

**CyberLondon: A Virtual City for the Posthuman?
Literary Reflections on the Changing Patterns of our
Relationship with the Metropolis in the Information Era.**

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Abstract:

This paper explores the changing patterns of our relationship with the metropolis from the perspective of London-based writers that have shown an interest for cyberculture (Matt Whyman, Stella Duffy, Pat Cadigan, China Miéville). Taking as point of departure the collection of Internet stories edited by Maxim Jakubowski with authors from a variety of fields, including crime, mystery, science-fiction, fantasy, and even erotica, this paper will analyze how popular literature has understood the role of the city of London and its social networks in the new informational society. The theoretical approach used to read these short stories is indebted to the ideas of urban theorist and sociologist Manuel Castells and cyberculture theorist Donna Haraway.

Key words: Cadigan, Castells, cyberculture, Duffy, Haraway, metropolis, Miéville, popular literature, posthuman, virtual city, Whyman.

Introduction:

I have always been fascinated by the meaning attributed to the role of certain cities in people's lives, and I have wondered if there exists a "real", concrete, tangible relation between certain urban spaces and the social dynamics that develop within them, or if it is just an emotional, nostalgic evocation, that grants space a role it actually does not possess. In the context of cyberculture studies, this question has returned to my mind acquiring even more convoluted ramifications. The concept of urban

space is now revised under the light of new sociological theories that take into account the effect of the digital revolution in the configuration of social spaces and relations. Virtual spaces are starting to be such an integral part of our lives that they seem to duplicate the actual city and to compete for their portion of the "real".

What I wish to suggest with my title is in fact another set of questions that have been added to my initial one about the relation between space and culture: What happens when a new technology intrudes in our routines with such power that it offers us the possibility of truly inhabiting alternative "urban" spaces, where we can buy food, books, music, clothes, or find entertainment, company, sex? Does our relation with our old street, suburb, city change? How does literature capture our way of feeling, living, the city? What characteristics of our real city do we carry with us when we think of recreating it in our imagination? And in cyberspace? And finally, if the city is a metaphor for what it contains, what do the literary representations of a certain city say about its inhabitants?

While doing some research for my thesis on cyberculture I came across a collection of Internet stories edited by Maxim Jakubowski with authors from a variety of fields, including crime, mystery, science-fiction, fantasy, and even erotica. The only prerequisite for these stories was that they could not have come to light without the existence of the Internet. I thought this could be a good point of departure to explore the changing patterns of the relationship with the metropolis in the informational era, since most writers included in this volume were London-based, a metropolis with a rich past of literary evocations, and they all had obviously shown an interest for cyberculture. I am referring to authors such as Matt

Whyman, Toby Litt, Matt Thorne, James Flint, Stella Duffy, Pat Cadigan, and China Miéville. Through the commentary of their stories, I will analyze how popular literature has understood the role of the city of London and its social networks in the new informational society. I would also like to establish some points of connection between these literary expressions of contemporary attitudes to urban life and social relations, and a more theoretical approach, which is actually indebted to the ideas of urban theorist and sociologist Manuel Castells and to cyberculture theorist Donna Haraway. Castells -who has studied urban sociology from the 1960s onwards and has dedicated more than twenty years of research to study the effects of the information technologies on the social, political, economic and cultural spheres (compiled in his famous trilogy *The Information Age*)- will be very useful to articulate the relation between the virtual and the actual cities. Donna Haraway, one of the most famous technoscientists, will help me envision the effects of computer mediated communication in the development of individuals and their relations among themselves and their surroundings. Haraway's theories provide a critical framework in which to insert the development of a posthuman subjectivity.

Isolation, fear, surveillance, inequality, terrorism, fraud, false identities, are some of the themes that these authors address as they explore the interconnections between real and fictional spaces, virtual and actual, with the city of London becoming more porous than ever, in some respects, but also more hermetic and mysterious in others.

Let us start by describing two of the terms introduced in the title: the virtual city and the posthuman.

