On the Status of Science Fiction and Realism in the Age of Dissolved Technological Aura

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In his article "Fear and Loathing in Globalization" (2003), first published in the magazine "New Left Review" but then reprinted in his larger utopia-centered study "Archaeologies of the Future", Fredric Jameson, probably one of the most well-known theorists of cultural postmodernism, makes an intriguing comment about one of William Gibson's latest novels, *Pattern Recognition* (2002) – a comment which, if to be studied more closely, might have interesting consequences concerning the relationship between (contemporary) realism and science fiction, the possible future perspectives of both genres, and the empirical condition of our cultural reality today.

Jameson notes that there is a great contrast between the novel's *thoroughly namedropping style* – its main character, Cayce, is a peculiar intuitive "cool hunter" who, in the logo-filled world of today, has "commodity bulimia", allergic physical reactions towards bad fashion, logos and advertising, and is therefore frequently employed in the advertising industry as a physical indicator of what might and what might not appeal to the general consumptive "cultural unconsciousness" of the future – and between *the main focal point of its narrative content* – Cayce is employed to find the author of anonymous film strips, published in the internet, which, in their minimal style, are devoid of (pop)cultural references of any kind. According to Jameson, this contrast, and the fact that Cayce's talent itself lies halfway between (future-oriented) telepathy and old-fashioned aesthetic sensibility, "*suspends Gibson's novel between Science Fiction and realism*"[i]. The particular context of this assertion needs no deeper exploration at this exact point – Jameson doesn't seem to develop it any further – but what matters is the assertion itself, if taken to a more general level, and its possible literary-theoretical consequences concerning the status of mimetic representation of our cultural reality today. One other well-known theorist, this time mainly of postmodernist poetics, Brian McHale, has also noted in an interview that since Jameson said these things about science fiction and realism, William Gibson, formerly most well-known as a cyberpunk science-fiction author of the 80s and 90s,

"has gone on to write entirely contemporary novels, set in the immediate present, involving no projection of future alternatives at all. Nevertheless, these novels have an entirely science fiction "feel," especially Pattern Recognition, Gibson's 2003 novel about 9/11, as well as its sequel, Spook Country, from 2007. This can be seen as confirmation that Jameson was right, and that Gibson has reached the conclusion that the only way to write science fiction now is to write immediately contemporary novels."[ii]

First of all, it has to be noted that both these remarks on the convergence of science fiction and realism – as well as some of Baudrillard's known comments on the postmodern science-fictionalization of reality itself[iii] – are thoroughly empirical in kind. They are purely (adequate) descriptions – there's a talk about a "feel" here, and a lack of directly spelt-out theoretical or philosophical content. My main aim in the following presentation is to propose one possible version of this content. In other words – if the contemporary realist novels which aim to adequately describe the immediate contemporary world really "feel" science-fictional, would it then be possible to detect and point out the poetic, cultural or

philosophical aspects surrounding these novels or the present cultural reality which directly "provide" this feeling?

To try to provide an answer, it is first necessary to explore the required literary, cultural or philosophical pre-conditions which enable the convergence of the "science-fictional feel" and the classic, mimetic, realist literary practice. Here I would like to turn to one of the most-known theories of science-fiction and begin with outlining the basic nature of the aforementioned "science-fictional feel", as it appears in or constitutes (traditional) science fiction. For Darko Suvin, in his groundbreaking survey "Metamorphoses of Science Fiction", the necessary structural component and the dominant formal device of science fiction is an element (which he calls *the novum*[iv]) that causes the effect of *cognitive estrangement*. This effect, not far removed from Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (which the latter defined as "a representation [---] which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar"[v]), may, in science fiction, appear on various degrees of magnitude,

"running from a minimum of one discrete new "invention" (gadget, technique, phenomenon, relationship) to the maximum of a setting (spatiotemporal locus), agent (main character or characters), and/or relations basically new and unknown in the author's environment".[vi]

Such a representation *must necessarily be* cognitive – the source on which the novum is based must be cognitively familiar, recognizable or traceable (the way we can recognize, for example, that a flying car is extrapolated from the usual car; or the way uploading our consciousness would seem somehow plausible or even possible because we can interpret our knowledge memory as bits of data) – or we would immediately cross over to the terrain of the fantastic where this kind of recognition is much more indirect, more difficult, or realized on the metaphorical, rather than on the immediately metonymical level. A novum or cognitive innovation, then, is a "totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality"[vii]. A novum, as a poetic device, therefore in a way enables us a certain distance, a certain estranged point of view from where, even if metaphorically, to look at our reality *as if for the very first time.*

