Techne and Poiesis of Urban Life-Forms

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Abstract

Technology extends human perception and it intervenes in relations to the environment. Life in cities is particularly affected by newest technological developments, and city dwellers are most shielded and disconnected from the natural world by these very same technologies. The term technology stems from the Greek *techne,* and it refers to the process of manipulation and adaptation of the world. However, by intervening in everyday life and modifying relations to the environment, technology also produces new forms of life, which did not exist before, and is therefore also poetic in the sense of the Greek term *poiesis*. This production is distinct from literary works because it opens worlds of possibilities that are not fictional. This makes a reflection on the poeticity of technology all the more urgent, because the large-scale advent of new technologies such as the industrialization or the digitization radically changes the modes of perception and relations to urban environments. Art works like literature absorb and articulate these changes and are therefore useful "strange tools" for putting on display (Noë 2015) the changing modes of experiencing cities. For instance, industrialization, explosive urban growth and the rapid modernization of cities overwhelmed the senses. In its very form and rhythm, modernist literature performs the fragmented and brisk-paced experience of modernity. The digital age ostensibly promises intelligibility and order, for digital technologies can survey and manage vast amounts of information. Smart cities are designed for this purpose and for offering tailored solutions to the inhabitants' individual needs. However, data analytics cannot capture the phenomenological quality of *lived* experience. Art works can, and contemporary literary works put on display urban life-forms characterized by disembodiment and by exhaustive information on any subject that on its own does not translate into any sense of meaning or belonging.

Key words: techne, poiesis, art, literature, modernism, new urban imaginary, industrialization, digitization, smart cities

Introduction

Technology is not only a process of rendering one's surroundings more convenient and efficient. It is also an intervention in a form of life and a manner of experiencing the world. It is a commonplace to point out how technology extends human senses and agencies: the microscope and the telescope extend our ability to see parts of the world hitherto too small or too far; the bicycle extends the human capacity for locomotion to greater speeds. With the increasingly salient dependencies on technologies (like our smart phones), some might proclaim today to be a transhuman age of the cyborg. However, the use of technology to modify our form of life seems to be constitutive for human life—think only of the manner in which the domestication of fire and the invention of cooking has modified our digestive tract (Sterelny, 2010)—there is nothing "trans" human about it. As Oliver Müller argues by reference to Ernst Cassirer and Hannah Arendt, technology is a manner of shaping one's reality, and at the same time one's very self (2014, p. 102-7, p. 223). In this sense technology is not only an process of production, a *techne,* but it can also be considered as *poiesis*—a production of something that did not exist before. Like poetry, technology produces new worlds. By contrast to poetry, these worlds are not fictional. However, art and literary works can be used as "strange tools" (Noë, 2015) to critically study the technologically inflicted changes to our life form through time, for as Walter Benjamin has argued in relation to the industrialization and the explosive growth of modern cities, literary forms often absorb and reflect the technological changes in the age in which they were produced (1969). What Benjamin has argued about in relation to the industrial age can and should be applied and transformed to address the rapid changes in the digital age and the advent of smart or responsive cities.

The application of digital technologies and data analytics is becoming increasingly common in today's urban design. For instance, in a study within the project "Big-Data Informed Urban Design" at the ETH Singapore, the researchers measured urban walkers' emotional responses via their skin conductance and temperature and correlated them with geospatial data from GPS tracking devices (Hijazi et al., 2016). This data could be used for a new approach to urban design, which is claimed to be more responsive to people's experience of the city. In *The Responsive City,* Stephen Goldsmith and Susan Crawford focus on how analyzing real-time data from the social media can efficiently replace cumbersome and unresponsive bureaucratic machinery. It could provide a more flexible, democratic and quicker means of participatory urban planning by accessing "the community's collective

knowledge" (2014, p. 13), for instance by analyzing social media feeds. A critical question that should be asked is whether and how digital technology in itself alters our perceptions of the city in the first place. This question should be kept in mind when discussing large scale 'smartification' of cities using digital technology. If it is the case that digital technology alters our perception of cities—and my first thesis in this chapter is that this is indeed the case (i)—then such projects will not simply result in cleaner, more efficient and sustainable cities, but will contribute (for better or worse) to a radical change in how we relate to cities in the first place.

My second thesis is that art works in general and literature in particular can articulate these cultural changes (ii).[1] As Noë (2015) has pointed out, knowledge is not only about amassing data: it's "a matter of seeing how the data you already have—your own experiences, observations, beliefs—hang together." (Noë 2015, p. 16). Here, Noë draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein's understanding of philosophical activity as working on a perspicuous or a synoptic presentation (*übersichtliche Darstellung*). Noë's main example is dance, and how dance, as an art form, is a way of putting-on-display. It can serve "to fashion for us a representation of ourselves as dancers; to make clear what is otherwise concealed and poorly understood" (2015, p. 17). According to Noë, art in general "exhibits our manner of organization to ourselves" (2015, p. 205). As Wolfgang Huemer has argued about literary texts, they too "display social practices." (2007, p. 237) Huemer takes up Franz Kafka's *Trial* as an example and points out that the text shows us the workings of a blind and opaque bureaucratic system, but also how that system only functions if individuals play by its rules (ibid.). Even though neither Noë nor Huemer directly address urban design, or the aesthetic presentation of cities, their considerations are applicable to these issues: urban literary works can be read as affording a different kind of perspicuity of how we organize our social practices in their most plastic form, namely the city.

In the following, I will summarize how my thesis that technology alters our perception of cities (i) pertains to the processes of industrialization, and how this was reflected in 20th-century literature (ii). Then I will consider contemporary literature and the manner in which it engages with and displays the experience of current digitization processes in urban environments (i and ii). I focus on literary works that prominently operate with technological motifs and that can contribute to a philosophical reflection on the manner technology changes our way of being situated in and moving through (urban) landscapes.