The Virtual City:

The question I pose in the title refers to the idea that our continuous and frequent interactions in cyberspace are constructing an alternative virtual space, where we spend a significant portion of our time and that might take the form of a surrogate urban space. The analogy between real and metaphorical or virtual cities has several points of contact. One of the most salient features of city life cited by urban theorists, and which is also a characteristic of virtual life in the WWW, is the large population of strangers that inhabit these "cities" (Donath, 1996). The immense population of the city means that urban social ties are relatively weak, as it also happens in virtual spaces, where people feel as free to express their anger as to change virtual sex partners. As it happens in the real city, anonymity can be both liberating and alienating. The tensions at work between the need for contact and the fear of the other are projected into cyberspace, where technology only barely transforms the most basic impulses of human nature. Even if certain things remain the same, it is undeniable that technology has been at the core of the most fundamental changes in our society, which have had a profound effect in the relationship between humans and their spaces.

Continuing with this idea we can conceive a virtual double of the city of London, which we can call Cyber-London. Cyber-London would then be the net of connections constructed by Londoners who project their particular conception of urban life into the virtual arena. For some critics, this notion might appear to contradict the universalist spirit of the World Wide Web, but, on the other hand, it can also be taken as an expression of cyberculture's activists motto: "think globally, act locally", since the replication of London's web of social

interactions in the virtual dimension can be a new way to reaffirm the cultural identity of Londoners in the face of a globalization which erases local specificity.

We could approach the study of such virtual replication from a variety of perspectives, the most intuitive being an ethnographic research of the different social agents involved in the creation of the urban fabric (institutions, businesses, organisations, communities, citizens, etc.) and their online presence and interaction. However, I have chosen an indirect method of study, the exploration of literary reflections of the impact of Internet on social relations as manifested in a series of short stories. These eminently subjective and grotesque distortions of the London writer's imagination provide, in my opinion, a good shortcut to explore the changing atmosphere that permeates everyday interactions, since writers possess this ability, also shared by anthropologists, of making the ordinary look exotic and *viceversa*, and thus making those changes we have already naturalized conspicuous. Therefore, even if by using literature to refer to visions of cyberspace we are also duplicating the notion of "virtual", this literary perspective can provide us with valuable insights. As we will see later the old media is often able to offer a more distanced, critical look upon the phenomenon of the Internet than the one we would obtain if we would analyse real interactions in cyberspace alone.

However, as a point of reference, I would like to present Castells' theories of the virtual city since he provides a solid theoretical framework that can illuminate the causes behind the changes perceived by the writer. The work of Castells focuses on the way information technologies and the formation of a global economy have transformed the urban space. For the first time in history,

information and knowledge directly become productive forces. Consequently material production, as well as services, becomes subordinate to the handling of information. The informational economy, as he calls it, has created a new elite of technoworkers and intensified social and economic differences. The middle classes are becoming impoverished as the number of well-paid, stable jobs is concentrated at the top of the spectrum, while a large section of the population is enduring a high level of precariousness. These changes can also be observed by the sharp contrasts the city offers, conspicuous consumption and social degradation sharing the same space, often in the streets of the centre of world's capitals. This juxtaposition of luxury and decay has been referred to by urban theorists as "the dual city". Castells takes this term even further by arguing that a single city is not a relevant unit any more, as capitalist production, as well as its political foundation, operates in a much larger space than the single city. He writes about the global city created by a space of information flows, in which the relative importance of the relation between the city and its region diminishes in favour of the relations that interconnect cities of different regions and countries. From this perspective, the informational development threatens to break down communication channels in society and to make the scattered, segmented places, increasingly unrelated to each other, and, as Castells sees it, less and less able to share cultural codes. To this scenery we could add the spectacular increase of teleworkers, who decide to do a large portion of their work at home due to a parallel increase in transportation problems, as the megalopolis concentrates most of the job offers and commuting is the only viable option to work and live in affordable places.

In fact, for many people moving into a virtual city of work and on-line shopping seems to be more and more of a necessity rather than a choice. Castells even wonders if the everyday life in the electronic household will mean the end of the cities, as we have known them. We will be nurturing a posthuman domesticity, in a smart house where we can talk to the washing machine and plan the menu together with the fridge, keep an eye on the children upstairs through a screen installed in the kitchen, and change diapers while trading stocks. This trend implies that access to conspicuous consumption will be granted by our ability to also generate conspicuous production.

The basic idea is that we increasingly need to be always productive and connected. Given this state of affairs, the question we ask ourselves is: How is our subjectivity changing at a time when we have to be fluent in the language of home appliances and computers in order to survive? This question touches upon issues that will be dealt with in the discussion of the term "posthuman".

