

Whiteness, Reloaded

Addressing the ghosts in reverse of the cities yet to exist

Alberto Duman

Prologue: address to the ghosts¹

I know you.

You come from me.

Born in the point cloud of the rig

Ready-posed from birth.

I see you.

You are here before me,

Manifesting our destiny

In the city-not-yet

You look back at me with anticipation

Prefiguring the time when I will be *You*.

I return your fixed gaze across time

In the future presents you can render so fast.

They are ruins by the time I get there.

And though your image will be gone

you will still be there somehow

a residual quasi-object left behind.

Your haunting will soak the scene

as an old image of colonial postures

freeze-framed from the phantom ride

of a ghost train.

Alberto Duman is an artist, university lecturer and independent researcher whose work is situated between art, urban studies and social practice. He is interested in the cultural production of urban spaces, narratives and atmospheres, and the agency of art within the immaterial economy of this production. In 2016 he was the Leverhulme Trust artist in residence at University of East London, where he produced the project Music for Masterplanning. In 2018, the co-edited anthology from the project 'Regeneration Songs: Sounds of Loss and Opportunity from East London' was published by Repeater Books. He is Senior Lecturer in Fine Arts and Programme Leader for the MA Expanded Printmaking at Middlesex University in London, a convenor of the online course PLOI at Autograph and a member of the DIG Collective. His ongoing project 'Haunting the Future City' is developing through educational spaces, films, exhibitions, 'talking ghosts' collective writing workshops, conference presentation and building up towards a publication.

<https://linktr.ee/cinciabigia>

¹ Given the spectral nature of the 'ghosts in reverse', the use of poetics here is intended as an expressive invocation casting a kind of 'spell', its verses directly addressing the inanimate urban actors of the rendered worlds of cities yet to exist that this text is preoccupied with and calling them out into a dialogue with us that acknowledges openly their anticipatory roles in urban discourses.

In recent years, images of 'futuring' of the contemporary city — *a term borrowed from the language of future management* — have been largely shaped by spectral urban figures/agents within urban processes and regeneration atmospheres which I would describe as acts of 'future colonisation'. The most notable aesthetic objects of this production of urban imaginaries are the CGI (computer-generated imagery) renderings of future urban spaces to be found on the hoardings that surround building sites of new developments during construction. Whilst on a cursory level this visual imagery simply functions as advertising for the sale and investment opportunity of the development, they also exceed such basic purposes as needed by real-estate marketing, through the use of persuasively photo-realistic aesthetic means of representation.

Ironically the more rationalised these spatial products become, the better they are suited to irrational fictions of branding.¹

By occupying a threshold between the temporalities of the existing and the yet-to-exist city in their encounter within the location they occupy, these surfaces open a unique discursive space with social and political dimensions, loaded with intense affective agency.

CGIs are not only representations, but actually have agency and become embedded in the construction of space, place and social life — through a powerful mobilisation and assemblage of people, skills and ideas.²

Because of their properties, these peculiar snapshots of moments in the future social life of urban spaces in the making — and the virtual actors within them — help to make apparent some recurring devices of contemporary city-making, that extend into a form of colonisation of urban futures through the fixated preoccupation with producing images of 'future presents', defined as 'technologically constituted futures prone to anticipation'.³ Acting in a spatial urban domain under constant reshaping as oracles of the inevitable becoming of future cities, these spectral urban agents have consistently summoned up a future urban landscape in the present.

These are the 'ghosts in reverse' of our cities, *the paradigmatic urban actors with anticipatory agency, prefiguring the city yet-to-exist and occupying its future ahead of its time*. Because of the place dialectic they set into motion in specific sites across different times, these aspirational digital people as virtual urban citizens are entering in some kind of 'messianic' dialogue with the present time and those encountering them as passers-by in the 'here-and-now'.

The reference to Walter Benjamin's interruptive philosophy of history is not casually employed here. The spectral presence and haunting power of these 'ghosts in reverse' and their CGI future worlds can be understood through Benjamin's conception of discontinuous time as discussed in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, alas in an opposite direction.⁴ Rather than unsettling the facile historicism of a linear past, here a crossing point is exposed between 'present futures' yet-to-be-written and 'future presents' traded and exchanged for wealth creation.

But whilst in Benjamin's philosophy, a disruptive event instigates anamnesis of such discontinuity and seizes the continuum of time with redemptive possibilities for a more just world, in the spaces opened up by the images of the city yet-to-exists in their architectural renderings, we see no signs of redemptive social and spatial justice in the future city.

Racial homogeneity, economic inequality, atomised subjectivities, cultural appropriations, speculative global investments, and a privately managed public realm are steady characteristics of these tableaux understood as images of 'future presents'.