[1] Art works arguably even shape these changes in the consciousness to some extent. For instance the sense of modernity being exciting and joyous has been shaped by Virginia Woolf's literary works, whereas its tragic side by T. S. Eliot.

The Industrial and Phantasmatic Aesthetics of 20th-Century Urban Literature

In his essay from 1903 "The Metropolis and Mental Life", the sociologist Georg Simmel postulates a new variety of alienation in the conditions of industrialized and rapidly growing big cities. He describes the danger for the individual to be "leveled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism" (2002, p. 11). The sheer mass of people moving in the streets of turn-of-the-century Berlin, London and Paris and the number of vehicles crowding the roads overwhelmed the senses. Simmel thus explains the necessity for "metropolitan types" to develop a "protective organ", a way of filtering out excess stimuli—an unemotional and impersonal "matter of fact attitude in the treatment of persons and things" (2002, p. 12) and a certain cool, "blasé outlook" (2002, p. 14). Simmel does not only refer to the simple difficulty of staying afloat in a sea of stimulation of the big city, but also the existential necessity of keeping up to date with the *right* sort of information. The metropolitan type forms his or her personality in relation to the current fashions, intellectual debates etc. in the city, either by signaling their endorsement, their rejection or quirky modification of these trends. According to Simmel, by contrast to big city dwellers, the rural inhabitants are free to be more sincere and to allow more time to get to know others' unique personalities. The sheer size of the city, mass of people and brevity of time to meet them breeds in the people the feeling of necessity "to appear to-the-point, clear-cut and individual" (2002, p. 18), but always in relation to "impersonal cultural elements and existing goods and values" (2002, p. 19) of the metropolis. This creates a brand of individuality unique to the metropolitan type, one that distinguishes itself not based on one's own irreplaceability, but on one's position in the complex coordinates of the pre-existing cultural codes battling for dominance in the city.

Walter Benjamin refers to Simmel's observations in his essay from 1939 "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1969, p. 341). The essay is on the late 19th-century Parisian poet Charles Baudelaire and it deals with changes in aesthetic and poetic forms correlated with the conditions of industrialized big city life. Benjamin takes up Simmel's postulate that big city inhabitants have had to develop a way of filtering out the "series of shocks and collisions" inherent in the over-stimulation of the senses (1969, p. 328). Gone were the days of the 19th-century flâneurs[2], who contemplated city life in their own leisurely strolling pace. Benjamin

[2] Gregory Shaya defines the flâneur as follows: "He was a common figure of the nineteenth century, essential to any picture of the streets of Paris. The flaneur was the man of leisure who went into the street in search of some satisfaction of his overdeveloped sensibilities. He was, by various accounts, a gastronome, a connoisseur, an idler, an artist [...]" (2004, p. 47)

explicitly names technology as one of the main factors that influence this modification in perception, namely the traffic, electric lights and advertising. He states, "[T]echnology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training." (1969, p. 328) As his equivalent to that which Simmel terms "a protective organ", Benjamin more specifically refers to the "protective eye" (1969, p. 341) that city-dwellers cultivate to shield themselves from the excess of stimuli. The resulting tunnel vision renders impossible the kind of lyrical and leisurely poetic mode still possible in the countryside, and robs the urban poet-flâneur of his dreamy, distant gaze, forcing him to focus on the mundane task of managing to navigate the city (1969, pp. 340-1).

Neither Baudelaire nor Benjamin appear particularly mournful about the lost lyrical mode in literature, rather they are gesturing towards new poetic possibilities opened up by the industrialized urban experience. In accordance to Benjamin's observation in "The Storyteller" that the genre of the novel flourishes in modernity, the fragmentation of urban experience and the sensory overstimulation had become one of the main leitmotifs of the 20th-century novel (1969, pp. 83-4). For instance, Andrei Bely's *Petersburg,* a novel published in 1913 presents the experience of this large and rapidly growing Russian city built from scratch and almost overnight as if the city itself offered resistance to comprehensive observation (Alter, 2005, p. 91). The characters' visual fields are therefore highly fragmented and phantasmagoric, dominated by flashes of color and light as opposed by any attempts to provide an intelligible and reliable account of life in the city of Petersburg on the whole. The novel's style is correspondingly not at all realistic and linear, but highly experimental, full of repetitions apparently mimicking the traffic rhythm of the city. Better-known examples of modernist urban novels are Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and James Joyce's *Ulysses.* The latter, which appeared serially from 1918 to 1920 is perhaps the most famous modernist urban novel that stages fragmented, seemingly unconnected glimpses of early 20th-century Dublin. In Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* from 1925, the industrial metaphor is expressed in Mrs. Dalloway's self-understanding of her role as a hostess for London's society—she must "assemble" the various personages together into a successful party in order to actualize the multifarious and kaleidoscopic experience of London's collective consciousness (Alter, 2005, p. 115).

Ezra Pound is one example of a poet who explores the new aesthetic possibilities opened up by the urban form of life. This is one of his poems from 1913, "In a Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.
(1957, p. 35)

The poem is compact and precise, evoking the rhythmic motion of trains and other machines in the industrialized age, the necessity of moving briskly with the times, of not wasting words. As Alex Goody argues, modernist poetry performs the economical and precise rhythms of modernity (2011, p. 25). This poem moves the way a pedestrian needs to move in modernized and technologically advanced large cities: without the leisure of strolling, lingering or contemplating the view lest he be overrun by a tram or jostled by the crowds. The modernist literary aesthetic expressed in Pound's poem is emblematic of the kind of fragmented and fast-paced experience marked by the mechanical rhythm of traffic. Therefore, in Noë's words, modernist literature puts on display and makes tangible the overwhelming quality of explosive urban growth and modernization.