Returning to the topic of literature, and taking into account the assumption that the contemporary realist novel – as any kind of realism – applies immediately mimetic techniques on one's cognitive sense of (cultural) reality then the aforementioned "science-fictional feel" which is at question here must at least partially originate from that (cultural) everyday reality itself. Coming back to Jameson's and McHale's remarks, it is now possible to ask another crucial question – if the "good old" cognition-based mimetic realism nowadays really produces a "science-fictional feel", then how can reality itself, in its immediate intimacy, somehow cognitively *estrange* us, so that we can "recognize it" but still somehow retain a fundamentally "unfamiliar" distance towards it? How can (cultural) reality itself feel like cognitive innovation? How is it possible that the various phenomena we live amongst – no matter whether they're objects, relations or persons – in their own *direct epistemological representation*, as reality, produce science-fictional cognitive estrangement?

It is here that we have to first transfer the source of cognitive estrangement from the novum of the science-fictional novel directly to the (cultural) reality itself, to the particular experience of the current condition of the empirical world today. And it is here that a

couple of well-known contemplations on a certain *distance*, or lack thereof, might help us – specifically, Walter Benjamin's concept of *aura* and Fredric Jameson's concept of the *technological sublime*.

Walter Benjamin uses the term *aura* primarily in the context of characterizing the source of the uniqueness or authenticity of a work of art and defines it as "the unique phenomenon of distance, however close [the work] might be"[viii]. This distance once generated the work's "existence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be"[ix], granted it its historical authority, immersed it in tradition, and caused the rituals oriented towards it. Benjamin used such a concept of specific distance in order to take notice of its withering in the era of mechanical reproduction. "The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition;"[x] thereby rendering the object "too close" and depriving it of its aura:

"...the contemporary decay of the aura [---] rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent towards overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. [---] To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura is the mark of a perception whose "sense of universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction."[xi]

Even though Benjamin said these things in the middle of 1930s, historically thus quite far from the cultural and scientific developments of today and in the general framework of topics which only interest me here by way of an indirect analogy, what might still remain relevant in contemporary analysis is the basic mechanism of a certain (aural) *distance and its dissolution* which I will a little further on apply in the context of a closeness and proliferation of a different kind.

Whereas for Benjamin various reproductive technologies were the cause of the collapse of the aura which earlier granted the work of art its unique existence, technology itself (and not only reproductive, but of any kind) can also be characterized by the possession of an aura of its own – of a specific distance that it maintains towards the ones who experience the cultural reality which it now thoroughly penetrates. This aura – by nature at once fascinating and terrifying, attractive and estranging – is, of course, different from Benjamin's original concept and can in my mind first be described with the support of Jameson's notion of *the technological sublime*.

"The sublime was for Burke an experience bordering on terror, the fitful glimpse, in astonishment, stupor and awe, of what was so enormous as to crush human life altogether: a description then refined by Kant to include the question of representation itself, so that the object of the sublime becomes not only a matter of sheer power and of the physical incommensurability of the human organism with Nature but also of the limits of figuration and the incapacity of the human mind to give representation to such enormous forces. [---] The other *of our society [---] is no longer Nature at all. [---] I am anxious that this other thing not overhastily be grasped as technology per se, since I will want to show that technology is here itself a figure for something else."*[xii]

Jameson's notion of the technological sublime doesn't therefore imply that technology itself with its "inner nature" should somehow be considered ungraspable but rather that technology represents something which in itself is exactly that; and precisely the hint of the ungraspable nature of this something else is the source of what I would call technology's aura – a certain estranging but necessarily mesmerizing distance from any representation of technology.

"The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. This is a figural process best observed in a whole mode of contemporary entertainment literature – one is tempted to characterize it as "high-tech paranoia" – in which the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup are narratively mobilized by labyrinthine conspiracies of autonomous but deadly interlocking and competing agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind. [---] It is in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that, in my opinion, the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized."[xiii]

Through such contemplation Jameson considers technology as a figure for the incommensurable "sublime other" of the postmodern (cultural) reality. At this point it is no longer difficult to transpose this contemplation to the cognitively estranging effect gained from reading science fiction: science fiction estranges not so much "in its own right", not because it "invents something new", but because it is the preferred literary form (and possesses, through the novum, the necessary tools) for the metaphoric representation of the *novelty inherent in technology itself*, for the figural depiction of the infinitely ungraspable and therefore *always novel* technological sublime. It is precisely this *qualitative novel*ty – a certain necessary cognitive distance from the technological sublime – that I would like to designate as the *aura of technology*.

