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KNOWING WITH THE CITY: SUBVERTING COGNITIVE EMPIRES THROUGH SPECULATIVE FICTION

I. Performing Citizenship

No wonder that various forms of speculative fiction and the rise of the city as the main living space for world populations have been so tightly connected, because both are the great inventions of the modern era. From Shangri-La in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933) to the Cradle in Neal Stephenson's *Seveneves* (2015), from the eponymous city in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to Los Angeles in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) fictional urban landscapes materialize the promises and threats of the technocratic imperialism developing from the late 16th century onwards. As Anke Steinborn and Denis Newiak argue in the introduction to the volume *Urbane Zukünfte im Science Fiction Film* (2020)[1], utopian and dystopian cities of the future depicted in science fiction films fulfil a more important function than just a spectacular backdrop for entertaining action. These imaginary urban landscapes should rather be treated as visualizations of the dominant social order, which have the potential to disclose many of its aspect that would otherwise remain hidden. The same could be said about the literary representations of urban futures, which the architect Carl Abbot analyzed in his *Imagining Urban Futures* (2016) in the context of the current developments in city planning[2]. Steinborn and Newiak go so far as to conceive of fictional future cities as "seismographs" that anticipate impending social and civilizational dangers of our time, also suggesting possible solutions[3]. In my essay I rehearse a similar notion, trying to read exemplary works of speculative fiction as narrative cognitive devices that exist alongside and in a complex relationship with other typically Western forms of knowledge-making. However, I treat the view from elsewhere and elsewhen that speculative genres offer not as a warning against the ongoing economic-ecological crisis. I am more interested in the way which they provide vantage points for the existing urban environments and allow to expose their relationships with the operations of imperial politics and capitalist economy. However, before I approach these forms and functions of speculative fiction, I would like to locate them in the context of today's geopolitical problems of cities

[1] Anke Steinborn, Denis Newiak, "Wahr'scheinliche Zukünfte: Urbanes Leben mit Science-Fiction neu Gedacht," in *Urbane Zukünfte im Science-Fiction-Film*, edited by Anke Steinborn, Denis Newiak (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2020), 1-10.
[2] Carl Abbot, *Imagining Urban Futures* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2016).
[3] Ibid., 6.

which at the same time sustain extant forms of imperialism and become spaces of social turmoil and emergent forms of sociality.

It was already in 1938 that Lewis Mumford in *The Culture of Cities* pointed out that the rapid development of cities coincided with the colonial expansion.[4] The two processes reflected the same agenda of the Western empire, its desire to conquer land, gain command of natural processes and power over people and resources. Particularly in the 19th century the rapid expansion of cities in the Old World was often aided by the experiences gained in the colonial settlement, which led to what Mumford calls an "internal colonization" of imperial powers which by that time looked for effective means of social control of urban populations. However, it was only with the onset of a spatial turn in humanities, inaugurated by Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974), that urban landscapes came to be considered as complex social constructions which in turn affect social practices and perception. The French sociologist worked on the assumption that processes of modernization led, among others, to the intense urbanization of social life, that is the shaping of social relations through design of the city.[5] He used this concept within a larger framework of the steady growth of urban populations worldwide to speak about processes of colonization of everyday life by the capitalist logic of market which organizes urban environments as spaces of consumption and market exchanges, threatening other types of social bonds. The ongoing pertinence of this perspective is proven by the recent studies which situate Lefebvre's oeuvre as one of the milestones in the critical assessment of the processes of urbanization, conceived of as a token of the general condition of modernity[6]. However, what proves equally important today is the methodology developed ever since within the spatial turn which combines the analysis of urban planning and architectural styles with sociology and philosophy, as well as insights from economy and technology studies[7]. This perspective entails that these innumerable forces produce urban space to consolidate communities as well as create zones of exclusion and strengthen social hierarchies and divisions, and at the same time offer insights into ways of countering it. Because of the steady growth of urban population worldwide and the expansion of megacities[8], this interdisciplinary critical approach has ever since allowed

[4] Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, San Diego: HBJ 1970, 393-396.
[5] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Hoboken: Wiley 1992.
[6] Łukasz Stanek, "Introduction," in Łukasz Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research and the Production of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), vii-xv.
[7] Ibid., vii-viii.
[8] According to the current UN estimates, 55% of world population lives in cities and this percentage is supposed to increase to 68% by 2050. Cf. *68% of the world population projected to live in urban areas by 2050, says UN*, https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html, accessed 24th September 2021.

scholars to highlight the detrimental effects and paradoxes of modern urban development.