The latter half of the 20th century is characterized by the massively spread use of communication media partially blurring the line between the mediated and the immediate. In the 1980s Jean Baudrillard claimed that the television and the telephone have introduced the element of simulacra into our everyday experience. Decades before the advent of social media, he noted "the ecstasy of communication" (1983) which has dissolved the boundaries between the private and the public and between individuals, rendering any talk of a surveyable public sphere meaningless. W.G. Sebald's novels reflect this change in the media landscape and its influence on urban experience and aesthetic possibilities, however, as I will argue, without buying into Baudrillard's resigned diagnosis of unreality. For instance, in the 2001 novel *Austerlitz,* the dome of the Lucerne train station is mentioned, and a photo of a televised image in which that very dome is burning is included within the text. There is furthermore a remark in a footnote that the fictional narrator had visited that very building in February of 1971, presenting a photograph he took of the still intact dome, alongside the photo of the real televised image of the fire which happened a day later in interdiegetic time of the novel, but also in the real world, February 5. 1971 (2013, p. 19).

In another reference to the video medium, the main protagonist of the same novel, Austerlitz, who has lost his entire family in the Holocaust, hopes to find clues about his mother by watching the Nazi propaganda video *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* on Theresienstadt, where he knows his mother had been. It, too, was originally a televised event, and Austerlitz watches it years later on a videotape from the Federal Archives in Berlin. He describes his anticipation while still researching on how to obtain the tape and what he thought finding it would mean to him,

> I imagined seeing her walking down the street in a summer dress and a lightweight
> gabardine coat, said Austerlitz: among a group of ghetto residents out for a stroll, she

alone seemed to make straight for me, coming closer with every step, until at last I thought I could sense her stepping out of the frame and passing over into me. (2013, pp. 343-4)

In this passage, the bygone cultural image of the flâneur is evoked in most absurd and darkest circumstances, in the context of a ghetto-camp in the Potemkinian town of Theresienstadt, posing as an attractive holiday spot in a Nazi propaganda video. The life-form of unburdened urban flânerie has been definitely put an end to by the technology of mass destruction of entire cities which changed the face of warfare in World War II, all the more so in pseudo-towns such as Theresienstadt, designed to contain and control people like cattle.

And Austerlitz, too, realizes that the video technology he had placed so much hope in, secretly fantasizing that it would provide him immediate acquaintance with his long dead mother turns out to only emphasize its own futility: "At first I could get none of these images into my head; they merely flickered before my eyes as the source of continual irritation or vexation […]" (2013, p. 345). He talks of the "impossibility of seeing anything more closely in these pictures, which seemed to dissolve even as they appeared" (2013, p. 346). He then plays the tape in slow motion, hoping this would help. Now "[t]he contours of [ghetto residents'] bodies were blurred and […] had dissolved at the edges […]" (2013, p. 349). The text includes still frames from the video, with pixelated, blurry pictures of almost unintelligible faces. The media which was supposed to enable him to see his mother—the video—turned out to show nothing but ghostly shadows. It was not medial in the occult sense of enabling him access to the dead, but in the sense of rendering any *im*mediate experience of the past meaningless. By contrast to postmodern novelists, Sebald does not simply dwell on the phantasmatic new media and the experience of simulacra in modern cities—even though his novels do reflect this obvious development. By including references to real events, people, architectural landmarks, streets and inconspicuous buildings, Sebald focuses more on the *intelligibility* of the metropolis. As Ursula Terentowicz-Fotyga has argued, W.G. Sebald, along with other contemporary novelists like Zadie Smith are representatives of a *new urban imaginary*, which defy Baudrillardian passivity in face of new media technologies and "traverse the urban simulacrum in search of a way out" (2009, p. 307).

The City on (the) Display in Contemporary Literature

In the following section, I will analyze the works of 21st century writers Zadie Smith, Rana Dasgupta, and Tom McCarthy with a focus on the recurrent motif of digital technologies that characterize the contemporary everyday. As another proponent of the "new urban imaginary",

Smith is interested in exploring and expressing the city as it can be known and perceived as opposed to mere simulacra. Yet, this does not mean that she reverts to a 19th-century realist mode of omnisciently presenting the city. Rather, she has been compared to the modernist author James Joyce in her stream-of-consciousness depiction of the urban experience (Strauss, 2012). Her novels *White Teeth* and *London NW* abound in rich glimpses and snippets of 21st-century London. However, as I will argue, she is interested in the intelligibility of contemporary cities and in the manner in which current digital technologies are apt to both deceive the senses and provide a tantalizing glimpse into the possibility of putting the city as a whole—in all its complexity—on display. This is a possibility that seemed lost with the diversification of urban life-forms in the course of industrialization and with the blurring of boundaries of the real and medially represented with the advent of mass communication media. For, digital technology, as the proponents of smart and responsive cities argue, can enable us to survey the hitherto unmanageable quantities of information produced in the cities every day that had overwhelmed or frustrated the senses in the previous century.

Zadie Smith's recent novel *Swing Time* (2016) treats on manners of displaying and making perceptually salient current socio-cultural developments by means of art. Parallel to the oscillation in setting between poor neighborhoods in both the United Kingdom and West Africa, and global nomads' hubs like New York and London, the novel reflects on the history of dance. The narrator is interested in everything from African tribal dances, coded slave dances, to contemporary pop star choreographies, which commodify multi-cultural influences and employ them to ornamental effects. As discussed above, Alva Noë has argued that dance, as an art form, displays the body as saturated in historical, cultural and communicative contexts. Here I argue that while it centers on dance and the human body, Smith's novel *at the same time* displays and reflects that collective body we call the city—in its global varieties and with regard to how current technological developments modify and influence urban experience. She includes the rooted perspective of West African locals—whose excruciatingly slow internet connection renders information-gathering an elaborate investigative process, involving fragile relationships of trust, as well as the physical traversing of spaces between villages and cities. But she also reflects on global nomads' privileged aerial view from an airplane window, and the almost omniscient gaze of a proficient internet and social networks surfer based in New York, with all the technological amenities the city affords her.