But since the time Jameson stated this before 1991, the impossible totality of the network of the social and economic institutions of the contemporary world system has gained a direct "material embodiment" in the form of digital networks which, through their constant proliferation and infinite ungraspable multiplicity, *directly and explicitly, with no metaphorical transaction of any kind,* emphasize the merely and resolutely particular existence of one's (both ontological and cultural) everyday existence, and her immediate effacement with the inherent multiplicity of the technological sublime. In other words, the high-tech scientific developments of the present late-capitalist culture have been by now so smoothly and thoroughly integrated to the perception or understanding of our surrounding everyday that their near-natural and unnoticeable presence, almost intimate closeness and speed aren't worthy of mentioning as something *directly novel* anymore. In the contemporary cultural reality which is thoroughly immersed in and constituted and by various kinds of (both material and immaterial) networks, it is now the constant contrast between their infinite multiplicity and one's own particular existence which is "always new" and thus provokes cognitive estrangement. My proposition is that, in Benjaminian terms, the technological aura, the estranging distance we have earlier maintained towards the technology that surrounds us – but also the somewhat safe position from where to grasp

and designate our own cultural estrangement – has in the wake of advanced technological integration and the proliferation of digital multiplicity started to wither and fade, or to completely merge with reality itself. Put in science-fictional context, the frightening and estranging novelty of industrial technology which was earlier the primary source of inspiration for creating the science-fictional novum has, through the thorough penetration of reality by the technological sublime, inseparably spilt over to (cultural) reality as a whole. Or yet still in other words – the novum has indiscernibly merged with socio-cultural reality; and the ones who experience this reality have been *fused into* the technological aura. Cognitive estrangement must in this context be described as the effect gained from experiencing late-capitalist cultural reality itself: instead of specific technological phenomena which were earlier, in the modernist times, the only privileged (and in itself almost isolated) source of novel (science-fictional) estrangement, the late-capitalist reality as a whole, to some degree, now always seems to appear to the ones who experience it *as if for the very first time.* This cultural reality, being here the ultimate "medium in transition", appears, like a novum, itself up to a degree as if being "out of our norm of reality". It is no longer some specific (scientific or technological) phenomena which create the cognitive estrangement from "a safe distance", but rather the ungraspable, impossible totality of the late-capitalist cultural reality that emphasizes the thoroughly *particular* nature of our experience of reality in an era of the constant proliferation of digital multiplicity (the latter, in itself, being a figure for the Benjaminian "sense of universal equality of things"). Precisely due to the contrast between this particularity and this multiplicity, reality appears, as Brecht already put it, "familiar but at the same time unrecognizable".

It seems that only in the basic framework of this peculiar thinking it is possible to think the "suspension of borders" between (contemporary) realism and science-fiction, to think the notion that the directly mimetic representation of cultural reality necessarily produces a "science-fictional feel" – and to provide a theoretical insight to the above-cited empirical assertions by Jameson and McHale. It is in the light of this argument that we might interpret McHale's above-cited statement that Gibson has reached the conclusion that the only way to write science fiction now is to write immediately contemporary novels.

In support of this line of thought, I would now like to give some short literary examples from Gibson's recent novels which might illustrate the abovementioned "science-fictional" feel in the fabric of everyday reality:

"She turned on the bedside lamp, illuminating the previous evening's empty can of Asahi Draft, from the Pink Dot, and her sticker-encrusted PowerBook, closed and sleeping. She envied it."[xiv]

"She knows, now, absolutely, hearing the white noise that is London, that Damien's theory of jet lag is correct: that her mortal soul is leagues behind her, being reeled in on some ghostly umbilical down the vanished wake of the plane that brought her here, hundreds of thousands of feet above the Atlantic. Souls can't move that quickly, and are left behind, and must be awaited, upon arrival, like lost luggage."[xv]

"Through this evening's tide of faces unregistered, unrecognized, amid hurrying black shoes, furled umbrellas, the crowd descending like a single organism into the station's airless heart, comes Shinya Yamazaki, his notebook clasped beneath his arm like the egg of some modest but moderately successful marine species."[xvi]

"CPUs for the meeting, reflected in the window of a Soho specialist in mod paraphernalia, are a fresh Fruit T-shirt, her black Buzz Rickson's MA-1, anonymous black skirt from a Tulsa thrift, the black leggings she'd worn for Pilates, black Harajuku schoolgirl shoes. Her purse-analog is an envelope of black East German laminate, purchased on eBay-if not actual Stasi-issue then well in the ballpark."[xvii]

