

Geography of the World's Ending: Capital and the Production of Terminal Spaces

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Abstract

Apocalypse happens all the time and is no longer a time, but a place. Catastrophes are no longer singular events, but geographical structures with their own spatial and juridico-political configuration: *disaster-spaces* that confine what Agamben calls *Homo Sacer*. Their territorial counter-poles are the maximum security, luxury enclaves of the world's new *sovereigns* in Carl Schmitt's sense: the global super-rich, who live outside state regulations in high-tech neoliberal utopias symbolised by Dubai. These terminal spaces are not Foucauldian heterotopias, nor can their complexity be captured by other outmoded theoretical vocabularies. Today's capitalism is anisotropic: it generates and interconnects different types of spatiality, with different laws of movement, for which only some forms of science fiction and contemporary art offer valid tropes.

Keywords

Disaster-space, Dubai, heterotopias, capitalism, science fiction, dispossession.

Resumen

El fin del mundo sucede todos los días y ya no es una fecha, sino un país. No podemos pensar ya las catástrofes y desastres como singularidades que emergen en el tiempo, sino como articulaciones del espacio: estructuras geográficas con su propia configuración jurídico-política; espacios-desastre que confinan a los seres que Agamben llama *homo sacer*. El otro polo de esta geografía está en los enclaves de máxima seguridad y máximo lujo de los *soberanos* del mundo (en el sentido de Carl Schmitt): la élite planetaria que vive fuera del alcance de toda regulación estatal en utopías de ultraliberalismo y alta tecnología simbolizadas por Dubai. Estos espacios terminales no son heterotopías Foucaultianas, ni encajan en los vocabularios teóricos tradicionales. El capitalismo actual es anisotrópico: genera y conecta espacios con propiedades y leyes de movimiento distintas. Solo ciertas formas de la ciencia ficción y del arte contemporáneo son capaces de representar esta complejidad.

Palabras Clave

Espacio-desastre, Dubai, heterotopías, capitalismo, ciencia ficción, rapiña

1. Disasterlands

...They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

Revelations, 6:8

We used to conceive catastrophes as events: whether brought about by the forces of “nature” or “history”, they were more or less arbitrary occurrences that belonged to the domain of the accidental and the contingent, aberrations that interrupted the “normal” course of things. In Christian apocalyptic imagery, they were traditionally symbolised by the Four Horsemen- Pestilence, War, Famine and Death- whose arrival announced terrifying calamities and the End of Days. Disasters and cataclysms were temporal concepts; diachronic categories of the interruption or the end of ordinary Time.

Little did we know that one day disease, famine, war, and upheavals of all kinds would no longer be the names of the Horsemen, but rather the proper names of the Lands they traverse. For the fact is that disasters are no longer events, but *geographies*, i.e. territorial structures within the capitalist world order. Contemporary capitalism not only thrives on disaster -as Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) has eloquently shown-; it actively generates the geographical differentiations that turn whole regions into disaster-prone hell-holes.

An earthquake is an earthquake; a hurricane is a hurricane, but *disaster* is a different thing. *Disaster* is what happens to the common folk of Haiti or New Orleans, not to the rich who can be evacuated by private aircraft and drink a glass of champagne as they (literally) enjoy the view from above. *Disaster* happens to the poor because *disaster* is *where they live*, and there is actually very little that is contingent or accidental about it. As Mike Davis (2006, p. 121) points out, “hazardous, health-threatening locations are the geographical definition” of the settlements where the world’s billions of slum-dwellers live. The poor inhabit topographies that have always been, presently are, or are about to become disaster-spaces: “swamps, floodplains, volcano slopes, unstable hillsides, rubbish mountains, chemical dumps, railroad sidings, desert fringes” (loc. cit.). In other words, places where the world ends, is ending, or ended long ago. *Disaster* therefore is a social construct, and most specifically, in contemporary capitalism it is a category of social geography: it is *Disasterland* or *Disaster-space*.

In Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), when asked about the German concentration camps in occupied Poland, Colonel Ehrhardt of the Gestapo replies: “We do the concentrating, and the Poles do the camping”. Similarly, it might be said that hurricanes, earthquakes and droughts provide the occasion for the *dislocation* of entire populations, but capitalism has always already done the concentration- the *relocation*- of the poor in spaces of disaster. Sometimes -as in most contemporary wars- capitalism itself generates the catastrophe upon which it feeds, sometimes it simply exploits the pre-existing geography of hazardous locations. But this distinction may be neutralised as climate change and ecological crises blur the boundaries between “natural” and “anthropogenic” cataclysms, and destruction becomes not simply something capitalism takes advantage of, as Klein believes, but a necessary part of its own equation, something it needs to set itself in motion. The prospect that capitalism may need to destroy the world, however, is not alien to the experience of the people who already live

in post-apocalyptic environments, the billions who live as if the end of the world had already happened.