One of the novel's major themes is the differing modes of information gathering appropriate to vastly different terrains: globalized 21st-century cities like London and New

York versus the rural landscapes of West Africa. The nameless narrator has grown up in the former world: she is a Londoner who spends most her time in New York due to her work, and who considers toggling her phone's airplane mode on for several days at a time one of "the great examples of personal stoicism and moral endurance of our times" (2016, pp. 1-2). However, her mother is Afro-Caribbean, therefore in her ancestry hailing from West Africa via European slave trade to the Americas. The narrator works in the music media and when she becomes a pop star's personal assistant and accompanies her around the world, including half a dozen trips to a West African village on a dubious developmental aid project, she is in the curious position of being intensely invested and interested in the place and aware of her almost complete ignorance of the realities there. This shows particularly well on her first day at the village, where she, shocked by the poverty around her, rushes to the village school headmaster's office (with the only available power plug "run on a solar-powered generator and paid by an Italian charity years earlier" (2016, p.176)) in order to google the country's GDP. She describes:

> frantically trying to get online, although I could, of course, have googled what I wanted to know in New York, far more quickly, with infinitely more ease, at any time in the previous six months. Here it was a laborious process. A page would half load, then crash, the energy from the solar rose and fell and sometimes cut off completely. It took more than an hour.

In the end she had the information she needed: her boss, the pop-star Aimee's net worth was a little larger than the GDP of the entire nameless West African country.

By contrast, back in New York and on her high-speed internet, the narrator has all the information she needs under her fingertips. In an increasing rebelliousness towards her boss Aimee, she does not go to one of her shows, not wanting to see the "funhouse versions of the dances" they saw in West Africa that Aimee appropriates, but spends the entire evening experiencing it via her laptop, following the social media commentary, pictures and videos released by the second: "Search Aimee, search venue, search Brooklyn dance troupe, image search, AP wire search, blog search." (2016, p. 369). She realizes that

> I could reconstruct – 140 characters at a time, image by image, blog post by blog post – the experience of having been there, until, by one a.m., nobody could have been there more than me. I was far more there than any of the people who had actually been there, they were restricted to one location and one perspective – to one stream of time – whereas I was everywhere in that room at all moments, viewing the thing from all angles, in a mighty act of collation. (2016, p. 369)

She is spell-bound: "I kept refreshing and refreshing, waiting for new countries to wake up and see the images and form their own opinions or feed off opinions already voiced." (2016, p. 370). Powerless as she is, especially in her exploitative working relationship with Aimee,

she is high with the power of knowledge that digital information technology lends her, allowing her to transcend her own ultimately finite spatio-temporal perspective and oversee the whole of Aimee's dance like a god, finding validation in other voices around the world criticizing Aimee's cultural appropriation of African dances and traditional clothes. She is able to access the city's venues and view them from practically any angle without ever leaving her apartment.

Another character, a Brazilian economist nicknamed Fern, is part of the team in Aimee's mission to reduce poverty, and lends the whole endeavor a shred of legitimacy and understanding of global and local dynamics. Unlike the narrator, he is well acclimatized to the conditions in rural West Africa and has the necessary patience to gather information the old fashioned way: by carefully listening and withholding assumptions and judgment. Due to the scarcity of communication media and information technology, person-to-person communication and the ability to navigate relationships in local family and village structures and hierarchies is key, and Fern has acquired these skills during his many years of field work. The narrator observes Fern's behavior:

> Whenever I spotted him in my reluctant daily walk around the village […] Fern would be locked in intense discussion with men and women of every age and circumstance, crouching by them as they ate, jogging next to donkey-drawn carts, sitting drinking *ataya* with the old men by the market stalls, and always listening, learning, asking for more detail, assuming nothing, until he was told it. (2016, pp. 248-9)

As much as she respects Fern, she is alienated by his intense sensorimotor engagement with the local culture, so different from her own disembodied, digitally enabled orientation in space.

While the narrator is not completely numbed to the world of the senses, for instance she does appreciate the quality of light in both New York and in African sun-bathed landscapes ("New York was my first introduction to the possibilities of light, crashing through gaps in curtains, transforming people and sidewalks and buildings into golden icons, or black shadows […] But […] this light was something else again. It buzzed and held you in its heat, it was thick, alive with pollen and insects and birds, and because nothing higher than one storey interrupted its path, it gave all its gifts at once, blessing everything equally […] 2016, pp. 254-5)), she does consider herself more at home in the city. She is accordingly blasé in her attitude, as shown in her wish to "crush" the optimism on Fern's face (2016, p. 251), trusting more her own abstract researches into the state of things in West Africa then Fern's first-hand knowledge gained from fieldwork. Her blasé attitude, in the sense Simmel introduces it as a characteristic of the metropolitan type, comes to the fore when she is

scrutinizing Fern's outfit and style when he shows up in New York: "Fern, in an ill-fitting, clearly rented suit, a little too short at the ankles, was walking towards me, waving goofily" (2016, pp. 335-6). As Simmel remarks, the psychological survival in a metropolis depends on being up to date on the *right* sort of information. Committing a fashion *faux pas* and not presenting himself as being up-to-date the way New Yorkers do disqualified Fern from being taken seriously by the narrator on her own terrain, in the big city. At first she and Fern admire the view on the city together. He senses her disapproval and says, "Please don't laugh at me" and "The truth is I don't know how to dress in New York." (2016, p. 338). Later on, the narrator muses: "I knew he'd crossed Liberia, alone and on foot, aged only twenty-four […] – but now all I could think was: *Brother, this city will eat you alive.*" (2016, p. 365). While she is critical of Aimee for her flippancy and superficiality, the narrator herself is clearly very concerned with outer presentation and appearances, as a critical means of metaphorical survival in the city and holding onto one's identity and status without letting the city "eat you alive".