A case in point is Arjun Appadurai and James Holston's contribution to the issue of "Public Culture" (1996) devoted to these problems[9]. They work on the assumption that today the rapid development of world's metropolises makes manifest the changes in the concept of citizenship, because cities replace nations as an important space of citizenship in which emergent communities challenge the rules of sovereignty and territorial belonging inherited after the epoch of nation-states. Not only are cities the main living space for most of the world population, they are also zones of migration of people and goods as well as ideas and images. This flow in urban centers turns them into spaces in which the modern concept of citizenship understood as membership in a society on equal terms with all community members is questioned and contested. Clashes of races, religions, classes, cultures and genders that typify urban life make social groups visible and provide opportunities for renegotiating the rules of belonging in the community, forming communal bonds and exercising citizen rights by those who have hitherto been unseen or regarded as illegal migrants. At the same time, however, the modern city, with gated communities, ghettoes and expanding slums instantiates the heightened drive towards social segregation and control over the flows of urban population. As Appadurai and Holston argue, the corollary of these tendencies is the disintegration of social imaginary of citizenship as a full membership in society. In view of these dynamic changes of urban societies, they argue for an understanding of citizenship not in terms of a passive belonging to a territory, but rather as performances of active participation in the life of an urban community which provide a firm basis for a common purpose and equal rights for all members.[10] Social tensions and conflicts, struggles for visibility and legal recognition can all be regarded as such performances. However, this urban turmoil challenges the extant theories of citizenship and the study of the new emerging communities and concepts of belonging. Therefore Appadurai and Holston conclude: "We need more images and narratives of urban economies so that we can better identify the various ways in which such cities spawn class fragments, ethnic enclaves, gang territories, and varied maps of work, crime, and kinship."[11]

As a matter of fact, Appadurai's later book, *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013)[12], reads like an exemplary response to this call and an elaboration on the concept of performative citizenship. In the second part of the volume he looks into the shaping of urban communities in Mumbai, a city which by the turn of the 21st century became one of world's largest metropolises and "the loci

[9] Arjun Appadurai, James Holston, "Cities and Citizenship," *Public Culture*, no. 8 (1996), 187-204.
[10] Ibid., s. 192.
[11] Ibid., s. 200.
[12] Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

of the predatory global capital."[13] Appadurai traces its development in the latter half of the 20th century, to delineate a major change in the communal life of the metropolis. In the mid-1970s this well-managed metropolis, by that time still called Bombay, dominated by commerce, trade and manufacture, and open to a variety of ethnicities and cultures, started to deteriorate due to the shortage of jobs and considerable increase in population due to migration. Due to steady and gradual worsening of living conditions, overcrowding and economic problems the anti-poor sentiments were more openly voiced. In this environment the xenophobic and anti-Muslim regional party in India, the Shiva Sena, set up in 1966 as a movement for ethnic control of the city, gained considerable power. It was responsible for instigating outbursts of violence against the poorest inhabitants of the slums and pavement-dwellers. It also exerted considerable influence on the official housing politics aimed at pushing the slum population out of the city and selling the land to global developers.

In the long run those major interventions of capital allied with political parties in the make-up of the urban community produce a large group of city dwellers which Appadurai, with reference to Giorgio Agamben's work, calls "bare citizens" – people deprived of secure housing and stripped of the right to the basic amenities[14]. This considerable and growing section of urban population is not only a symptom of the destructive impact of global capitalist expansion on the local communities. For Appadurai the uncertain social status of this part of the population offers "a lens on citizenship"[15] which from this point of view becomes completely divorced from any spatial location and does not guarantee even the basic shelter from the elements. No wonder that Appadurai is focused on telling the story of such performances of citizenship in the poorest social strata of Mumbai residents. A large portion of his book is devoted to the activities of the Alliance, a network of grass-roots and community-based organizations which fight for secure land tenure, proper housing, access to sanitation, electricity and other amenities that Mumbai slum dwellers are in want of. Appadurai documents not only the legal battles waged by the Alliance in defense of these vulnerable districts, but also their efforts to design and develop new housing for the poor, educating them, as well as inviting the cooperation of a host of architects and builders. What is significant in the context of my essay, from the point of view of these struggles the citizenship, contingent on various performances, is volatile and unstable, and therefore cannot be regarded as a "passive belonging to a territory, an ethnos or a polity"[16]. It is a condition that must be constantly renegotiated, fought for, and contested.

[13] Ibid., 131.
[14] Ibid., 117-120.
[15] Ibid., 121.
[16] Ibid.

