles, then the

nervous system, then a whole political system. Take to the streets again; if you squint and look real hard you'll see all around you the splinters of institutional architectures coming into existence, embryonic shapes of subhuman or post-human existence.

IV

Sinchronycity= Synchrony City

If the past is not truly past because it has never actually ceased to pass, and the future is not the time that is as-yet-to-come but is always already here, then there is no present either -not in the sense of an a priori self-identical *pre-essence* that is entirely co-eval or co-terminous with itself. No such thing will you ever find whether outside or inside yourself [for you are also an assemblage]. There is no present: there is a here-and-now; actually there are many (each a frame as Einstein knew), but they are constituted by the criss-crossing fragments of memories, amnesias, regrets, repressions and narrative voices you used to call "the past", and the desires, the fears, the plans and promises you called "future". The present is nothing but the shadows of all these "pasts" and "futures" and the constellations they make. Ontology is actually hauntology⁹, inside and outside of you (*je est un autre*).

Take to streets and look real hard again. Contrary to its own ideological illusions, Capitalism is not a Newtonian, anisotropic space. What goes by the names of North and South is actually a set of spatial technologies of accumulation and dispossession that can be redeployed at any scale, on any coordinate on the map; in actual fact they can redraw the map itself, altering the metric and the geometry of space-time in economic and political terms: borders, barriers, distances and connectivity may be stretched or shrunk, they may harden into stone or melt into air. The cross-hatching of *norths* within the South, and *souths* within the North in the Neoliberal city is just one *dispositif* among many; any machinery of capitalist spatiality, anywhere in the world, is a mixed assemblage of southerly and northerly dynamics. The Frontex Program turns EU borders into liftable technologies outsourced to the shores of Senegal; and then racial-profiling at improvised police checkpoints may redeploy the frontier as *internalised*, homeland policing technique at a transport interchange *within* any European city. Armoured personnel carriers cross from Bagdad to the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. *L'Afrique se bat a Lavapiés (Madrid) et dans les banlieues parisiennes*. Brixton in London may be an extension of Afghan war theatres. Your city is both to the North and to the South of itself. That street-corner, that lamppost, are both in your city and in the shadow of another city (This is called *cross-hatching* in China Miéville's *The City and The City*, an essay in advanced Weird Studies and Urban Theory-Fiction)¹⁰.

Take to the streets and look real hard again. The past is not "what is past", and the future is not as-yet-to-come; multiple space-times coexist in fractal, rhizomatic and cross-hatched arrangements within the synchronicity of your *synchrony-City*, where the Here-spaces are not simple *here*, and the Now-time is so much more than just *now*. The lived experience of time under Capitalism is dominated by illusions of linear, progressive evolution (or as Walter Benjamin noted, by the eternal non-time epitomised by modern fashion, whose ceaselessly repetitive cycles pre-empt the emergence of the radical *novum*, the truly new); and yet, beyond the veil of ideology, the timelike structure of Capitalism is far more complex. Slavery and coloniality, for example, are not fixed at a point in a "past" that we have "left behind" us, but constitute modular, ever-available

instrumentalities within Capital's toolbox, assemblages whose machine parts can be retrofitted, recombined and redeployed in different modes at any given spot in capitalist space-time. Apartheid is reinvented in Palestine. Neoliberal business management reinvents productivity-enhancement strategies from slave plantations. This chrono-structure is not governed by an irrevocable "arrow of time" flowing in a linear, irreversible progression, but constitutes a superimposition of multiple temporal vectors.

And there is also the ever-open Now-time of Revolution (Benjamin's *Jetzt-Zeit*), a time-like dimension parallel to our own where the date is forever July 1789, or 1871, or May 1968, or May 2011, *parce que c'est le même combat*. An alternate world that from time to time intersects our own, and then seems to vanish for decades or centuries -but one day in a flash the fabric of time will burst open, and like the Mirror People in Borges' story, out of the depths of that shadow universe there will cross into our own all the bands of Bagaudae and Goliards and Diggers and Levellers and Cimarrons and Pirates and Sans-culottes and Black Jacobins and Communards and Guerrillas and Partisans- and they will become us, and remake everything forever.

V

Letter from a Black Jacobin

London, April 2014

Dear Julia

I have been going through the materials for the Z. Symposium, and I must say that although there are a few interesting things, the whole paradigm upon which they are based seems to me to be fundamentally outdated on a number of counts, and as a result, potentially rather useless and even counter-productive from the perspective of critical thought. Since I have not been able to find any online article with a relevant overview of the issues involved, I have decided to sketch here a few theses from my own theorisations (fragments from an article I am writing). I hope you find them useful- and if not convincing, at least thought-provoking:

1- The whole approach in the attached documents from the Symposium seemed to me to be fundamentally pre-Crisis, i.e. from a by-gone world where there were, on one side the "migrants" in all their fragile, vulnerable ontology, and on the other side the European (or "First World") "citizens", in their ontological plenitude as solid juridico-political subjects under the rule of law in a welfare state (État social et démocratique du droit). How very '90s! The polarities (in those days) were effectively -as is outlined in a diagram in one of the texts-, "the migrant-as-problem" vs "the migrant as wealth". The "migrant as problem" was the semantic core of New Extreme Right discourse (Front National, etc), and the "migrant as wealth", in turn, while seemingly unimpeachably "progressive", could easily drift semantically down the path that led in actual fact to either a) depoliticised, NGO-style, namby-pamby, kumbayá-style glamorisation of ethnical difference and identity, or b) the corporate discourse of "human resources". So the choice was that you could either side with the Neo-fascists, or the Neoliberals, or the NGOs (all post-political in different ways).