There is a binary in the novel between the mode of being in the countryside of a third world—and correlated reliance on interpersonal experience and exchange of intelligence—and the mode of being in the city, with access to latest information technology and the correlated impersonal, disembodied access to the events and places, and with the unspoken necessity of adhering to impersonal codes and exterior markers of being-in-the-know, like fashion, characteristic of metropolitan types. The novel shows how the reliance on smartphones and the internet has become so deeply ingrained in metropolites' navigation of space that it has become almost unnoticeable. It takes a visit to a dramatically different environment, that of a tiny West African village to properly see it. This is not in itself objectionable, but if we reflect on the use of digital technologies and their potential for designing cities, it would be fruitful to also consider how digital technology itself modifies the perception of cities. Furthermore, it is not clear whether digitally optimized cities would again afford the kind of stress-free strolling that the flâneurs of old enjoyed, or whether these cities would be technologically determined to such an extent that they would be impossible to navigate without the equivalent of today's smartphone. While Smith describes her narrator's technologically mediated experience of her surroundings neutrally, merely hinting at her alienation but presenting it as the way things are now,[3] the next novel I study—Rana Dasgupta's book draws out the more sinister and problematic aspects of digital technologies.

[3] To be sure, Smith does criticize the standardisation of experience due to Facebook in her essay "Generation Why?", and the replacement of experience by representation due to digital

Rana Dasgupta's *Tokyo Cancelled* is a hybrid work. It is a collection of stories interrelated by their shared framework: they are told at the airport, by passengers whose flight to Tokyo has been cancelled because of a snowstorm, and who then have to find a way to pass the time until the next morning. As such, it is a novel that reflects on the bygone form of oral storytelling, once rendered antiquated by the advent of technologies that increased the velocity of life (Benjamin, 1969, pp. 83-4). In a situation where technology fails, however, and people are forcefully slowed down, even completely arrested in their motion by, say, the cancellation of a flight, this antiquated form re-emerges, and passengers tell each other tales from faraway lands of their origin. To mark the extent to which technology is taken for granted, the first line of the book is "There was chaos." (2005, p. 1). The disorientation of the passengers is emphasized:

> A 747 had disgorged its 323 passengers into the middle of a vacant, snow-brushed tarmac expanse, left them to trudge across it through the cold and the floodlit glare to a terminus […] had abandoned them, in short, in the Middle of Nowhere, in a place […] like a back corridor between two worlds, two somewhere, where people only alighted when something was seriously kaput with the normal eschatological machinery. (2005, p. 1).

Some of the unlucky passengers who are unable to find accommodation for the night huddle together on uncomfortable vinyl airport furniture. Someone suggested, "You know friends I don't think we know each other well enough to sit in silence. […] I was thinking just wondering to myself: Does anyone know any stories?" (2005, p. 7). They commence telling stories set in the cities they come from, and the fourth story told is titled "The House of the Frankfurt Mapmaker". It is a story of one named Klaus Kaufmann, who collects geospatial information "compiling them all into a complete electronic map of the planet" (2005, p. 93). There follows a list of the kind of information that interests him:

> Air routes
> Archeological sites
> Canal systems
> Climate
> Crops
> Demographics
> Electricity systems
> Housing projects
> Legal systems
> Price indices
> Rock and soil types
> Sea routes
> Telecommunication networks

technologies in "The Tattered Ruins of a Map: On Sarah Sze's *Centrifuge*". Both essays appeared in her 2018 anthology *Feel Free: Occasional Essays.*

This project has made him filthy rich, and he even accepts bribery to put a yet nonexistent pipeline on his map in order to put pressure on parties involved in the decision of its realization. A Turkish official suggests to Klaus, "[…] perhaps if you mark the pipeline on your map it will help to push things in our direction. Make it already a bit concrete, so to speak… […] I think this information would make your map much more – how should I say it – prescient, no?" (2005, p. 95). Dasgupta's book was published in 2005, a year after Google has acquired the project now universally known as Google Maps (Google Earth was launched in 2001), which made the company one of the largest global players both economically and, as some suggest and fear, politically. The story reflects on the power of represented information to slowly replace subjective experience and even shape new realities, such as a pipeline.

Kaufmann clearly has power based on the information he has gathered, but he is also impoverished in his experience of the places he visits to collect this information. He considers them mere "backdrops". For instance, after picking up his rented car, he proceeds to drive through the city:

> The windows of the glitzy international stores reflected cheerful scenes of the early morning street; people read newspapers and talked on mobile phones. A man in a wheelchair was affixing five different posters of Atatürk to the front of an abandoned shop, with a handwritten sign saying "TL 1.5m". The single-mindedness that Klaus's vocation demanded left no time for lingering in the places he visited, but he liked the sense of momentum he got from carrying out his purposes against so many different backdrops. (2005, p. 95)

Klaus does not care about the places he visits and maps, and usually does not give them a second thought. In a reference to theatrical scenography, they are merely "backdrops" to his life, not a reality to be encountered and felt. Furthermore, he does not even look at the street scene directly, his view is mediated by the reflection on the glass panes in the stores' windows.4 This anticipates the design of his house, which, as the reader learns later on, is built with large flat screens replacing all the windows and constantly projecting scenes from beautiful places around the world (2005, p. 103), ensuring that Klaus does not have a direct view of the banal reality outside his mansion's gates. Not only is he cut off from directly perceiving the material world with his sense of vision, he is also inexperienced in handling

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4 The motif of the city as a locus of representation and dream-like effects also comes up in the second story in Dasgupta's novel/story anthology "The Memory Editor", set in London. The characters "drove down from Islington in the car, crossing over Blackfriars Bridge from where the floodlights on St. Paul's Cathedral made it look like a magnificent dead effigy of itself. The restaurant was a floating cocoon of leather and stainless steel with lighting like caresses, and their table looked down over the row of corporate places that lined the other side of the Thames." (2005, p. 29)

temperature differences—for he almost exclusively approaches the world via screens, be it computer screens or that of his car's navigation device: "Next to the 21 on his dashboard was a 48 coming from outside. He realized he had not paid the journey enough thought, had not so much as put a bottle of water in the car." (2005, p. 96). His car broke down in the middle of Anatolian wilderness—close to where the new pipeline would be constructed—the literal Baudrillardian "desert of the real" (Baudrillard, 1994, p.1).