How is all this represented in hegemonic discourses? That our language -along with our collective imagination- is increasingly and unconsciously adapting to cataclysms as permanent landscapes rather than singular occurrences is evidenced by the very terminology we employ to refer to them, dominated by phrases containing a spatial reference, such as “disaster *area*”, “war *zone*”, “refugee *camp*” or “shanty *town*”. These terms, which have almost coalesced into compound words or single lexemes, bear witness to the fact that “catastrophe” has become *Disasterland*, i.e. an eminently *spatial* concept, to be understood principally in terms of territorial configurations with economic and juridico-political implications. In Wikipedia, for instance, “disaster area” is defined as:

[...] a region or a locale heavily damaged by either natural hazards, such as tornadoes, hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, earthquakes, technological hazards including nuclear and radiation accidents, or sociological hazards like riots, terrorism or war. The population living there often experiences a loss of energy supply, food, services, and an increasing risk of disease. Declarations of disaster areas open up the affected areas for national or international aid. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disaster_area)

Wikipedia is far from being a reliable, undisputed scholarly source (though its democratic aura of collective authorship may lend it a kind of counter-*auctoritas*, a sort of un-academic prestige among certain sectors of the digital *intelligentsia*), but that’s precisely what makes it relevant here: as a formidable (if not, or at least not yet, the most potent) distillation of contemporary *doxa*, it provides veritable snapshots of what is actually believed by vast numbers of people outside expert circles.

In that regard, as a widely disseminated condensation of conventional wisdom, the rhetoric of the above definition deserves careful analysis. It begins with “nature” and ends in international politics; a whole catalogue of diverse “natural”, “technological”, or “sociological” phenomena are lumped together and conceptually equalised as “hazards”; the precise nature of these “hazards” is deemed ultimately irrelevant, a technicality to be consulted in other articles; the crux of the issue is that the affected areas -affected by no matter what- be “opened up” to “international aid” by “declarations of disaster”. This political corollary is the grand Niagara the definition flows towards like the water in a cataract, for “declarations of disaster” are a variety of- or ultimately pave the way for- declarations of a state of emergency or exception, and as the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt ([1922] 2005, p. 5) famously put it, “sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception”. This is what truly matters, for sovereignty is at stake, and international *aid* must be taken to actually mean international *intervention*.

Disaster-space is intervention-space. The first vector of intervention- but not the only one- is of course military: a territory designated as *Disasterland* is a territory that can be invaded or militarised. As Žižek (2002) observes, since there is no longer a true opposition between war and “humanitarian aid”, the same intervention can function at both levels simultaneously. The Taliban, for instance, have to be bombed in order to secure food transportation and distribution in Afghanistan. But the concept of intervention also includes a host of other dimensions such as the “disaster industry” described by Klein, IMF-imposed economic policies, “reconstruction”

efforts orchestrated by global capital and actually aimed at plundering resources and infrastructures (as in Irak), etc. Thus international aid is another aspect of the whole industrial-military complex of imperialist interventions characterising contemporary “disaster capitalism”. These interventions are based on an extended concept of the state of emergency which includes not only military violence, but the “shock therapy” of structural economic adjustment.

Another significant feature in the above text from Wikipedia is what is left unsaid -but implicitly hinted at- regarding the biopolitics of disaster-space. There is a list of things that go missing in disaster areas (energy supply, food, services); the population is said to “experience loss” and “risk”. Actually it is maximum exposure and the loss of *everything*- up to and including a host of immaterial things, such as dignity, citizenship, civil rights and even a discernible juridical status- that defines the populations of *Disasterlands* as such, for they are “bare life”, what Giorgio Agamben ([1995] 1998) calls “homo sacer”. Their lack of rights defines them: not even in war can they aspire to a clear juridical title such as “enemy” or “prisoner”; they are “unlawful combatants”. Their externality with regard to Law itself in all its forms is what defines their a-political condition. They are outside the Polity, though exposed to its naked violence; wherever they are, they are always in a kind of Guantánamo, a non-place outside the rule of law and the constitutional boundaries of the state, but under its physical power.

In one regard, the lumping together of different types of “hazards” in the definition from Wikipedia is not an ideological distortion, but rather points to the truth beneath superficial differences: namely that regardless of how they come into existence or what triggers their territorialization in the first place, concentration camps, humanitarian refugee camps, “disaster” areas, war zones, ghettos, slums and shanty-towns, are not only interchangeable and constantly mutating into one another (today’s war zone is tomorrow’s camp, and a slum the day after, and then an urban guerrilla area, and so on); they belong to the same sociological matrix, to the same geographical structure. Scattered throughout the planet, the Non-Republic of Disasterland is not a nation-state, but it is a kind of country in its own right (or lack thereof); though spatially discontinuous, its territories are nevertheless economically and politically connected by the same logic of capital. They share the same ecology of natural and unnatural hazards, the same “wars on terror” and “drugs”, the same neoliberal policies of privatisation and fiscal adjustment, the same juridical status in the guise of a permanent state of exception, the same biopolitics of destitution. The geographical form of this new country that will never join the United Nations is that of an archipelago of dispossession. The fact that a minority of us do not live there should not make us forget that the countenance of this land, where the Four Horsemen now ride endlessly, is increasingly the true face of the planet, indeed what the whole planet may one day look like.

2. Dubaitopia

In 2006 an airline in Florida offered “evacuation in style” (in case of hurricane) to the subscribers of its HelpJet service: this included a seat on a chartered jet out of the hurricane zone, reserves for five-star hotel rooms and limousine transfers. But where do the rich go when a private jet or helicopter evacuates them from a disaster area or a war zone? The jet or the helicopter might as well be a spacecraft, for their destination is another planet.