As Appadurai argues, in order to provide an informed account of these ephemeral performances of citizenship, one cannot rely on the trusted anthropological methods of describing a community inhabiting a certain location. The citizenship in flux that he writes about is not only dependent on the dynamic of a community, but also relies on the flow of ideas and people across national borders in the age of digital networks. Therefore, he proposes the turn towards an "ethnography of circulation"[17], more in synch with the drive to globalization which informs local grass-roots activism. However, what is manifestly missing from his account is the function of literary, artistic and performative genres in this new type of ethnographic endeavor. In the following, drawing on his concept of the city as an arena for the struggles over citizenship, I would like to take a closer look at how they are reflected and enacted in the discourses and practices that Appadurai mentions only briefly – in the works of speculative fiction.

I adopt the definition of this term from Mark Rifkin's recent work *Fictions of Land and Flesh* (2019)[18]. By analyzing a selection of science fiction novels written by indigenous American and Black writers, Rifkin focuses on their use speculative fiction as a way of introducing alternative projects of relating to land and evading the rule of national sovereignty. In his account speculative fiction is less a specific genre, but rather a "mode of relation" with the reader which provides an opportunity to challenge the transparency of the real. The function of speculative fiction is thus to raise questions about the ability of particular ways of knowing to grasp extant forms of being and becoming in the world. In this way speculation not only poses the question: what counts as real, but also inspires an engagement with not-known[19]. In this respect speculative fiction often reveals affinities with live performative interventions into the urban fabric which employ fictional devices to steer the perception of the participants. What is, however, more important, this kind of literary discourse offers a different kind of knowledge from the academic discourses of anthropology and ethnography. To use the distinction introduced by Boaventura de Sousa Santos[20], it does not describe and analyze the processes of performing citizenship, making the readers "know about them". Rather it provides them with a framework for "knowing with" the city, involving them in complex games of identification and estrangement, engaging them affectively and making them see how a spatial urban setup governs perceptual processes, performatively creating social reality. In order to elaborate on this function of speculative fiction in the context of the current renegotiations of citizenship I draw on two works of urban fiction: China Miéville's novel *The City and*

[17] Ibid., 155.
[18] Mark Rifkin, *Fictions of Land and Flesh* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).
[19] Ibid., 7-8.
[20] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 117-118.

the City (2009) and Hao Jingfang's short story *Folding Bejing* (2012). Also, I juxtapose these two works with a performative project *A Trip to Asia* (2006), to highlight the similarities and differences in which they all engage their recipients to make them question the relationship between urban spaces, citizenship and belonging in a community.

II. Seeing the Unseen

As Miéville commented in an interview following the publication of his acclaimed novel *The City and the City*,[21] it was intended as an elaboration of a typical trope of crime fiction, the notion of "the city as a text of clues in a kind of constant quantum oscillation between possibilities, with the moment of the solution really being a collapse, and, in a sense, a kind of tragedy"[22]. It is not by accident that he refers to the vocabulary of quantum physics, which seems to have influenced the basic spatial concept of the eponymous cities in which the action takes place. The plot draws on the stock of conventions of crime fiction, because its principal action is an investigation into a murder of a young American woman, a student of archeology in an East European city in which the action takes place. As inspector Tyador Borlú finds out, she died because she discovered a conspiracy of an American corporate executive who extracts precious ancient artefacts from the archeological site where she worked. Admittedly, the murder investigation that unveils a conspiracy run by a representative of capitalist corporation is a conventional motif, present in crime fiction at least from John Buchan's *Thirty Nine Steps* (1915). In Miéville's novel, however, this trope is updated through an ingenious narrative device that comes straight from dystopian science-fiction: the action of the novel is set in fictional twin state-cities Beszél and Ul Quoma which, in this peculiar version of quantum theory, occupy the same territory. They live in clearly demarcated autonomous realities, forced by the law to carry out on daily basis a quite unusual performance of citizenship. They have to "unsee" the people, buildings and objects belonging to the other city. As it can be gleaned from the novel, this ability is an effect of a special socio-technological training, and it is also mentioned that the newcomers have to learn this skill before entering the territory of one of the cities. It is this aspect of the novel that provides an additional dimension to the sociological and anthropological accounts mentioned so far. In this case the performance of citizenship is contingent upon the culturally mediated schemata of perceiving the urban space and operating in it. No wonder that official measures have to be introduced to keep at bay the danger of perceptual misdemeanor which could lead to a disintegration of the imaginary dividing lines between

[21] China Miéville, *The City and the City* (London: Del Ray, 2009), Kindle.
[22] *Unsolving the City: An Interview with China Miéville*, https://www.bldgblog.com/2011/03/unsolving-the-city-an-interview-with-china-mieville/, accessed 25th September 2021.

communities. An omnipresent secret police section called Breach immediately identifies any act of perceptual disobedience and punishes it more severely than murder. This geo-political peculiarity functions as an obstacle on the way to solving the murder mystery which, as we find out in the beginning, involves different individuals and organizations from both states.