When he comes out of the car, all his mediated information was useless and he was at the mercy of the elements: "The sun mocked his thick hair and pummeled his scalp, while gusts of dusty wind sucked mercilessly at the moisture in his body." (2005, p. 97). After some time outside, he collapses. A local old woman and her daughter nurse him back into consciousness. They live in a cave, a shelter from the elements that is not technologically mediated, as is life in the city, but simply discovered and repurposed. The old woman attributes Klaus's thoughtlessness to his city provenience: "You're from the city, I suppose. You people do crazy things. Think you can just go wandering out. I don't think they teach you how your body works." (2005, p. 98). The city, usually the seat of newest technologies that serve to make life more comfortable and less helplessly exposed to nature, protects its dwellers from the rougher experiences of the elements but it also alienates them from an intuitive survival instinct and a feel for the body outside the comforts of the polis. The old lady mocks Klaus, "You are a joker, German man! […] Did your map not tell you that summers are hot in Anatolia? That the land is without water or shade? […] You make me laugh my pink friend. A mapmaker!" (2004, p. 100). Innocently, she asks him to take her daughter Deniz's hand in marriage as a thank you for saving his life. Klaus, in his blasé metropolitan manner thinks it impossible that the girl would ever find her way to Frankfurt without any documents; he half-agrees in a mumbled assent and goes home.

When Deniz shows up at his doorstep, Klaus is at first dumbfounded, then he does his best to avoid her, while having his invisible house help take care of her basic needs. In a reference to Bluebeard and his wife (Klaus was listening to an opera rendition of this old tale while driving through the Turkish wilderness), he forbids her to enter a room in the tower of his mansion. When she of course does enter it, she encounters his map:

> She found herself in the middle of a large circular room with high ceilings, and walls made entirely of frosted glass. Projected onto the glass, from floor to ceiling and around all 360 degrees, was a map of the world, a vast, flickering thing that kept her turning on the spot in wonder. (2005, pp. 111-112).

The motif of glass continues: the map is projected on glass screen. Glass, a medium that normally allows transparence and a clear view of reality behind it is transposed with a

represented reality. So much so that one is completely immersed in this representation of the world, and the contours of the actual room she finds herself in are blotted out. She approaches the set of binoculars in the center of the room and zooms in on Frankfurt (the way one can zoom on a place on Google Earth on one's computer). The glasses she wears also provide data in text and symbol form transposed over the glass:

> What a majestic place was Frankfurt! She had never imagined that human beings were engaged in so many pursuits! People made things whose purpose she could not even imagine: valves, adhesives, tubes, lenses, pumps, plastic pellets, nylon tiles, rubber seals, steel gauze, springs, washers. They sold houses and prosthetic limbs and elegant clothes. They bought books and money and cars and guitars and other people. […] And if you did not want to buy whole people you could buy pieces: for there were hearts and kidneys on sale, and livers and slices of skin and corneas and fetuses. (2005, p. 113-114).

Deniz has lived a life that is a crass antithesis to Klaus's. Her only access to mediated vision was a little fragment of a mirror she had in her cave. She is completely immersed in the electronic map of Frankfurt. So much so that she starts fantasizing about her future life based on this map—fantasies entirely unchecked by the reality of her *sans papier* existence in Frankfurt and Klaus's complete indifference to her:

> For hours she traced imaginary journeys around Klaus's majestic map, thrilled at the largeness of things and full of anticipation at what a life she would lead in this city she had come to. She made plans and resolutions about what she would have and be. (2005, p. 114).

Instead of all that, Klaus finds her an employment as a maid in a shady hotel. It is suggested that the hotel is just a cover up for a more sinister business of organ and embryo trade, and that Deniz's friend, another foreign maid named Klaudia, who was pregnant, was victim to just these illegal operations. When Deniz confronts Klaus and the person who appears to be Klaus's twin brother, Karl,5 about Klaudia, they ignore her. In a reference to Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Meek One,* mentioned by the two men, in which a woman in an unhappy marriage throws herself out of a window, Deniz runs and jumps through one of Klaus's projection screens that serve as his windows. She first thinks:

5 At the end of the tale, another Klaus doppelgänger named Kurt appears. This suggests that Klaus, Karl and Kurt are unlikely to be triplets, but are themselves the result of the bizarre genetic experiments done at the hotel. This recalls Walter Benjamin's text *The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,* in which he theorizes that the technological reproducibility of art (as in photography and video) has contributed to the loss of "aura", the veneer of irreplaceability of the original (2008, p. 23). Only, in Dasgupta's tale the technological possibility of reproducing i.e. cloning people via genetic engineering has eclipsed the aura of irreplaceability of individual people. This is evident in the blasé way foreign maids' bodies are disposed of (2005, p. 122 and p. 128). Since Dasgupta's tale takes place in Frankfurt, and Benjamin was associated with the Frankfurt School of cultural critique, it is likely that this is a reference to Benjamin's famous essay.

What unspeakable things are piled up at the edges of civilized people's imaginations. (2005, p. 128).

Again, the glass motif of the screen/window symbolizes mediation, separation from reality via represented reality by the transposition of Klaus's map on the glass in his room in the tower, or by the projection of pretty scenes from around the world in the niches where there are normally windows, providing "backdrops" for his life but not real situatedness. In an act of symbolic protest against this self-enclosed life, Deniz commits suicide by first crashing through the "backdrop" that makes up Klaus's life, the projected video of some far off beautiful place, and into the mercilessly concrete reality beyond the screen, plummeting to her death on the pavement.