The new global class of the super-rich may have “an Indian passport, a castle in Scotland, a pied-a-terre in Manhattan and a private Caribbean island” (Žižek, 2009, p 4). The same extra-territoriality of financial capital that fuelled a delirious building boom throughout the world in recent years affords this class a special status, a kind of externality with regard to political barriers, frontiers and juridical constraints, which turns them into the true counter-pole of *homo sacer*. They are also beyond the rule of law and outside the polity, but in the sense of being “above”, in their own privatised domains of sovereignty, protected by their own private armies in fortified palaces. Whether they are real-estate developers from Beijing or drug lords from Medellín -undeniably in many ways textbook capitalists-, they are true *sovereigns* in Carl Schmitt's sense: masters of a kind of state of exception, above and beyond the power of nation-states.

For lack of a better term, the planet where the super-rich live might be called *Dubaitopia*, after the glittering emirate powered by the labour of imported near-slaves that became something like Milton Friedman's Beach Club at the turn of the century. Like the archipelago of *Disasterland* -with which it may actually coexist in close proximity-, *Dubaitopia* is a constellation of discontinuous spaces scattered all over the globe in maximum-security, high-tech luxury enclaves popping up from Kabul to Johannesburg, from California to Cairo, from Hong Kong to the Iranian desert. *Dubaitopias* are true capitalist utopias, “dreamworlds of neoliberalism” (Davis & Monk [Eds.], 2007), unfettered by the trappings of unions, political parties, elected assemblies or state regulations of any kind. Indeed, they are post-institutional spaces where capital has finally superseded and discarded its entire traditional political and fiscal superstructure, with all its 20th century notions of “welfare” or “democracy”, from elections to labour laws or income taxes.

As symbolised by a gilded archipelago of private islands known as “The World”, which was literally added to the ocean in Dubai, *Dubaitopian* spaces are intended as separate “worlds” unto themselves. Immune to the “natural” or “sociological” hazards that define disaster-spaces, and free of all the chaos of modern urbanism, *Dubaitopias* are not really “cities” in a traditional sense of the term, but rather post-urban environments aspiring to the condition of what Buckminster Fuller called “archologies”, a kind of self-enclosed space-stations landed on Earth. The ultimate goal of *Dubaitopian* architecture and engineering is not only extra-territorial, but *extra-terrestrial*, i.e. *Dubaitopias* are an attempt at building another planet or leaving our planet behind, like the spaceships that left the doomed Earth in 1950s disaster films like *When Worlds Collide* (1951), or the arkships in Roland Emmerich's recent *2012* (2009).

The Dubai-Lords, however, cannot exist without the Dubai-Dogs. There was a time at the beginning of the 21st century when something between 25% and 50% of all the construction cranes in the planet were located in Dubai (Kaczynski, 2009), but the cranes did not operate themselves. Dubai had about 800,000 citizens and more than 700,000 non-citizens -the foreign construction workers building the world's tallest skyscrapers, the projected spaceship- like revolving towers, and the whole archipelagos of private luxury islands. Ridiculous though it may sound, not only were they not paid anything resembling decent wages, but they were actually trapped in debt by agents who charged them high fees for work visas (Paulu, 2008). The disparity between their slum housing on the outskirts and the luxury dwellings in the city proper was such that many of them preferred to sleep in the bus shelters that had been air-conditioned to provide a respite from the summer heat, which may exceed 45°C.

One can imagine a performance action that would consist in handing out copies of Andre Gorz's *Farewell to the Working Class* ([1980] 1982) to the Pakistani workers in Dubai, or for that matter, the women in the sweatshops in Mexico or the 14 year old girls sewing blue-jeans in China, Dubai-dogs all of them. One could chastise them for not being aware that according to French theory, they were not supposed to exist. The way the world turns, however, is highly ironic, and it is probably all the "post-industrial", "post-modern", or "post-Marxist" theories that we can bid farewell to, while Marx in his grave seems to be having the last laugh. The fact is that a description of the working and living conditions of the Dubai-Dogs that nowadays toil ceaselessly throughout the planet could be inserted in Marx's chapter on "The Working Day" in the 1868 edition of *Das Kapital*, and no one would notice an anachronism. What once seemed to be the past of the working class -indeed a narrative of a proletariat that was no longer supposed to exist- is actually its present.

And what the future may bring is almost already in our imagination. As the world's temperatures reach unbearable limits due to climate change, the achingly beautiful buildings of Dubai-topia finally take off like giant starships, while the Dubai-dogs who built them watch their trails in the sky from their over-crowded bus shelters, where the air-conditioning short-circuits and slowly, but surely, grinds to a halt.