Although the exact location of the two eponymous cities is not given in the novel, there are clear indications that it is situated somewhere in Eastern Europe, within the former Soviet bloc. What testifies to this is not only the proximity of other European cities mentioned in the novel and the fact that the action takes place in the first decade of the 21st century. What is more important, at numerous junctures in the novel Miéville clearly indicates that we are in a geo-political milieu where multinational capital is slowly making its way. The characters mention the fact that members of the state administration have recently started to get involved in commercial matters and attend business meetings with representatives of foreign capital. Also, the aggressive national propaganda is suggested to be the work of newspapers controlled by British or American owners. Even the cityscape, in which old wooden rooftops are ousted by mirrored steel, seem to reflect this slow encroachment of capital, typical of post-communist states. It is in this respect that Miéville, quite like Appadurai , makes us read the city as a text of clues and notice the seemingly minor details in the make-up of the city, which taken together demonstrate the sometimes barely perceptible colonization by the late-capitalist ideology.

Commenting on this motif omnipresent in the novel, Carl Freedman analyzes it in terms of a juxtaposition of two orders of organizing social reality[23]. The policing of borders implemented by Besźel and Ul Quoma is a typical imperial operation of the nation-state, which in this way sets out to strengthen its sovereignty on a given territory occupied by a population understood as a national collective. However, as Freedman argues, drawing on the seminal work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri from 2000, this historical descendant of the colonial powers of the 19th century is currently superseded by a different form of power. Hardt and Negri argued that the old rule of nation states has by the end of the 20th century been replaced by a globalized rule of accumulated capital. This new type of sovereignty, which they call Empire, is "a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule"[24], unmoored from any nation state. It operates beyond any borders and manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. Undoubtedly, Freedman is right in setting Mievillé's novel in this context, clearly pointing to

[23] Carl Freedman, "From Genre to Political Economy: Miéville's *The City and the City* and Uneven Development," *The New Centennial Review* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2013), 13-30.
[24] Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xii.

the fact that it demonstrates that the nationalist agenda in the post-communist states is just a smoke-screen for the implementation of the rule of Empire as a new type of deterritorialized sovereignty. However, I would like to depart from his assessment of the novel as "an arealistic political satire" which illustrates the processes of the expansion of capitalist rule in urban environments. In my reading, informed by the notion of performances of citizenship, Miéville's novel through the use of a speculative and fictional framework, provides a way of knowing with the city from a unique perspective which is not available in knowledge-producing discourses of human sciences, typically striving for objectivity of presentation devoid of fictionalization.

The problem of the relationship between speculative genres and scientific and scholarly discourses was raised by Miéville himself in an essay *Cognition as Ideology* (2009)[25], published in the same year as his novel. He takes issue with the pre-eminent literary theorists, notably Darko Suvin, Freedman and Fredric Jameson, who argued that out of all types of speculative narratives only science-fiction can be treated as literature which brings the reader cognitive benefits because contrary to fantasy it provides a defamiliarizing perspective on the author's immediate empirical environment. Miéville is surprised by the longevity of this myth of superiority of science-fiction, particularly in the face of the wave of mixed-genres, the example of which is *The City and the City*, which have been gaining popularity since 2000. He quite rightly points out that the cognitive value of speculative fiction cannot be measured by its faithfulness to real-life scientific discoveries, because the future technologies and inventions that science-fiction presents as novum are often regarded by science as merely hypothetic if not entirely impossible. Therefore, he argues, it is not in the close affinity with scientific discourses that one should look for specificity of speculative literature, but rather in the effect that it exerts on reader.

Miéville conceives of this type of literature in a performative vein, and defines it as "something done with language by someone to someone."[26] From this point of view one can say that even the awareness that the scientific claims made by the novel are specious, should not prevent the readers from engaging in a game-like interaction with the text. However, what is won in this game is not knowledge of a scientifically described natural or technological processes, but rather insights into the workings of cognition and the putatively logical way of thinking. Miéville, redefining the effect exerted on the reader by speculative genres argues that we should stop trying to distinguish legitimate and illegitimate ways of knowing. Instead, the distinctive trait of such literary texts, which he calls literature of alterity, is their

[25] China Miéville, "Cognition as Ideology: a Dialectic of SF Theory," in *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, edited by Mark Bould, China Miéville (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 231-248.
[26] Ibid., 235.

ability to question the extant onto-epistemic order and "domesticate an impossibility,"[27] as Miéville's great predecessor Herbert George Wells put it. In view of this meditation on the function of speculative literature is not only to bring to the foreground the way we think, but also to question its own ideological underpinnings and its roots in Western cognitive empire, at the same time pointing to alternative modes of knowing the world and with the world. In this respect his postulates come close to Rifkin's concept of speculative fiction and de Sousa Santos's notion of "knowing with" – forms of knowledge that are situated in specific material-semiotic conditions and taking into account all that which falls outside of the familiar cognitive frames of reference.