Tom McCarthy's novel from *Satin Island* (2015) also commences at an airport, during a glitch in the otherwise perfectly functioning technological everyday. Unlike in Dasgupta's book, the culprit here is not nature. It is a rogue airplane, a private jet flying erratically over European airspace and therefore disabling all other airplanes from passing. The narrator, simply called U—who could be you, like any youtuber today—is one of the passengers stuck at the airport in Turin. Rather than to converse or tell stories like they do in Dasgupta's book, here each stranded voyager is engrossed in his or her private little screen, a smartphone or a tablet. U notes: "Around me and my screen, more screens: of other laptops, mobiles, televisions." (2015, p. 6). And: "People who weren't clicking and scrolling their way, like me, through phones and laptops were grazing on the luxury items stacked up all about is." (2015, p. 10). These luxury items were kept behind the polished glass of store windows and U notes how the reflection of televised news played across these surfaces: "[T]he marketplace bomb-aftermath replayed across the pattern of a shawl, oil flowed and reflowed on a watch's face." (ibid.) The reality of a space designed for soliciting maximal consumption merges with that of mediated events from all over the globe.

U is an anthropologist who works for a corporate enterprise named simply the Company. It remains vague what it is that the Company does; it seems to be a consulting firm. This Company landed a deal called the Koob-Sassen Project—and often, simply just the Project—which, too is vague in its substance. It is supposed to be so big and all-encompassing that it is impossible to describe. One aspect of it has something to do with city-planning. The Company "advised cities how to brand and re-brand themselves […] We dealt […] in narratives." (2015, p. 14). They consulted other companies, cities, regions in how to sell themselves as meaningful and necessary in a post-everything reality. It is also vague how

they proceed, but it is clear that their strength lies in possession of information. Similar to Klaus Kaufmann's mapmaking headquarters, the Company's offices are equipped with

> floor-to-ceiling glass partitions […] creating an expansive vista in which sketches, diagrams and other such configurations of precious data, lying face-up on curved tabletops, pinned to walls or drawn on whiteboards or, occasionally (and this made the data seem all the valuable, *fragile* even), on the glass itself […] (2015, p. 15).

The Company worked with data to create its products—narratives. They seemed to possess arcane knowledge that gave them power—this knowledge was derived from data analytics, sometimes looked upon as modern day alchemy: the Company's headquarters conveyed the impression of "a hermetic zone, a zone of alchemy, a crucible in which whole worlds were in the mix." (ibid.)

By creating narratives for companies and cities, U's anthropological work at the Company is, as he understands it at first, a means of injecting meaning into the world:

> Helping a city council who were thinking of creating parks and plazas but had yet to understand the ethnographic logic driving such an act; laying out for them the history of public (as opposed to private) space, making them grasp what these zones fundamentally embody, what's at play in them from a political and structural and sacred point of view; and doing this in such a way that this whole history is injected back into the squares, sports-fields and playgrounds millions of citizens will then inhabit—same thing. (2015, p. 34).

U imagines himself on par with road repair crews, bakers, milk-men and other people whose work is generally hidden, but who ensure the functioning of a city. But they, like himself, as U imagines, are those who "*put* the city there" (ibid.) He thus understands the work of creating and maintaining meaning, a *brand* for a city, its corporate identity as equally important as maintaining its physical shape—its roads, the sustenance for its populace. This idea is in line with some of his boss's slogans, such as: "*A city has no 'character'; it is a schizoid headspace, filled with the cacophony of contradiction.*" Or, on the end-point of design: "*a state in which the world is one hundred per cent synthetic, made by man, for man, according to his desires…*" (2015, pp. 42-42). In an attitude of a quaint technocratic utopianism (recalling Le Corbusier's functionalist urbanism), the Company's employees like U understand themselves as quietly and in the background working on "helping draw up blueprints for the future of the world" (2015, p. 45).

The Company's narrative within McCarthy's novel bears remarkable resemblance to IBM's marketing strategy of "smarter cities" in the real world, which was launched in 2008, in the middle of the financial crisis (Söderström, Paasche and Klauser 2014, p. 311). This strategy, too, is a narrative, a form of storytelling that aims to sell IBM's IT services to cities around the world in order to make them "smarter". As Throgmorton has argued, storytelling

or narrative has power to shape realities, and it is becoming increasingly necessary to ask, "who has the power to give meaning to things, to name others, to construct the character of collective identities, to shape the discussion of urban politics […]?" (2003, p. 132) The answer to this question is increasingly: major corporations—both in the world of McCarthy's novel where the Company consults cities on injecting meaning back into public space by selling narratives, and in the real world as the example of IBM shows.

As Söderström, Paasche and Klauser analyze in "Smart Cities as Corporate Storytelling", this marketing strategy or "story" generally starts with problematizing cities today, diagnosing them as somehow privative and then positioning the company as an (to use Bruno Latour's term) "obligatory passage point", a crucial and indispensable actor in a socio-technical network they are seeking to create, and so tap into a new and lucrative market (Söderström et al. 2014, p. 309-311). This goes as far as to diagnose cities today as "sick" and needing therapy, utopian solutions based on a firm faith in technology and the power of data to deliver answers to all urban problems (ibid., p. 315). This double step is apparent in *Satin Island,* as well, where U's boss, the Company's CEO diagnoses cities today as sick, as "schizoid", a "cacophony of contradictions". His company seeks to iron out these contradictions, create a coherent whole that can be captured in a single catchy narrative, and design a synthetic future "made by man, for man, according to his desires…", thus positioning itself as an "obligatory passage point" for this supposedly bright future, and reaping the profits. U explains the Company's proceedings:

> Certainly, each brief the Company worked on, every pitch we made, involved an invocation of, a genuflection to, the Future: explaining how social media will become the new press-baronage […] using the Future to confer the seal of truth on these scenarios and assertions, making them absolute and objective simply *by* placing them within this Future: that's how we won contracts. (2015, p. 91).