The Posthuman:

According to the definition of British philosopher Max More: "Physically, we will have become posthuman only when we have made such fundamental and sweeping modifications to our inherited genetics, physiology, neurophysiology and neurochemistry, that we can no longer be usefully classified with *Homo Sapiens*." Thus, the posthuman creature has crossed "normality's" threshold, lending its body to a techno-scientific colonization that will enhance or intensify its qualities beyond what characterizes the human species.

Today, the popularization of certain practices such as cosmetic surgery, sex change operations, the ingestion of

anti-depressive drugs, anabolic steroids and hormones, produces the impression that we can become human beings *à la carte*, that we do not have to resign ourselves to the gifts and the limitations with which we have been granted by nature. And even though body transformations and drug use to alter states of consciousness have been part of human cultures since antiquity (tribal tattoos, scarification, hallucinogenic drugs, etc.), it is the acceleration of the rhythm and repercussion of contemporary transformations what makes us think of a qualitative leap versus all the previous evolution. In its hybridization with technology the human being surpasses his humanity, since science places within human reach the "conscious" manipulation of his own evolution.

The main concern regarding this hybridization between the biological and the mechanical or technological has to do with the capacity that human beings have acquired to transform nature. The barriers between the artificial and the natural begin to blur as scientific advances progressively make apparent the existing permeability between both poles. Nowadays nobody is alarmed about the use of contact lenses, or even about the implantation of a pacemaker or artificial crystalline lenses. Labelling these people as "cyborgs" (cybernetic organisms) or not depends on the degree we demand of this prosthetic element to regard as cyborg the resulting compound.

Donna Haraway explores the meanings that we have attributed to the term "cyborg", which has become a metaphor that encompasses all those uses of the environment that function as an extension of the human being (from the use of language, to the remote control, the mobile phone, or the computer). In general, however, "real" cyborgs usually are the product of a restorative technology, which returns to the organism its lost function through organ

transplant or prosthetic implantation that replaces the damaged members. In this manner the organism returns to normalcy. However, there are also cyborgs whose technological transformation is somewhat destabilizing or transgressive, since it has transformed them into creatures similar to the rest but already outside normality. And it is this kind of cyborg that receives the appellation of "posthuman."

The posthuman cyborg is that ideal self that we create in our imagination and that some people set about to become using all the technological resources at hand. It becomes in some respects the creature Donna Haraway had envisioned: "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149).

Our bodies seem made of a malleable material of amazing plasticity, penetrated by all sorts of instruments and substances. The shapeless batch of human parts is treated as if it could only reach perfection through its union with the machine, growing dangerously dependent on all its technological extensions. According to Haraway, the metaphor of the cyborg can be liberating, since it can teach us to live according to a different logic. But it can also turn into a nightmare if we fail to understand the way technology is able to process us, using McLuhan's terminology. We are changing in order to adapt ourselves to our new media and technological environments, the machines are increasingly becoming our extensions, our prostheses, our protective barriers, but these can also become a prison if we fail to reflect upon the implications of the direction we are inexorably taking.

Cyber-London:

Between these two poles of technoromantic utopia and cybergothic dystopia, we can place the texts of the London writers that have participated in the *Internet Stories* collection, with an obvious bent towards the darkest side of the spectrum. The atmosphere that permeates most of the stories in Jakubowski's collection feels very cybergothic. London writers have established a very intimate relation with the new digital medium, manifesting a common tendency to concentrate on obsessions, mental diseases, fears, phobias, nightmares and secret fantasies, which are characteristic of the gothic genre.

The collection opens with Matt Whyman's *Crusoe.com*, a surrealist story that evokes the collapse of the start-ups at the end of the 90s and touches on the subject of our growing dependence on computers and technology in general. As the main character narrates: "In that time I went right back to basics. Grew a beard God himself couldn't better, and aimed to survive on the bare necessities of life. Food. Shelter. Laptop computer" (2).

The absurdist situation is that of two men, stranded in a desert island trying to obtain some visibility in the World Wide Web in order to be rescued. Difficulties come when they have to compete with a group of women from a neighbouring island who find themselves in the same situation (but they have webcams!). Matt Whyman's story also serves to highlight, through humour and irony the division of labour inside the informational economy. For example, the character that parodies the figure of Friday in Defoe's novel is a Frenchman. The protagonist reflects about his crucial role saying: "For the man was more than just support staff. He was *human*" (9).