3. The World's True Map

It cannot be taken for granted that our metaphors or our theories can truly grasp the strange geography of a planet of Disasterlands and Dubai-topias. It is not self-evident that we possess, or can even generate, the right kind of figural or conceptual language. About twenty years ago, Fredric Jameson famously argued that the enormously complex world space of multinational capital had turned unintelligible; by becoming what he called a "postmodern hyperspace", it had "finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself [...] and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world" (Jameson, 1991, p. 44). At the political and theoretical level, the impossibility to represent capital's "new decentred global network" as a totality was one of the basic features of what Jameson termed "postmodernism", or the logic of "late capitalism". The outmoded expression "late capitalism" seems bitterly ironic today- indeed, after all that has happened since 1991, Jameson's discourse sounds more like a description of the *early* stages of present day capitalism. But the fact is that Jameson's insistence on cognitive mapping as a key political issue is still relevant at the present moment, and some of the conclusions he reached are still valid; today, even more urgently than twenty years ago, we need to "grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralised by our spatial as well as our social confusion" (Jameson, *loc.cit.*, p. 54).

The first step in this direction, however, involves getting rid of what have proven to be conceptual confusions and outmoded theoretical vocabularies -a whole set of formulations that the politico-economic roller-coaster of the last decades (from Bush the Father to Bush the Son and beyond), has rendered obsolete. We might begin with Jameson's own insistence on the intrinsic *un-representability* of capitalism, which pushed his discourse too far in the direction of the "postmodern sublime" celebrated by Lyotard and others. Jameson's famous analyses of cognitive disorientation in spaces like the interior of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, for instance, failed

to grasp to what extent “un-representability”, far from being an inherent property of the new spaces of capital as incarnated in architecture and urbanism, was actually an ideological effect deliberately designed into the physical structuration of the built environment, a result of an economic process materialised in what Lefebvre ([1974] 1991) calls “conceived space” (*le conçu*). For example, the syntagmatic organisation of floor plans and the engineering of pedestrian flows in shopping malls -the most emblematic “postmodern” spaces- are purposefully designed to achieve effects of cognitive disorientation that force consumers to take some added time in getting from one place to another. In general terms, Jameson neglected to analyse how disorientation and “un-representability” are engineered and forced down upon us.

Another formulation that has been pushed too far in the direction of the sublime and the un-representable- to the point of becoming an ideological distortion- is Foucault's concept of *heterotopian* space. Heterotopias were supposed to overcome the distinction between dystopia and utopia; indeed, they were the incarnation of the ruin of syntax itself in a celebration of anarchic difference:

Les *hétérotopies* inquiètent, sans doute parce qu'elles empêchent de nommer *ceci* et *cela*, parce qu'elles brisent les normes communs ou les enchevêtrent, parce qu'elles ruinent d'avance la “syntaxe”, et pas seulement celle qui construit les phrases- celle moins manifeste qui fait “tenir ensemble” (à côté et en face les uns des autres) les mots et les choses. [...] Les *hétérotopies* [...] dessèchent le propos, arrêtent les mots sur eux-mêmes, contestent dès sa racine, toute possibilité de grammaire; elles dénouent les mythes et frappent de stérilité le lyrisme des phrases. (Foucault, 1966, pp. 9-10)

Ironically enough, this concept that was meant to supersede the utopia/dystopia distinction only reinstates it on another level. To begin with, its exaltation of pluralism and fragmentation is utopian in the naïve sense (wishful thinking); it ignores the fact that heterogeneity is a privileged term of capitalism itself. As contemporary capitalism has repeatedly shown, the market flattens out pluralism into fungibility and exchangeability. In support of his vision of an impossible ensemble that cannot be reduced to a common syntax, Foucault cites all the amazingly incompatible objects from Borges' Chinese encyclopaedia. But taken as commodities, all those objects can actually be reduced to the common syntax of exchange value. And the same goes for space: in the geographies of uneven development, spatial differences are objects of consumption and speculation; Bilbao, Beijing, or Berlin are not incommensurable “heterotopias”, but so many marketable spatialities, rendered commensurable as symbolic or real estate commodities. It is possible then for a multiplicity of apparently incongruous “heterotopias” to jointly compose a meta-space of a higher order which is dystopian in its functioning. Thus, rather than “heterotopias” pre-emptively ruining a “syntax of words and things”, it is the syntax of exchange value that ruins the pluralism of “heterotopias”. What characterizes contemporary capitalism is precisely the fact that spaces that we would intuitively deem to be mutually incongruous and incommensurable are nevertheless interconnected and joined by capital flows, sometimes in the most brutal manner: a drop in the sovereign debt market in China, for instance, may result in someone on the other side of the world losing health care, or their job, or their house.

Something like an attempt at representing this bewildering capitalist topology of interconnections across time and space can be discerned in a recent exhibition

called “The Potosí Principle” at Madrid’s Reina Sofia Contemporary Art Museum (May to September 2010), where paintings from the Latin American colonial Baroque are juxtaposed with a whole constellation of the most disparate works and installations by contemporary artists, in a critical assemblage that reveals historical and geographical processes of violence, dispossession and capital accumulation linking different periods and regions in the most unsuspected ways. Rather than the individual works themselves, the interesting thing about the exhibition is the exhibition itself as a meta-object; how it answers the challenge of the un-representable, how it manages to create links between different spatialities, representations and objects whose extreme disparity does indeed resemble the ludicrous heterogeneity of the items in Borges’ Chinese encyclopaedia. By drawing from an analogously baroque assemblage not a collection of incommensurable “heterotopias”, but the common syntax dictated by capitalism from its infancy to our days, the exhibition seems to answer and deconstruct Foucault in his own terms, somehow breaking through the ideological veil of cognitive disorientation to reveal the geographical structure of dispossession across the centuries.