The City and the City can be read as an exemplary speculative narrative of this kind. The conventional crime plot is just a pretext for exploring the workings of nation-state in the perceptual patterns imposed by the urban space. The novel, written in the first person from the point of view of inspector Borlú, imposes his perspective on the reader, making salient the obligatory acts of "unseeing", that is of state-sanctioned ignorance. In this respect the novel differs from a conventional crime fiction, in which part of the readerly experience lies in the search and interpretation of clues together with the detective. Famously, Agatha Christie wrote her novels in such a way that the reader could follow the detective and control the procedures that he or she employed to solve the mystery and see whether they find and properly interpret all the clues. In *The City and the City* this search is manifestly thwarted, because in his novel Miéville directs the reader's attention to what is and should remain "unseen". Therefore what used to be frustrating for the readers of Agatha Christie's stories as the detective's mistakes, here brings to the foreground the structure of the city and a crucial feature of the nation-state ideology: that borders between the states as a performative effect of interaction with urban space which interpellates the inhabitants just like other institutions of the state apparatus.[28] Such a reading clearly opposed the concept of a novel as illustration of social processes, and in its place offers an account of fiction as form of active knowing by means of imagination. This account clearly undermines the division between academically sanctioned scholarly disciplines and literary fiction, a fundamental distinction for the Western cognitive empire. In my reading I am guided by the recent studies in popular literary genres which demonstrate their crucial cognitive function and subversive potential.

As the French sociologist Luc Boltanski argues in his *Mysteries and Conspiracies* (2012)[29] it is not by accident that crime

[27] Ibid., 236.
[28] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-186.
[29] Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

fiction came into being in the latter part of the 19th century, together with the modern nation states, to which we owe the project of constructing reality for a given population on a given territory. As Boltanski argues, detective novels focus on a crime as an anomaly and a rift in a fabric of this constructed and upheld reality. On the one hand they demonstrate the process of restoring order, threatened by all that try to evade the territorializing logic of nation state, usually personified in the figure of a corrupt aristocrat turned capitalist or a banker, typically a Jew, who is regarded as an internal enemy. However, on the other hand "crime novels and spy stories have arguably been the chief means for exposing to a broad public certain concerns that, precisely because they go to the heart of political arrangements and call into question the very contours of modernity, could not easily have been approached head on, outside of limited circles."[30] In this respect crime novel as a way of knowing social reality outside of academic sociology, is a trial or test for the state as the agency constructing reality, a test that could potentially undermine belief in the homogeneous fabric of reality thus weakening the sovereign power.

In the case of *The City and the City* this test is conducted on the level of perceptual processes and this speculative element brings to the foreground a structural element that typically provided background for urban detective stories, that is their crucial connection with the structural changes of cities in the modern era. As Fredric Jameson has recently shown in his analysis of Raymond Chandler's prose, an integral element of the investigations carried out by the protagonist of these novels, Philip Marlowe, is the urban development of Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s which reflected the imperial politics of pushing the culturally and ethnically others, primarily Mexicans, outside of the city borders, condemning them to social invisibility. However, as Jameson argues, Chandler's prose is full of more or less overt references to Mexico as the space alternate to the imperial order: "Spatially the designation of Mexico … serves as an initial mechanism for sensitizing the reader to what lies beyond the frame, to categories of an essentially spatial otherness of which Mexico proper is only the strongest form."[31] Hence Jameson reads the novels of Chandler as a kind of "phenomenological training in which we learn to sense distance, separation, disjunction, between a container and its contents." Clearly, this concept of crime fiction as a means of phenomenological training that teaches the reader to see what could otherwise pass unnoticed in the urban space points to the potential of this popular genre to become a form of questioning the perceptual patterns that govern everyday behavior. In this respect speculative fiction comes close to the strategies employed by urban activists and artists who prefer direct action in the urban settings, in the form of site-specific

[30] Ibid., xvi.
[31] Fredric Jameson, *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), Kindle.

performances and interventions or project carried out with local communities which thus have a chance of unlearning certain perceptual patterns and look for alternative ways of co-inhabiting urban spaces. The performative aspect of Miéville's novel, the way it rehearses performances of citizenship, can be made even more salient if one compares it to an exemplary site-specific intervention in a public space, in order to undo the performances of unseeing carried out daily by the inhabitants of a city.