By gesturing toward future technologies and developments, the Company gets rich without providing substantial accounts of concrete steps to be taken now.

U was hired to write a Great Report (another vague, capitalized term in the novel) that is supposed to sum up today's day and age. He procrastinates on it, noting random events and occurrences on the board in his office and seeking to connect the dots with wool threads: random events like a parachutist's death caused by a sabotaged parachute, oil spills, a garbage disposal island. In the end, he realizes that his task is impossible that an overarching meaning eludes him continuously. He imagines the Koob-Sassen Project that his company has landed as something of immense importance, but he is still vague on the details. The way he imagines the project is:

towers rising in the desert—splendid, ornate constructions, part modern skyscraper, part sultan's palace lifted from *Arabian Nights:* steel and glass columns segueing into vaulted cupolas and stilted arches, tiled *muquarnas,* dwindling minarets that seemed, at their cloud-laced peaks, to shed their own materiality, turn into vapour. (2015, p. 67-68).

The image evokes cities rising in the deserts of the Gulf, like Dubai or Masdar. U's boss, tellingly named Peyman (the pay man), would be "perched on a balcony, […] consorting with engineers and princes, architects and sheikhs and viziers" (ibid, p. 69). Peyman would have the overall view of the project, of "an entire metropolis" with the Company's logo—the Tower of Babel—rising (ibid). Meanwhile, U and the rest of the employees and workers, he calls them "ant-like" (ibid, p. 68), would be scurrying around, "delivering instructions they themselves, perhaps, did not quite understand […] so complex was the logic governing the Project" (ibid). He imagines that upon its realization "*all* would become clear, to everyone, and ants would see as gods." (ibid). His fantasy is that of a future city that affords the ultimate meaning and the ultimate perspicuity of society and one's place in it, a quasi-religious vision of an all-encompassing gaze.

Instrumental for this purpose was "data itself, its pure, unfiltered content" (2015, p. 73), which would, somehow raw and uninterpreted provide the substance for the Project, its contents and the intelligence needed to realize its sublime vision. The idea behind his Great Report is to gather *all* relevant information on the current age, to "turn it *all* into data" (2015, p. 74). The impossibility of this endeavor dawns on him surprisingly late in the novel. He had become convinced that the Great Report was "unplottable, unframeable […] *unwriteable*" (2015, p. 126). Too complex, disjointed and disparate were all the elements making up reality today. There was no single perspective from which to view the whole—except maybe that of a machine with an almost infinite memory capacity (but by definition with the corresponding incapacity to represent lived experience). U notes that almost every move of almost every single person is already being mapped, not by an anthropologist, but

> by software that tabulates and cross-indexes what we buy with who we know, and what they buy, or like, and with the other objects that are bought or liked by others who we don't know but with whom we cohabit a shared buying – or liking – pattern. (2015, p. 133)

He realizes that it "wasn't that the Great Report might be unwritable, but—quite the opposite—that it had *already been written* […] by a neutral and indifferent binary system […]" (ibid.).

U's Great Report, which he had intended to title *Satin Island,* after a phrase from a dream he had of an island off the coast of a magnificent metropolis, was a failure. Instead, we have the novel *Satin Island* in front of us. He cannot put together *all* the necessary

information to draw conclusions about our age—a work only a computer could do, and it is dubious whether the information on our buying and liking patterns could truly sum up an age, or whether there *is* such a thing as a definable age or epoch we find ourselves in. Furthermore, the kind of knowledge gained by algorithms would hardly be a public good, but property of corporations like the Company in the novel, and Google, Amazon, Facebook and IBM in the real world. To use the language of the novel: the ants will never see as gods. The references to data as "precious" and "valuable" in the novel already indicates the status information has acquired as the new currency, the new gold, which will not so easily be given up to public use. However, rather than doing the work of computers and trying to summarize our day and age, the aesthetics of McCarthy's novel *shows* its disjointedness, and the difficulty to discern it as a coherent whole. As an artwork, it puts on display precisely these obstacles to a clear perception, which are—according to Walter Benjamin—synonymous with the advent of modernity, the acceleration and diversification of life-forms, and the role of technology therein.

Conclusion

To come back to the theses i) and ii) posed at the beginning of this essay. As argued, technology does modify and influence perception and experience of cities (i), and literary works reflect precisely these changes (ii). In the literature of the 19th and early 20th century the effect of industrialization, massive urban growth and the resulting lack of perspicuity of the city was expressed in choppy, efficient, machine like language in literature, or the description of a fragmented and even phantasmagoric perception. The rise of communication media like television in the second half of the 20th century contributed toward the feeling of phantasmagoria and the blurring of the lines between media and reality. In the 20th and 21st century, the major technological breakthroughs that most affected subjective experience were the internet, and later social media and the correlated focus on data. This development is reflected in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time,* which shows the narrator's utter epistemological reliance on the internet for the navigation of the spaces she finds herself in. Rana Dasgupta's *Tokyo Cancelled* shows how a breakdown in technology that is taken for granted—the cancellation of a flight—can draw out archaic modes of oral storytelling from times less thoroughly permeated with impersonal information. The story of the mapmaker from Frankfurt shows more sinister possible implications of the thirst for information—the replacement of reality with representations. Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* shows that even

newest developments in data analytics for city planning will not necessarily afford a new perspicuity in urban society. While data and algorithms might themselves be neutral and indifferent, their use is a highly political matter and currently in the hands of giant corporations. This does not mean that one should advocate a retreat into aesthetics and the study of literature—available to all with a library membership. The world of literature need not be an alternative to political engagement for more participative city governance and transparency on the use of data. Rather, the study of literature provides insight into subjective modes of urban experience that cannot be captured by means of quantitative data analytics, and it can inspire civic engagement in real cities. The poiesis of urban life forms that affect our very experience of cities should not happen behind our backs. Taking literature and the arts seriously is just one way of sharpening one's awareness that the technological production of future cities is also a production of future selves.

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