Another lesson about outmoded vocabulary cruelly imparted by the contemporary world (and also hinted at, though not directly addressed, at the above mentioned exhibition) is how the geography of global capital is too complex and convoluted to be captured by the spatial imagery based upon simple dichotomies like “North” and “South” or “core” and “periphery”. For all its florid language of rhizomes, hybridizations and alterity, mainstream postcolonial colonial theory is still caught in the binary logic of *metropolis* and *colony* that today’s flows of investment and speculation are increasingly voiding of meaning. The “South” can be in the “North”, as in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina or the deindustrialised districts of Glasgow where male life expectancy has dropped to 53,9 years (Brygo, 2010, p. 8); and the “North” can be in the “South”, as in São Paulo in Lula’s Brazil, which boasts no less than 250 heliports in its central downtown area (Žižek, 2009, p. 5).

Perhaps one of the most bizarre examples of how notions of “core” and “periphery” are materially and symbolically deconstructed by global capital is to be found in Thames Town, a replica of a small English town built near Shanghai, where the new Chinese ruling elites can live in a kind of secluded British-inspired Disneyland with “half-timbered Tudor-style buildings at its centre, a waterfront of Victorian red-brick warehouses, and an outlying area of gabled 20th century buildings bordered by hedges, verdant lawns and leafy roads” (Watts, 2004). The signifiers of old empires are ruthlessly dissolved into symbolic commodities to be reshuffled into the new spatial configurations of financial capital and the real estate market, and theory runs the same risk of becoming an empty language unless it comes to terms with these facts.

The premise for an effective cognitive mapping of contemporary capitalism is therefore an analysis of the global structuration of space, which should begin by discarding outmoded vocabularies and ideological myths of all types, including the myth of “globalisation” itself. Instead of the unified space of the master narrative of globalisation, or the binary spaces of “north” vs. “south”, or indeed, the multiplicity of incongruous spaces of Foucauldian heterotopias, the geography of today’s capitalism has generated three basic types of spatiality, three basic articulations of space which can be distinguished in terms of the movements of information, capital, labour, and violence:

- 1: The first spatial level -and the only one that is truly and fully “globalised” in the

sense in which this term is normally understood- is the sphere of financial capital. Its structure is rhizomatic or hypertextual: everything everywhere is, or can be, connected with anything anywhere else at the click of a mouse: *click, click*: one billion euros go to Shanghai; *click-click*, now they are in Zürich; *click, click*: now they are in Frankfurt. On retrospect, it looks quite clear that the “postmodern” or poststructuralist carnival of difference and the floating signifier in the 1980s and 90s was actually the translation of this domain in ideological terms. Without too many mediations, the decentred play of the signifier is the decentred play of the financial markets. Like the Einsteinian universe, their circumference is everywhere, and their centre is nowhere. This form of spatiality that allows capital to move at the speed of light is actually a non-space where distance and time have been abolished by instantaneity. It might be interpreted as the inconceivable “postmodern hyperspace” Jameson referred to, if we take the trope of “hyperspace” in the same sense in which it is commonly used in Science Fiction narratives, where the characters can walk through some sort of stargate portal (a teleporting device, a wormhole, a spacetime fold, etc) and emerge anywhere else in the galaxy. It must be noted that although this articulation of spatiality is symbolised and partly made possible by the Internet, the Internet itself may be about to be demoted to the next level.

2: In the second level of world space there are differentiations, barriers, movements at various speeds, and interconnections of diverse types. It's the world of *uneven development*, a level where time and space can be compressed (Harvey, 1989), but have not been abolished yet. This is the level at which all the other factions of capital operate: industrial production, real estate markets, even the culture industries. It is also the level of nation-states and imperialism, the domain of US power and other rival, subaltern or emergent hegemonies. Contradictions within this level, as well as between its spatiotemporal dynamic and that of the financial sphere, account in part for the present global crisis. Though the variously-called ideologies of “free trade”, “neo-liberalism” or “monetarism” conceptually and/or politically attempt to assimilate this domain to that of financial capital, that aspiration is impossible- a pure ideological smokescreen- for a number of reasons: in the first place, financial capital can abolish time and space and all national and cultural barriers because it is pure *abstraction*, the ultimate empty signifier, the one commodity whose use value is null and whose exchange value is inexhaustible, the one commodity that can be exchanged for any other, and the only one that can even be self-referentially exchanged for itself. By contrast, all other commodities, whether material or immaterial, must incarnate some sort of use value, and must overcome spatiotemporal barriers of one type or another. Even if all political obstacles and regulations blocking free trade are lifted, material goods still have to be transported across space and time at a cost -at least until stargate technology or teleporting devices are available-, and even immaterial goods such as information, symbolic capital and the productions of the various cultural industries are constrained by linguistic and cultural barriers. And secondly, although the logic of financial markets pushes towards barrier-less hyperspace, other factions of capital concerned with counteracting falling rates of profit or protecting their investments in infrastructure may push in other directions, as the current struggles about “net neutrality” and the future of the Internet are making clear. As an orthodox neo-liberal publication such as *The Economist* candidly puts it in its September 2nd, 2010 issue, “the incentives that used to favour greater interconnection now point the other way”, and consequently “network operators looking for new sources of revenue will strike deals with content providers that will favour those websites prepared to pay up”. Traffic will be discriminated (or blocked) on that basis, and the result will likely be

“right-wing news sites loading five times faster than left-wing blogs”.