2- After the onset of the Crisis, this whole approach is no longer tenable -if it ever was. Especially in Southern Europe (and elsewhere as well), what we are witnessing is the growing precarization of whole sectors of the population as the constitution of the social-democratic state and the whole sphere of rights is eroded or dismantled (in the name of austerity, debt, security and the war on terror, etc). As Achille Mbembe magisterially puts it (in the interview that you sent us, Julia), what we are increasingly experiencing is the "devenir-nègre-du-monde"¹¹. It is increasingly meaningless and politically misleading to talk in terms of "migrants" vs "citizens", when in fact what we have is a whole constellation of new, unevenly disempowered subjectivities of multiple kinds, whose rights vis-à-vis the neo-liberal state and the new biopolitical networks of decentred governance have been deconstructed in a myriad different ways. The solid, ontologically substantial European subject as a strong juridico-political reality... Il n'existe pas! We are all going to be Blacks of Different Colours. This should be our new paradigm, and our new war cry.

3- Many of those who (rather uncritically) celebrated the death of the Nation-State with the advent of Globalization failed to see that the modern Nation-State was actually a three-fold structure, or rather the nexus of three social assemblages that have existed in one form or another throughout the history of humankind: territory, power, and populations (or land, authority and people in another vocabulary). The modern Nation-State stitched together these three components through the liberal-democratic constitutions and the rule of law as guarantee of rights. By blowing to pieces the Nation-State as nexus, neoliberal capitalism has not only dislocated the fixed correspondence between power and territory, it has also fundamentally liquidated the possibility of anchoring any of the elements in the triad to the other two -such that populations, power structures and territories can no longer be made to match one another in any stable, homogenous configuration. This means the death of rights. Subjects are precarious assemblages of ever-shrinking juridical entitlement, caught in biopolitical networks of debt and security ("l'homme endetté et sécurisé" that Negri and Lazzarato talk about)¹². The People as sovereign is thus dismantled through the deconstruction of the subjects that formed the People as constituent power -the ordinary people who together were "We, The People". As "populations", people are likewise deconstructed into a myriad deracinated ethnicities pitted against one another in striated urban spaces. And constituted Power in turn is no longer in the seat of Government, but unevenly scattered throughout unaccountable networks of managerial "governance", or in the capillary everyday-ness of communicative capitalism and other forms of exploitation. Territories are no longer fixed geographical continua, either, but mutable, splintered, labyrinthine juxtapositions of zones with internal and external walls, gated areas and no-go areas, extra-legal detention centres next to shopping malls, border controls in the middle of the inner cities, etc.

4- In this context, without any solid anchoring for rights, the basic fact about the human condition under Neoliberalism is that ANYBODY, fucking ANYBODY (yes, you too, Hypocrite lecteur, - mon semblable, - mon frère!) may become, from one day to the next, homo sacer -expendable, stateless, refugees or migrants. Anybody. This truth may still be hard to grasp from the cosy smugness of (soon to be extinct) middle-

class existence in Germany or Finland. But ask the young people in Greece or Spain, who are leaving their countries in droves and never expected to.

5- Existential security -the certainty that nothing bad is likely going to happen to you, that health, food, shelter, comfort and freedom are guaranteed for you and your kin- is disappearing for most of the population not included in the 1%. Life without existential security is life in fear -and as Roy Batty famously put it in Blade Runner, to live in fear is to be a slave. The life of a slave, in turn, as many anthropologists have pointed out, is a kind of non-life or social death. The life of the Walking Dead¹³.

6- "The anatomy of man explains the anatomy of the monkey", and not vice versa, Marx said in the Grundrisse¹⁴. Our condition is not (yet) slavery, but the anatomy of slavery is contained in the anatomy of current capitalism, and our fate within it.

7- We Are All Blacks of Different Colours.

8- Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Black Jacobins -that's our hope. Let us rise from the plantations of precariousness, unemployment, surveillance, incarceration and debt. Let us unite. Let us rise.

*Yours faithfully,
J.M.*

VI

The City and You.

Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind

William Wordsworth
To Toussaint L'Ouverture (1807)

At the time when Edgar Allan Poe was writing his poems and short stories, houses were the symbols of the soul: as the House of Usher falls, the semantics of its collapse maps the crumbling of the self. Psychology as architectural design was based on a three-storey floor plan: the ego, the super-ego, and the id. The equation today, however, is radically different: it's not in a single house but in the whole city where you find the map of you, and you in turn do no mirror just one house, but this entire cityscape that very much like yourself is an assemblage of criss-crossing space-times, an untheorised actor network, a socio-technical machinery that can't quite be told apart from the others that give it a shape, like the Tube network that connects the urban hypertext of your existence as you write these lines in a car bound for a station where all lines intersect. You're a chrono-archaeologist on a mission in this city, intent on scrutinizing its post-Einsteinian timelike geometry, it's cross-hatched temporal planes. You are aware of the presence of the characters from Chris Marker's *La Jetée* and Terry Gilliam's *Twelve*

Monkeys riding in the same car with you; there are fleeting moments when you think you can see them standing in the platforms, on CCTV feeds, walking down the corridors, vanishing through those doors in the walls that nobody notices. You'd like to go after them on a place-hacking journey across the most unlikely connections and passages, following their footsteps through cut-and-paste guerrilla topologies into the most hostile and striated city-spaces. You know those chasing after them are not far behind - all those enforcers who behave like an occupying army humiliating a defeated enemy population, with all their barriers and checkpoints, their anti-riot urbanism, their vision of urban planning as groundwork for urban repression. You're a war correspondent reporting from the future frontlines of this military urbanism, in a state of exception that may at any time outlaw your words, along with the people they refer to. But as Wordsworth promised to L'Ouverture, there are things that the breathing of the Common Wind can't forget.

And you ride the Tube, listening to The Jam's defiantly Anti-Thatcherite song *Going Underground*, way back from all those years ago when you got told over and over again that 'There Is No Alternative', and yet you had the courage to resist: *You choose your leaders and place your trust/ As their lies wash you down and their promises rust/ You'll see kidney machines replaced by rockets and guns*. And you realize that cycle is over now, the time when there was no Time and History had Ended in an eternal capitalist present, and after so many years going underground, you alight at last and you see the sun again at Sol (at Tahrir, at Syntagma), and the entire Resistance takes to the streets with you, and your name is Revolution.

Notes

¹ Magnetic Declination (*Declinación Magnética*) is the name of an art research & production collective formed by (mostly Madrid-based) visual artists, curators and theorists URL: <http://declinacionmagnetica.wordpress.com/>

² Caitlin C. Rosenthal is *Harvard-Newcomen Postdoctoral Fellow in Business History* at Harvard Business School URL:

http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/rosenthal/files/rosenthal_cv.pdf

Her research is part of a project titled 'From Slavery to Scientific Management: Capitalism and Control in America, 1754-1911'. For a summary, see Johnston, 2013; see also Nichols, 2011.

³ On the correspondence between Marx and Lincoln, see Blackburn, 2011; on the relationships between Marx, British workers and Lincoln, see Heartfield, 2012.

⁴ See Baptist & Hyman 2014; for an overall account of Slavery as the Capital that *made* Capitalism, see Ott 2014.

⁵ In her "Hegel and Haiti" (2000), Susan Buck-Morss points out, following Eric Williams and C.L.R. James, how plantation slavery was a quintessentially modern institution of

capitalist exploitation, rather than a relic from a prior historical stage, and how it had come to underwrite the entire economic system of the west by the mid-18th century. The challenge now is to re-think today's capitalism in light of the persistence of technologies of accumulation and dispossession that were first deployed in plantation slavery.

⁶ See Jameson (2005) especially the chapter on "The Future As Disruption".

⁷ On the Stanford Torus see Merchant (2013).

⁸ Other recognisable buildings in *Elysium* include Helmut Jahn's Berlin Sony Centre. [See the official website at <http://www.elysium2013-movie.com/news/9/61/Real-Life-Locations-Used-in-Elysium/#.VANDcWPgV8E>]. En una de las páginas web "ficticias" asociadas a la película [<http://www.welcometoelysium.com>]. In one of the fictional websites accompanying the film [<http://www.welcometoelysium.com/>], a virtual tour of real estate at Elysium informs us that the decoration at the orbital worldlet's luxury homes has been designed by the "Guggenheim Commission":

All Elysium homes are decorated with consult from the Guggenheim Commission for Elysium Beautification. Exceptionally appointed, each home includes a Steinway grand piano, Italian marble floors and pre-emptive climate design.

In the film's tomorrow, art world institutions have completed their journey -already in progress today- towards total subsumption within the speculative circuits of financial capital, finally becoming purveyors of decorative accessorizing for the orbital real estate market.

⁹ On hauntology see Derrida 1993, and its companion counter-book Sprinker (ed) 1999.

¹⁰ Miéville, 2009. See also the entry on "crosshatch" in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (Clute & Grant [eds] 1997) [<http://sf-encyclopedia.co.uk/fe.php?nm=crosshatch>]: "in many fantasy tales the demarcation line is anything but clear-cut, and two or more worlds may simultaneously inhabit the same territory".

¹¹ Moussaoui, 2013; Mbembe, 2013.

¹² Lazzarato, 2011; Hardt & Negri, 2012: "the indebted, the mediatized, the securitized, and the represented".

¹³ On 'slavery and social death' see Patterson, 1982; on the political economy of Zombies, see Powers 2013

¹⁴ Marx, K., 1973 (1856): p. 105

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