Finally men and women agree to join forces, but, to the men's surprise, the webmistress, leader of the women, has other plans instead of returning home: "Today we become

one island." -she exclaims- "Tomorrow we'll take on more. Increasing our advertising rates, investing in the service, expanding our horizons until we can no longer be considered an island at all. That's when we'll know we've made it. When the rest of the world is lost without us" (15).

With this twist at the end of the story, Whyman shows us the inversion of spatial power from the real to the virtual, from urban spaces to desert spaces, be they real or virtual, which have acquired new prominence with the advent of the informational economy. In this way, through the tale of two cyberculture castaways, Whyman questions the reconfigurations of the relations between dominant culture and periphery after the digital revolution; between a professional elite and a subclass of technoworkers, between men and women, English speakers and French speakers; in sum, between the members of the technological space of flows and the excluded from the production of the new history, using Castells' words.

Sex is a recurrent theme, empowered by the extravagance that the Net exhibits, and nurtured, above all, by the anonymity that it grants its users. Sex and terror combine in narratives that resemble urban legends, modern myths about the real and imagined possibilities that the Internet offers the criminal. For example, *Butt Hutt* by Matt Thorne deals with the fear provoked by "snuff" movies and hardcore porno found on the web. The possibility of creating a deceiving identity through the web gives way to a multitude of crime sceneries. Behind the title *When Larrie met Allie*, evocative of a famous romantic comedy, Val McDermid hides the terrifying store of a maniac who weaves an on-line love story to end up killing the woman that turns up for the date.

Violence is very often directed to women, but this is not always the case. For example, the Stella Duffy's story,

It came in a box, mixes sexual desire with addiction to on-line shopping in a rewriting of *Frankenstein*. Woman builds ideal man to end up destroying him; this is the script for a surrealist story in which the quest for individualism ends up winning the need for contact and companionship.

Stella Duffy ridicules the promises of advertising happiness that revolve around computer technology. Everything begins the day the protagonist buys her first computer:

The nice man said this would help, this would open up new worlds for her. He said this would take her outside of herself, promised far-reaching arms and smiling faces. Promised a global warmth to envelop her cool heart. She wanted that comfort, prayed to go far beyond herself. But she did not want to leave her room. This would be a shining ark to transport her beyond fear, proof against fire, flood and acts of God. This was the same as an act of God. This was a chance to begin again (18).

This new electronic Eve dreams of travelling without leaving the comforts of home, of breaking the barrier of the self without actually leaving the self at all, of feeling the warmth of cordiality without making any effort to nurture a friendship. In the end, she cannot bear the idea that this new man might need her and actually love her, so she destroys him and sends back the pieces while they are still in guarantee.

In this story, Duffy expresses the contradictions of human desire: its need for love, and its fear of a total fusion with the other, the other being here an android. The ego triumphs over love, since loving would imply the acceptance of limitations and this act of humility is in direct opposition with the promises of omnipotence and omnipresence that feed cyberculture.

Another theme introduced, which is directly expressing the changes discussed by Castells, is that of the

electronic home as a refuge from the outside: the home is networked with the rest of the world yet it provides a safe ground for the protagonist to experiment with her wildest fantasies. After September 11, the feeling of danger outside in the work place is accompanied by an intensified feeling of the safety inside at home, and unfortunately the city of London has also had its taste of terrorism. In addition, on-line shopping allows the agoraphobe to continue with her conspicuous consumption habits.

The theme of agoraphobia as a disease that seems to affect women more than men is also present in our next story. Pat Cadigan's "icy you...juicy me" tells the story of a forty-year-old agoraphobic Londoner who becomes intrigued by the behaviour of a New York vagabond who keeps staring and dancing in front of a webcam she is connected to via the Internet. The Web connects two victims of the urban monster, the agoraphobe and the homeless, who are relegated to the internal and the external spaces respectively. The protagonist, for example, expresses her "irrational" fear of the "marketplace". In order to go outside you need money, but also to stay inside, it just depends on your perspective. Cadigan's protagonist also expresses the fear and repudiation felt towards the bleak, suburban spaces that separate the two great cities, London and New York:

She had been watching this little piece of the world on Live Earthcam from her North London flat for, well, she wasn't sure how long. But what she was sure of was that she had absolutely no fear, unreasoning or otherwise, of Times Square, or at least what was visible of it going on north and south from 45th and Broadway.

It was everything in between her and it that had her petrified (245).