3: The above mentioned *blocking and discrimination of traffic* is precisely what characterises the third level of contemporary capitalist spatiality, a fragmented topography of border fences and border patrols, gated-communities and private security, Baghdad-style “Red Zones” and “Green Zones”, Abu Dahbi and Abu Ghraib; in sum, apartheid and segregation on a planetary scale. This is the world of *Disasterlands* and *Dubaitopias*, increasingly polarised between the global poor and the global rich, and yet ironically unified by the same logic of incarceration, surveillance and paranoia: transit in or out of maximum-security holiday resorts follows almost the same protocols as in maximum-security prisons, and both may be watched by the same mercenaries and private security firms. This structuration of space practically cancels mobility except in the form of deportation, evacuation, or invasion. In Ronald Emmerich’s *2012* (2009), an otherwise rather stupid catastrophe film, there are two brilliant scenes that lay bare the ultimate logic of a world dominated by this segregated spatiality: in one of them a wealthy Russian mafia-capitalist explains how he paid one million euros for a ticket to one of the “Arks” (a true Dubaitopian ship) where the world’s elite and their minions will survive a cataclysmic displacement of the whole of the Earth’s crust. The other scene comes at the end of the film: after the tectonic plates have shifted, a much-reconfigured planet is shown from low orbit; the south pole is now in (what is left of) Wisconsin and, most of the human race- and particularly all of the poor- having been wiped out, the rich are free to inherit and repopulate the Earth (which might be the subject of a TV spin-off series). It is the ultimate Green Zone, cleansed of all the surrounding Red Zones.

To sum up: at the first level spacetime has been abolished by the perpetual circulation of money; at the third level circulation has almost been rendered unviable by increasingly segregated divisions, and in the middle, the “incentives” and interests of different factions of capital and different states may push in one direction or the other: immigration laws, for instance, can be tightened or loosened, allowing for massive displacements of the labour force, or on the contrary fixing entire populations within strictly controlled territorial boundaries, with ghettos or slum-areas being the ultimate horizon of confinement. Capitalism is not one single space, but several interconnected layers of spatiality, with different laws of movement at different levels.

4. Capitalism as Anisotropic Space

The formulations of materialist geography and political economy can help us dissolve ideological illusions, but we still need new modes of representation. Beside the assemblages of contemporary art, the only other field where we can turn to for strategies of cognitive rupture, dissonance and dislocation -the only other language whose imagery matches the complexity of the multilayered spaces of capital- is probably science fiction.

While the cities in the “real” world of *Disasterlands* and *Dubaitopias* become increasingly science-fictional, the imaginary cities in science-fiction narratives become increasingly more realistic, even in their most exaggerated forms. In Alastair Reynolds’ recent novel *Terminal World* (2010), for instance, the world’s “last human city” seems to have been conjured out of the wildest dreams of Dubaitopian architecture: it is literally one single huge *sky-scraiper*. i.e. a kilometres-high spire reaching beyond the stratosphere. This city/building -aptly called *Spearpoint*- is the *last* human city in several

senses of the term: not only is it the last City in the sense of polity or *civitas* -i.e. the last stronghold of urban civilization in the narrative's dying world-, it is also the last possible configuration and ultimate summation of urban space, the final condensation of urbanism into a vast built environment of monstrous proportions and bewildering technological and political intricacy.

For the most significant fact about Spearpoint is its topology: Spearpoint is vertically divided into "zones", city-states with different levels of technology determined not by governments or police or cultural choices, but by the very operation of natural laws, which differ from one area to the next. Thus, "Neon Heights" has analog television and telephones and electric cars, but in neighbouring "Steamville", as its name implies, only steam-driven engines work. Up in "Circuit City" there are functioning computers, but down below in "Horsetwon", only animal power is available. In the "Cybercities" and the "Celestial Levels", computation of increasing complexity is possible, but there are outlying regions where even the bio-chemistry of simple living organisms is too complex to be supported by the underlying physical laws. In general, machines from one given area cannot be made to work in adjacent "zones". As a result of some long-ago, almost forgotten cataclysm hinted at halfway through the story, the very fabric of space-time has fragmented into an ontological mosaic where physics is no longer *isotropic*, but *anisotropic*: it differs from one locality to another.