III. The City within the City

As a point of reference for *The City and the City* I have chosen a performative work entitled *A Trip to Asia: an Acoustic Walk Around the Vietnamese Sector of the 10th-Anniversary Stadium*, organized in Warsaw in 2006 as part of a larger program of urban interventions. The reason for this choice out of innumerable performative site-specific interventions of this kind is triple: not only did it take up the problem of invisibility of minority communities in a city, but it was also set in an Eastern-European capital undergoing a rapid modernization and employed a fictional framework to highlight the workings of the global capitalist rule. Significantly the project took place at a symbolic moment, when the 10th Anniversary Stadium, a monument of the previous epoch, was dismantled. In the post-communist era, since the fall of the communism, the place became the epitome of the ruin of the Polish communist society. The venue opened in 1955, as part of celebrations of the tenth anniversary of Poland regaining the status of an independent state after the second world war and for four decades served as a place for major sport events. Since the mid-1980s it was gradually abandoned and finally fell into disrepair. However, it was revived in 1989 and rented to a company that turned the stadium into the largest open-air market in Europe called Jarmark Europa. The place became a cultural melting pot, drawing not only Polish merchants, but also large groups of immigrants, primarily from Russia and Vietnam[32]. This place of commercial and cultural exchange was finally closed in 2008 and in its place the new National Stadium was constructed which ever since serves for sporting and commercial cultural events. The symbolic significance of this place has been further highlighted by the transformation of this place in the temporary medical unit, the so-called National Hospital for COVID-19 patients.

This ousting of cultural diversity by a national agenda, visible in the fabric of the city, provided background for *Trip to Asia*[33]. The project was conceived as a response to the symbolic

[32] Joanna Warsza, "A Place that Never Was," in *Stadium X: A Place that Never Was*, edited by Joanna Warsza (Warszawa: Korporacja Ha!art, 2008), 6-7.
[33] The anonymously written description of the project can be found in the volume documenting the last weeks of the existence of the stadium. Cf. "A Trip to Asia," in *Stadium X*, 10-15. A short film presenting the itinerary of the walk can be seen in the archive of Ninateka: *Podróż do Azji*, https://ninateka.pl/vod/sztuka/podroz-do-azji/, accessed 25th September 2021.

absence of Vietnamese population of Warsaw, which according to official estimates is currently around thirty thousand people[34], mainly in the capital of Poland. Although by the time *Trip to Asia* was organized this population was most probably larger and every hundredth Varsovian was a Vietnamese, they were visible only to those who actively looked for them, employed them or shopped a their grocery stores. The project employed the format of a performative acoustic walk which by that time was gaining popularity, mainly due to the success of the German performative collective Rimini Protokoll[35]. The trip began on the left bank of the Vistula, opposite National Museum at a check-in point where participants were given tickets, an mp3 player and a map showing where they should play audio tracks. Significantly, they were also given a large checkered plastic bag, typically used on the markets to transport large numbers of goods and five thousand forged Vietnamese dongs, which could be used in designated stalls in exchange for goods, which also provoked interactions with sellers. Clearly this fictional frame was to impose on the participant the vantage point that was alien to them: that of someone who not only sees the Warsaw Vietnamese, but becomes aware of the richness of the culture that they locally (re)created. From this station they traveled to the next, on the right bank of the river, and the three-minute trip they were informed that they cross an imaginary border between Europe and Asia, listening to the same recorded message air passengers hear when landing in Hanoi. Listening to the audio, and guided by a map they walked around the Little Vietnam, as the Vietnamese sector of the stadium came to be called, learning about origins of Vietnamese migration to Poland, the oppression the immigrants experience, the activities of Vietnamese embassy and secret service, deportations and spectacular careers. Finally they were taken to Thang Long Vietnamese cultural center and a Pagoda, which was built without any official permits within a matter of days as a copy of One-Pillar Buddha of Compassion pagoda in Hanoi. One may assume that the imposition of a fictional framework defamiliarized the perception of the participants, who, as citizens of Warsaw, who might earlier view this spot as another commercial space. The trip, which was also a form of knowing with the urban landscape, revealed the existence of a city within a city, a vibrant culture that otherwise remained invisible and was soon to be obliterated.