In this way, Pat Cadigan's story materializes Castells's ideas about the interconnection between cities

as nodes in a network. The Internet connects two great urban nodes in the global network, New York and London, what actually produces fear is the space in between. However, as the protagonist observes: "What was the big deal about going out? If you could bring it all in and put in on a computer screen –complete with traffic noise– then you were *already* out" (260-261).

The "inside" and "outside" categories become blurred by the technological extension. Eventually, what encourages her to leave the house is the phone that the homeless has left hanging off the hook (after she fell into the temptation of calling the number he had been showing her with a piece of cardboard), and that inexplicably continues to have an open connection with her home. In her hurry, she even forgets to pick up her purse, which has been waiting for her for years to gather enough courage to leave the house.

Homeless in New York, agoraphobe in London. China Miéville's story "An end to hunger" offers us a glimpse of other class and race divisions in the city of London, which are also projected and transferred to the virtual city. The story's narrator tells us of his relationship with a mysterious guy of Turkish descent called Aykan, a computer virtuoso who starts a solo battle against a charity webpage called "An End to Hunger" which he finds offensive and denigrating.

The story starts thus:

I met Aykan in a pub sometime late in 1997. I was with friends, and one of them was loudly talking about the Internet, which we were all very excited about. (...)

He was Turkish (I asked because of his name). His English was flawless. He had none of the throaty accent I half-expected, though each of his words did sound finished in a slightly unnatural way (317).

Aykan starts boycotting this webpage through hacking, sharply aware of the dangerous factic powers inhabiting the Web. The narrator cannot understand his paranoid attitude until the end, when Aykan asks for his help and for the first time in years tells him where he lives. "You been close all this time" (332), he says surprised that the anonymity of the city would be such that it would keep neighbours apart if one wanted it. When he finally arrives to Aykan's flat the door is open but he has disappeared.

Through this story China Miéville expresses the different apprehensions of the real by two Londoners with different backgrounds. For the 100% British man, the radical activism of Aykan is an exaggerated response, whereas for the second generation immigrant British people live unaware of the sharp injustices and hypocrisy of their society. For them, the heterogeneous cultural background of the people coming to live in London turns immigrants into inaccessible others, cyborgs with unnatural accents whose mind is always a mystery and their motivations obscure. Aykan also represents the divisions among technoworkers, since as a member of the second category of workers, and regardless of his expertise and mastery of computers, his projects will never see the light. The Internet has its masters, but it also connects what the city separates: in this story, the narrator and Aykan.

As in many other stories, the theme that runs through the whole collection is the struggle established between the search and need of the other and the risk and discomfort that implies a true contact with him. The virtual space is always a surrogate space, an antechamber after which one awaits for the physical materialization of the other in order to reach the narrative climax. The rich world of relationships generated by cyberspace contrasts with the lack of a complex social fibre in which the

individual can find anchorage outside it. Characters in these stories suffer the nostalgic urge for a primeval community, at the same time that they experience fear about the facility with which surrogates become addictive. CyberLondon is not what they want but it helps mask their loneliness.

As a conclusion, we could say that the real city is now more necessary than ever. Cities have always evoked an image of modernity and technological sophistication without displacing the memory of past times inscribed in its streets, squares, buildings, parks...They have always been points of reference where everything changes yet everything remains the same. Their spaces serve as silent mirrors for the passing of time, fashions, and ways of life, providing for the cultural anchorage and identity their citizens needs.

In his later writings, Manuel Castells leaves aside his most bleak prospects for the future of cities, and instead acknowledges that they have a double role in the global informational economy. On the one hand, they are the key centres of production in the processes of wealth generation of this new type of economy, which is based on the development of networks among individuals and companies. On the other, they are also producers of the social capacity to correct the disintegrating effects of a network economy that lacks any interest in the wider, more integrative or collective social values, such as the preservation of cultural identity.

The city of London is for Castells the great engine that gives power to the area of technological innovation that is Cambridge, since it is a dynamic city, capable of acting as a magnet for talented individuals and risk capital. As a main node in the global network it will have to take care of its relations not only with the other

nodes, but also with its region in order to maintain its cultural identity, which is also provided by the people from suburbia and from other regions of Great Britain.

As I have tried to show, London writers have demonstrated an acute awareness of the challenges that the city of London and its citizens are experimenting in the informational era. They have also given a common flavour to their stories, which taste rather dystopian and cybergothic to me, and this is how I imagined Cyber-London to feel.

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