Now I believe the implications of anisotropic space as a figural device are politically relevant in several regards, and most specifically in terms of the new cognitive mappings required to account for the mystifying spatiality of contemporary capitalism. Firstly, it is worth highlighting that, although "zones" and ontological fragmentation are nothing new in "postmodernist" narratives (McHale, 1987, pp. 43-58), the particular version of this science-fictional trope in Reynolds' *Terminal World* quite transparently allows different *historical* stages in the development of the means and relations of production to be *spatialized* -i.e., to be articulated in a synchronic pattern of contiguous spaces rather than a diachronic sequence. *But this is precisely what contemporary capitalism does through uneven development.* As materialist geographers have shown, although capitalism transforms the world as a whole, it is forced to produce geographical differentiations as part of the same process, developing the productive and social forces in some areas, while curtailing or distorting growth in others (Harvey, [1982] 2006, 1996; Marshall, 1998). Anisotropy is a systemic feature of the capitalist structuration of space- capitalism articulates different topologies with different properties and different laws of movement dictated by different infrastructures.

In *Terminal World*, as in the spaces of contemporary capitalism, movement between zones of different types is a paramount issue -transits are actually the characters' main concern throughout the story, because the "zones" are porous, and "zone transitions" are possible in principle, but difficult and painful in practice- even potentially lethal for some individuals. To complicate matters even further, the "zones" behave like tectonic plates and may shift from time to time with catastrophic results, wrecking the whole urban infrastructure and leaving people stranded in formerly known environments suddenly transformed into alien and hostile territories. There is a moment when one of these shifts transforms all of Spearpoint into a disaster area. *Dubaitopia becomes Disasterland.* Help can only come from outside; but the "outside" is a wasteland populated by cannibalistic cyborgs, deranged terrorist gangs, and an airborne army of dirigible ships that severed all political ties with Spearpoint centuries before to become a kind of mobile state unto itself- an independent war-machine transformed into a kind

of nomadic polity.

It might be argued that, while all the above is quite clearly mimetic of the condition of contemporary global capitalism, it would still not suffice in itself to transcend its ideological veil, for ontological pluralism is after all the master trope of “postmodernist” fiction and theory. From the carnival of difference to the dissemination of the signifier to the anarchic juxtaposition of multiple realities, in the last thirty or forty years pluralism has been packaged in all kinds of narratological and/or theoretical formulations that replicated or celebrated capital’s logic in various ways but without too many mediations. As was mentioned above, the concept of *heterotopian* spaces, in particular, was mobilised to proclaim the victory of the heteroclitite, “without law or geometry” (Foucault).

But what makes Reynolds’ *Terminal World* singular –and politically enlightening– is precisely how this figuration is overturned. The “zones” in the novel may be *allotopic*, but they are most definitely not *heterotopian* in the Foucauldian sense. To begin with, though divergent in the extreme– even to the point of physical laws being different–, they are not wholly incongruous or incommensurable; on the contrary: as the plot moves, they can be seen to be linked through every conceivable form of cultural and political articulation, ranging from warfare to confederation. And most importantly, they are all unified by a single *syntax*, in the shape of a kind of underlying tectonics deriving from a founding Event in the remote past: more than ten thousand years before the beginning of the story –the protagonists eventually learn– a malfunction in a species of vast teleporting device unleashed some sort of space-time disruption that has remained active ever since then, causing the ongoing cosmic phenomenon to which the zones’ fragmentation and the shifting topology of their boundaries owe their strange existence.

What was at first believed to be a purely natural order –or disorder– of things (and indeed, what can be more “natural” than the laws of physics themselves?) is thus revealed to be the result of a technologically mediated social process, a man-made technological catastrophe involving an interplanetary transport network. A system born of disaster, and maintained by disaster ever renewed; a cataclysm extended in time– a permanent state of exception

As David Harvey (1989) explains, through the development of the transport infrastructure, capitalism aspires to the compression, even the abolition of space-time. Teleporting devices are the ultimate incarnation of this goal, the supreme technology, and as such it is only logical that they should pose the greatest ecological risk– the possibility of a disruption of physical laws themselves. This trope literalizes Lefebvre’s assertions about capitalism thriving through the production of space: in Reynolds’ *Terminal World*, capitalism’s technological forces of production literally *produce* space, i.e. they alter space-time down to the physical level.

Altering the properties of space-time may sound too far-fetched, but as I suggested above, sometimes the most exaggerated science-fictional imagery is actually the most realistic. In the September 2010 issue of *The Economist* there is an article on recent scientific discoveries that suggest that, contrary to what scientists have believed for centuries, the universe may indeed be anisotropic; i.e., the laws of nature may change from one region of space to another. Researchers from the University of New South Wales in Australia have found “evidence that the [so-called] fine-structure constant may not actually be constant after all. Rather, it seems to vary from place to place within the universe” (*loc. cit.*).

It's not surprising that a publication such as *The Economist* should pay attention to such discoveries, for the possibilities they offer for future profits are truly fascinating. If the laws of physics are indeed variable, then finding an effective technology to alter them is only a matter of engineering, and engineering itself is, in turn, a matter of cost-benefit analysis; *i.e.* ultimately a matter of investment or, in other words, speculation. What huge profits if gravity itself, or entropy, could be privatised!