It is here, in the simple descriptions of the everyday, that we can trace the complete mergence of cultural reality with Jameson's technological sublime, the cognitive estrangement generated by the simple "mimetic" representation of contemporary reality itself. In the first two examples, the "science-fictional feel" is generated by representing the emotional-subjective faculty (e.g. envy, souls) through thoroughly technological imagery or metaphors (the closed and asleep state of the PowerBook; souls being reeled in like lost luggage) In the third, this (the heart of the station; notebook as the egg of some marine species) is complemented by the thoroughly fragmentary perception of what could be called the technological sublime (the contingent details of the crowd in the station as a kind of self-operating machine in its own right; the undetectable nature of the faces in the crowd), and the "predominantly visual or aural" flow of time that Jameson took notice of in Gibson's earlier cyberpunk novels of the 80s.[xviii] In the fourth example (as a bit in the first), cognitive estrangement is created by the staggering density of proper names – clothing items and accessories here not only being described through common names but by their implied smooth integration into well-known (proper) brand names, the proper name here symbolically designating infinitely more than the common name would (this is a territory that Jameson has already explored).

It is probably possible to bring more examples here, and to name more novum-like sources or factors of *realist cognitive estrangement* in Gibson's text, but it is more important to emphasize that these excerpts should be considered as neither *solely* science-fictional nor *solely* adequately real in regard to the cultural condition depicted but *indiscernibly both at the same time*: in this respect we might as well be dealing with a new literary form evoked by a change in the cultural condition, by the dissolution of the technological aura.

Finally, and in a different line of argument to which I have little space to devote here, the ungraspable nature of the late-capitalist technological sublime and its indiscernible fusion with cultural reality should not only be thought in terms of spatiality, but also and as much in terms of temporality. Brian McHale, drawing a firmer line of division between realism and science fiction than I do here, has already devoted a thought to this, noting the incapability of realism to grasp the speed of change of contemporary technological developments:

"Science fiction has justified itself by giving us tools for thinking about contemporary experience, as realism once could, but not longer does. "Good old mimetic realism" has actually become retrograde with respect to the immediate contemporary world. Realism is not really well-equipped to deal with change at this pace, and it inevitably lags behind where we are now; it's not paying attention to the right things or looking in the right places."[xix]

Curiously, in an interview devoted to his latest novel *Spook Country*, William Gibson, commenting his recent turn to contemporary novels as something necessary, has noted the same incapability in the case of science fiction:

"I don't know if I'll be able to make up an imaginary future in the same way. In the '80s and '90s--as strange as it may seem to say this--we had such luxury of stability. Things weren't changing quite so quickly in the '80s and '90s. And when things are changing too quickly, as one of the characters in Pattern Recognition says, you don't have any place to stand from which to imagine a very elaborate future."[xx]

So it seems it's not only realism but also future-oriented science-fiction which is experiencing difficulties in grasping the current pace of the developments of the contemporary cultural reality today. And it might as well be that this new literary form (probably, as Jameson would put it, still on its way towards a defining proper name of its own) which Gibson's novels hint towards and which indiscernibly merges science fictional cognitive estrangement with realist mimetic practices, is one of the few mediums to adequately represent the empirical condition of the present-day late-capitalist culture and the radical collapse of the technological aura.

i Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London, New York: Verso, 2005), 390 (my emphasis).

ii See Marina Grishakova, Jaak Tomberg, On the Obligation toward the Difficult Whole. Interview with Brian McHale (Hortus Semioticus 3 (2008)) http://www.ut.ee/hortussemioticus/1_2008/mchale.html (accessed April 14, 2009)

iii Jean Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed Hal Foster. (New York: The New Press, 1999), 36–7

iv Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction.On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 63

v Bertholt Brecht, Kleines Organon für das Theater in *Gesammelte Werke*, 16 (Frankfurt, 1973), 192

vi Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction, 64

vii Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction, 64

viii Walter Bennjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction in *Illuminations,* ed Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), 216

ix Walter Bennjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 215

x Walter Bennjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 215

xi Walter Bennjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 216-7

xii Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London; New York: Verso, 1999), 34-5

xiii Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London; New York: Verso, 1999), 37-8

xiv William Gibson, Spook Country (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2007), 1

xv William Gibson, Pattern Recognition (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2003), 1

xvi William Gibson, All Tomorrow's Parties (Viking, 1999), 1

xvii William Gibson, Pattern Recognition (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2003), 8

xviii Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London; New York: Verso, 1999), 38

xix See Marina Grishakova, Jaak Tomberg, On the Obligation toward the Difficult Whole. Interview with Brian McHale (Hortus Semioticus 3 (2008)) http://www.ut.ee/hortussemioticus/1_2008/mchale.html (accessed April 14, 2009)

xx Across the Border to Spook Country: An Interview with William Gibson, http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?ie=UTF8&docId=1000112701 (accessed April 14, 2009)