Glaring omissions are also significant in these representations, where all actors on the 'scene' are pasted into a sedated, totally socially compliant situation, with no policing or surveillance cameras as part of their visible infrastructure. To all effects, these renderings exist as images of an ideal present transposed into a predetermined future where nothing changes. Acting both as harbingers and as

proxies, the operative ghosts enlisted by the financialised urban imaginary of global investment are shadowy figures of anticipation and prefiguring with the power to extend beyond the present and shape the future as a matter of marketing and management, carrying with it all the desires and unconscious biases of their creators.

In the utter uncertainty of the present, the time of the global institution and its own planning (whether business or cultural seems not to matter anymore) is the one that asserts its ownership, it prefigures and articulates future urban landscapes visually and aurally and sets their goals to achieve them through marketing and management.⁵

It is in these spectral conceptual mobilisations, that the silent narrative of capital investments leads to the unfolding of a financial imagination of the future city⁶, conceived as a terrain that is empty, open and subject to colonisation⁷. They perform deliberate acts of prefiguring the occupation of future residents and city dwellers in advance of their actual presence on the site, anticipating their existence in affirmative and expressive ways through projected identity and lifestyles, actions and positions in public space. Their actual roles and functions are mostly determined by the selected offerings of human activities typologies by the companies that provide 'ready-posed' figures for the creative assemblages of designers involved in the architectural visualisation industry.

And as we look more closely at these spectral urban agents as significant packages and products of the visualisation industry, we can get a sense of how the social dimension of 'rendering' emerges right at the moment of acquisition of human photogrammetry data. In the journey from scanning, through point cloud renderings and to 'ready-posed' figures, these human-like spatial products carry with them all self-evident social descriptors and aesthetic assumption of their source identities as pattern recognitions of contemporary life fed back to the viewer, into the urban simulations they will become a part of. We know who they are, because they are like crude postures of ourselves, captured in contemporary street photography-like images.

But they also carry the algorithmic biases of their makers as stealth material into the futures they are imaging. Looking at the technological structure needed for these harvesting processes and their geographic distribution, we can see how the use of the word 'colonisation' becomes deliberately associated with a 'scanning bias' that reinforces 'whiteness'⁸ in architectural visualisation of places yet to exist, sanitising the global majority out of its boundaries.⁹ A digital version of white supremacy futurism becomes embedded in the industry of production of the spectral agents that populate the renderings of future cities, most notable at the point of purchase from specialised visualisation industry companies, when these agents are available either as single figures or in 'bundles', as members of potential but 'inoperative' communities.¹⁰

We can think of them as a service population assembled from singular individual acquisitions of actual humans who relinquished the licensed use of their features to become animated 'people', whose destiny is to be copied and pasted into existence as part of a purpose-made screenplay. By inoperative (*désœuvrée*), Nancy does not mean dysfunctional or failing, but rather 'a spontaneous or "unworked" inclination to come together that has no object or purpose other than itself'. Nancy's definition of 'inoperative community' fits well the condition of these actors as potential, ready-posed agents of place-making without a cause, *with no object or purpose other than itself*.

In the data decoding and recoding that occurs in the process of 3D scanning and acquisition from human beings to products on a shelf, the objects and purposes of the 3D people are voided and reset – rendered 'inoperative'. That is, until they are set into action to perform human presence in a rendered urban context, becoming an active part of choreographed 'scenes' of social dynamics (citation on scenes) and collective mobilisations of urban atmospheres: from people to puppets as products and back to 'surrogate people' again.

In this transition, they are switching from being bundled products and turning into imagined citizens, the affective communities of places yet to exist. The 'bundles' are packaged offerings where a group of individual digital characters are brought together in some specific situations, and whose means of association can be derived from purely spatial or circumstantial proximities, or otherwise deliberately attributed basic social categories. For example, the company 3Dpeople proposes 'workers bundles', 'shopping bundles', 'sports bundles', 'café bundles', 'mobility bundles', 'travelling bundles', but also 'kids bundles', 'sauna bundles' and even a 'VR bundle'¹¹. As their names suggest, the 'bundles' constitute a crude sociology of everyday assemblages, but one that satisfies the basic laws of demand and offer of the visualisation industry. After all, a bundle is both 'a number of things that have been fastened or are held together' or 'to make someone go to a particular place by pushing them in a quick, rough way.'¹²

The purpose of turning people into commodities that the technological and commercial process of this industry is dedicated to – from scanning to bundles to renderings – inherently acquires the spectral and structural violence of the colonial enterprise as the subservient acquisition of bodies as products for unique and specific purposes, a digital chattel extracted from reality, 'ready-posed' to act out the visual script they are meant to fit into. These digital bodies are displayed as bundled products for ease and convenience, but the corollary dimension of these bundling decisions also speaks of a social politics at the point of sale: *'who gets bundled up with whom?' and 'for what reason?'*

We use the term 'whiteness, reloaded' here, to signify the continuity between reality and the virtual, then back into reality, and to identify a pernicious and inherent tendency within the visualisation industry – even before it has visualised any urban scene – that becomes established by these choices, as they are presented on the shelves of the companies that offer the 'bundles'. An '**Ethnic Bundle**'¹³, as well as a '**Diversity Bundle 1**' and '**Diversity Bundle 2**'¹⁴ are on the shelf of 3Dpeople products that supply the global industry of renderings for urban development. The chilling effect of this bundling violence comes through as a persistent evidence of whiteness as an oppressive ideology and a regime of representation, reloaded into the building blocks of a racialised future manifested into being through apparently innocuous images, but perpetrating its othering logic into a prolonged 'future present', where nothing actually changes.