5. The Final Frontier

What are the final frontiers of capitalism? How far can it go? In a footnote to Chapter 31 of *Capital*, Karl Marx quotes a bourgeois writer, T.J. Dunning, who sums up what is now called "shock therapy" or "disaster capitalism" quite excellently:

Capital is said by a Quarterly Reviewer to fly turbulence and strife, and to be timid, which is very true; but this is very incompletely stating the question. Capital eschews no profit, or very small profit, just as Nature was formerly said to abhor a vacuum. With adequate profit, capital is very bold. A certain 10 per cent will ensure its employment anywhere; 20 per cent certain will produce eagerness; 50 per cent, positive audacity; 100 per cent will make it ready to trample on all human laws; 300 per cent, and there is not a crime at which it will scruple, nor a risk it will not run, even to the chance of its owner being hanged. If turbulence and strife will bring a profit, it will freely encourage both. Smuggling and the slave-trade have amply proved all that is here stated. (Dunning, 1860, pp. 35- 36, cited in Marx [1867] 2007, p. 834)

So expropriation, illegality and violence are nothing new, and that is precisely one of the basic truths that needs to be grasped about capitalism. Marx analysed this process in the historical context of the transition to capitalism in England, the enclosure of the commons, and the beginning of colonialism and imperialism, what he referred to as *ursprüngliche Akkumulation*- which should be translated as "original accumulation", but has traditionally and erroneously been rendered as "*primitive* accumulation", as if it were confined to the past, to the foundational pre-history of capital, when in fact the problem is that *it has never ceased to happen, it is happening all the time*. We cannot describe a "moment of violence", or "shock therapy" that is exclusive to a certain brutal or "primitive" period of expropriation and then never happens again. In other words, the distinction between "savage" and "civilised" capitalism is meaningless, or simply corresponds to two forms of accumulation that coexist throughout the periods of capitalist history. In 1913, Rosa Luxemburg observed that capitalist accumulation as a whole, as an actual historical process, had two different aspects:

One concerns the commodity market and the place where surplus value is produced – the factory, the mine, the agricultural estate. [...]. Here, in form at any rate, peace, property and equality prevail, and the keen dialectics of scientific analysis were required to reveal how the right of ownership changes in the course of accumulation into appropriation of other people's property, how commodity exchange turns into exploitation and equality becomes class-rule. (Luxemburg, [1913] 1951, p. 452)

But alongside this "peaceful" side of capitalism there was a darker systemic process:

The other aspect of the accumulation of capital concerns the relations between capitalism and the non-capitalist modes of production [...] Its predominant methods are colonial policy, an international loan system –a policy of spheres of interest– and war. Force, fraud, oppression, looting are openly displayed without any attempt at concealment, and it requires an effort to discover within this tangle of political violence and contests of power the stern laws of the economic process. (*loc.cit.*)

In his 2003 book *The New Imperialism*, David Harvey expands this concept of “original accumulation” to create a new concept, “accumulation by dispossession”, which encompasses phenomena such as the expropriation of intellectual property rights, privatization, and environmental predation and exploitation.

What are the final frontiers of dispossession nowadays? In 1991, Fredric Jameson affirmed that modernisation was “complete” because capital had commodified culture and the unconscious, which he believed were the last bastions that remained unconquered. Today Jameson’s view seems hopelessly naïve. Dispossession today might perhaps be summarised in a flash by juxtaposing in a video installation footage from science-fiction films that look like documentaries, and footage from documentaries that look like science-fiction films. This imaginary assemblage would look more or less as follows:

On one screen, Science Fiction as Documentary: The scene from Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) where Rick Deckard gets a snake scale examined via electron microscope:

Deckard: Fish?

Cambodian Lady: I think it was manufactured locally. Finest quality. Superior workmanship. There is a maker’s serial number 99069-07X/B71. Interesting. Not fish. Snake scale.

Deckard: Snake?

Cambodian Lady: Try Abdul Ben-Hassan. He makes this snake.

(From Brian Silverman’s transcription of the 1982 US Theatrical Release of *Blade Runner*)

Genomes have been patented, privatised -the markers of property are inscribed in the innermost recesses of living matter. Capital controls biology: “Biopiracy is rampant and the pillaging of the world’s stockpile of genetic resources is well under way to the benefit of a few large multinational companies” (Harvey, 2003:148).

On the other screen, Documentary as Science Fiction: *Organ Market*, a video by artist/documentary filmmaker Sally Gutiérrez at the exhibition “Embedded Art: Art in the Name of Security” (Berlin, Akademie der Künste, 2009).

The Tondo district, near Manila harbour in the Philippines, one of the poorest and most densely populated urban areas in Asia. In the slums of Tondo people sell their organs to make a living. A cornea or a kidney can be “donated” for as much as US\$ 2000. In a matter-of fact tone, the video shows how squalor and transplant biotech converge in a surreal world where dystopias have become reality, and the poor are harvested for body parts by the rich. (Gutiérrez, 2009)

In H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1899), humanity splits into two different species. The posthuman Morlocks *feed upon* the Eloi. But an analogous biopolitical bifurcation of the species is already under way. While the body politic of the Western World is being made "safer and safer" through tougher immigration laws and all kinds of high-tech counter terrorist military operations, the "natural", biological body, of wealthy individuals is increasingly invested with a similar technological pursuit of security at all costs- including dreams of longevity or even immortality through rejuvenation techniques and transplants. But the organs must come from somewhere, and outside the walls there live millions of expendable, vulnerable bodies.

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