There is a strong affinity between Miéville's novel and the performative project in that both employ the "as if" mode, introducing speculative fabulation as a means of disclosing the imperial principles of the social production of space that restricts performances of citizenship. However, *Trip to Asia* offered its participants an immersive experience in the fabric of the city, and

[34] Ewa Grabowska, *Wietnam*, Country of Origin Information Unit. Department for Refugee Procedures, https://wikp.udsc.gov.pl/kraje-pochodzenia/wietnam.html, accessed 25th September 2021.
[35] *Experten des Alltags. Das Theater von Rimini Protokoll*, edited by Miriam Dreysse, Florian Malzacher (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2007).

invited them to cross imaginary borders that separate communities inhabiting the same space. It is through enhancing the visibility of cultural others that the project provided an opportunity of not only getting to know the other but also engaging in cultural exchange that was prevented in the course of daily affairs. They both provide forms of knowing with the city in order to explore other models of sociality, outside of the governing logic of nation-state. In the final section of my essay I would like to examine another speculative fiction of this type, which tackles the problem of social invisibility from yet another angle. It shows that the imperial control over urban population is exerted not only via architectural designs and the policing of performances of citizenships, but also the politics of representation which occludes underprivileged communities and their experiences.

IV. Solidarity of the Unseen

The Chinese author Hao Jingfang's short story *Folding Beijing* (2012)[36], which won 2016 Hugo Award for Best Novelette, provides a yet another take on the theme of performing citizenship in an urban environment. Although the action is set in an unspecified future, the main theme of the story as well as the ingenious technology that it features is an extrapolation of the aforementioned current problems of growing economic inequalities between social groups and the currently implemented policies to isolate and control different sections of urban population. Undoubtedly, the fictional metropolis of the future reflects the current tendencies in the urban politics of China which currently invests a lot of money and effort in megaprojects housing for the people migrating to big urban centers[37]. Jingfang, a graduate of physics who also holds PhD in economics and management[38], used her expertise to conceive of a dystopian fully automated city which embodies the principle of social segregation according to professional merit and economic status. Beijing in her novelette is reminiscent of Besźel and Ul Quoma in that it is divided into three districts which occupy the same territory. However, in this case the way the space is shared is determined by the machinery that allows to fold and unfold all buildings in a forty-eight-hour cycle. The governing class of five million people enjoy life in the First Space for twenty four hours, from 6 a.m. to 6 a.m., after which they are put to sleep in cocoon beds with the help of soporific gas and surface of the earth is turned upside-down to make space for the lower social strata. Twenty-five million inhabitants of the Second Space are allowed to wake up for sixteen hours, from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., when their buildings fold

[36] Hao Jingfang, "Folding Beijing," in *Invisible Planets: an Anthology of Contemporary Chinese SF in Translation*, edited and translated by Ken Liu (Tor Books: New York, 2016), ebook.
[37] Austin Williams, *China's Urban Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
[38] "Hao Jingfang," in *Invisible Planets*.

and retract to make room for fifty million Third Spacers, who live at night till 6 a.m. Then the surface turns upside down again. Any traffic between the zones is strictly regulated and trespassers are severely punished by law. This technological feat, which controls all urban performances of citizenship, reads like a perfect solution to the problem of the richest urban population which relies on the proximity of the poorest employed in the service sector, but at the same time would like to keep them at a safe distance[39]. No wonder that the most common job in the Third Space is waste processing, as its inhabitants are treated by the governing elite as human garbage. Jingfang's story, however, offers more insights into the difference between knowing the city and knowing with the city.

It is not only the living conditions that are different in these three spaces, but also the level of technological development. The Third Space looks like today's poorest city districts with basic amenities and neglected market selling cheap food, and the Second Space is reminiscent of today's middle-class modern lofts. But the First Space is a world of the future, fully-automated and run by intelligent machines which cater for all the basic needs of the governing class. Jingfang modifies the long-standing trope of science-fiction literature in which a journey to distant lands provided an opportunity to get in touch with communities living in a different time, either as remnants of old epochs or future communities. In the case of *Folding Beijing* the inhabitants of the same space seem to live in different times, and the consequences of this lack of temporal coevalness are probed during the journey through all the spaces of the city undertaken by the protagonist of the story, a waste-processing worker and third spacer, Lao Dao.

Jingfang, similarly to Miéville, draws on the stock of motifs from popular literature to set the action of the novelette in motion, however her story is not related to crime fiction. Rather the plot of *Folding Beijing* is set against the background of a typical melodrama in which social divisions stay in the way of a romantic love. Where Miéville used a whodunnit format to problematize the workings of perception, Jingfang, gives her story a melodramatic backdrop which puts centerstage the question of affect and emotion. A woman from the First Space and a man from the Second fall in love despite of her being married, and Lao Dao is employed by them as a clandestine messenger who passes messages and gifts between them. During his journey through different urban landscapes he not only sees them for the first time but also learns about the real purpose of the division of the city. As he is eavesdropping on the conversation of state officials during a UN conference in the First Space, he finds out that the waste processing industry can easily be replaced by technological inventions, but the only reason why it is not implemented is the possible unemployment and social unrest of millions of people. Jingfang clearly capitalizes on her expertise in economy and makes the two state officials provide an in-depth explanation of

[39] Appadurai, *The Future*, 140.

the economic rationale for the functioning of Beijing as a thriving city in times of ongoing crisis. However, only snippets of this conversation reach us, because the scene is written from the point of view of Lao Dao, who understands little of specialist terminology and complex relationships between technological development, migration and job market. I would like to read Jingfang's novelette as another example of a speculative fiction which feeds on the insights from modern social sciences, but it does not introduce the reader to the intricacies of economic theory. Just like Miéville's novel, *Folding Beijing* puts centerstage the problem of invisibility of the crucial aspect of the functioning of modern urban machinery governing performances of citizenship.

Clearly Beijing from Jingfang's story is designed in such a way so to provide as little as possible of direct contact between different social and economic strata of society. This technological solution not only restricts the flow of people, but also allows for a strict control of the flow of information. It is this aspect of sovereign power that the novelette brings into the foreground, coupling the analysis of economic solutions to the problem of overcrowding the cities with the need to create images of urban spaces which conceal the hardship suffered by those on whom the prosperity of the First and Second Spaces depends. Jingfang introduces this topic via two scenes in her story. In the final passage of the first section she depicts the moment when the city turns upside down and unfolds, as witnessed by tired, hungry and bleary-eyed truck drivers, who wait at 6 a.m. on the roadside for the passage through Beijing. From afar they admire the spectacle of "endless cycle of urban renewal"[40] in awe of the technology subservient to the needs of humans. The gaze of the outsiders is clearly introduced at the beginning of the story in order to subsequently, through Lao Dao's journey, how much is concealed under this monumental and awe-inspiring image. The significance of this topic is highlighted again towards the end of the story, when large vistas of urban landscape appear again, this time shown from a manifestly non-human perspective. During the UN conference Lao Dao looks inside the banquet hall with a lectern, behind which a screen shows shifting pictures of Beijing taken probably from an airplane. Some of them show the moment of folding, which the protagonist sees for the first time in his life from this perspective, because earlier he only experienced the Change from the inside of the city. The pictures document not only the construction of the city, but also its economic success, exemplified by shots of neon-lit streets filled with people joyfully rushing to work. And it is this image that upsets Lao Dao much more than the conversation between state officials, because in this visual display of the magnificence of the urban design he does not find even the faintest trace of his own social class which built the city and keeps maintaining it in its current shape.

[40] Jingfang, "Folding Beijing."

To use the terminology of de Sousa Santos, Jingfang in her story confronts two ways of cognitive procedures with different impact on the community. On the one hand, knowing about the city mediated through images and expert discourses is a tool of governance sustaining the territorial sovereignty of the rich, and making the poor disappear or turn into human waste. On the other hand, knowing with the city by entering the living spaces and experiencing it from within seems to provide an impulse for a political action and mobilization of the most underprivileged communities. Admittedly, in the final scene of the story we can see only a single act of solidarity of the invisible, an irreverent performance of citizenship based on compassion and empathy, when Lao Dao, using part of the money he earned as a messenger, pays surcharge for the heat for his two neighbors who would otherwise have to live in a freezing temperature throughout the winter. Also, this kind of practical and experiential knowing is here presented as means of seeing those aspects of urban life which due to the efforts of the imperial operations of power are doomed to invisibility.

V. Concluding Remarks: Unlearning Imperialism

All three works that I have analyzed here can be treated as forms of knowing with the city which stand in clear contrast with the academically sanctioned discourses of hard and human sciences. They provide insights into the workings of the imperial sovereignty which work not only on the level of urban design but also cognitive and perceptual processes. In my reading speculative fiction is a practice that offers a way of knowing with the city by combining insight from various disciplines with ingenious narrative devices of addressing and involving the reader on the cognitive and affective level. Offering a view from elsewhere and elsewhen, they expose the workings of the Western cognitive empire which sustains the ideologies of the modern era responsible for colonization of lands and people. In this respect they also offer a chance for getting rid of the habits of thought and perception which we have inherited from the Moderns. As Ariella Azoulay persuasively argues, in order to prevent the daily occurrence of violence and injustice it is necessary to actively unlearn imperialism, instead of just passively forgetting the epistemologies of the West. In my reading, speculative fictions belong to those forms which she calls "rehearsals", attempts at making visible all "non-imperial actions, memories, and potentialities that … normalized configurations threaten to shut off." [41] Speculative fiction of the kind that I analyze in this paper, by merging the imaginary with the scientific, and the metaphorical with the concrete, provides an opportunity at such unlearning, at the same time calling for major shifts from the

[41] Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso 2019), ebook.

received concepts of abstract knowledge to dynamic processes of knowing in local contexts and communities.

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