By the compound effect of the inherent othering of the 'ethnic' and 'diversity' bundles at the point of sale (whiteness) and the future colonising at the point of visualisations meeting the street level, a 'spectral-structural complex' at work in the architectural urban visualisation industry comes into view. Once understood as part of such future colonising impulses, echoes of notions of 'manifest destiny' reminiscent of US frontier conquests, imbue the architectural renderings with soft violent histories and visual manifestations of self-generated psychotic fantasies, a desire for possessing the real through the use of the architectural visualisation as representational evidence of its unequivocal becoming. The message is: 'This will be your future because we show it to be so', even when disclaimers of 'subject to change' appear in small print on the very same hoardings.

But in the actuality of our present, the condition of urban spaces in all their planetary connectedness is now openly haunted by racial (Black Lives Matter) and immunological (COVID-19) histories – in between all others – that have emerged as finally inevitable key factors in the determination of any possible future of human proximity and co-habitation of our cities.

These stored up grievances, concerns and preoccupations have incubated for a long time as a set of emancipatory and autopoietic speculative futures. But they are now also fully active agents of alternative futures in the making: they are active 'histories that disturb the present'¹⁵ and fully operative actors in the imaginary of future cities. Their presence has flooded the 'thirdspace between reality and ideas of the city'¹⁶ with further hauntings, taking us into an animated state in which a repressed

or unresolved social violence is making itself known: 'The ghost demands your attention. The present wavers. Something will happen.'¹⁷

At the point of convergence of these multiple hauntings and social demands — the spells and counter-spells that make up the city in its incommensurability — the ghosts in reverse of the city yet-to-exist demand our attention as actors of a scripted urban future, a future where the histories that disturb the present are sanitised by the normative ideology of its maker. In Michael Taussig's ethnographic writing on Occupy Wall Street, a voice appears, engaged in an imaginary dialogue between them and Walter Benjamin's writings in *This Space for Rent*.¹⁸ Alex, a code writer sleeping rough in Zuccotti Park is rummaging into her own dialectic caught up between sleep and revolution: 'We are emerging from slumber but we are disoriented, stupored, caught between the dream-work logic of capitalism and the newly forming world.'¹⁹ A world scenario where 'whiteness' finally, only occupies 'a place in the rainbow', as Linda Martín Alcoff writes about in *The Future of Whiteness*²⁰, appears still elusive in the present approach to urban architectural renderings and its service industries, where whiteness still appears as the normative presence against which the 'ethnic' others are bundled up together as the non-normative presence in cities yet-to-exist.

But the gap between the dream-work logic of capitalism and the newly forming worlds is also the space in between urban narratives and urban realities, where the reclaiming work of haunting and exorcising the ghosts in reverse of the city yet-to-exist, may begin.

Endnotes

- 1 Keller Easterling (2015) *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*. London: Verso, p.15
- 2 Gillian Rose, Monica Degen, Clare Melhuish (2016) Looking at digital visualisation of urban development projects: dimming the scintillating glow of unwork. In: Jordan, S. and Lindner, C. (Eds) *Cities Interrupted: visual culture and Urban Space*, London: Bloomsbury, p. 107.
- 3 Barbara Adam, Chris Groves (2007) *Future Matters: Action, Knowledge, Ethics*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill. A complete online archive of the project 'In Pursuit of the Future' (ESRC 2003-6) is available here: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/briefings.html>
- 4 Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt (Eds) (1999) *Theses on the Philosophy of History. Illuminations*, London: Pimlico. pp. 245-255.
- 5 Kirstin Ross (2016) *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. London: Verso, p. 7.
- 6 Max Haiven (2014) *Cultures of Financialization: Fictitious Capital in Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- 7 Barbara Adam, Chris Groves, *op. cit.*
- 8 Richard Dyer (1997) *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. London: Routledge.
- 9 Two recent important and nuanced texts on race, gender, and difference in science and technology studies are: Neda Atanaskoski and Kalindi Vora (2019) *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures*. Durham: Duke University Press, and Ruha Benjamin (2019) *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley.
- 10 Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) *The Inoperative Community*. Oxford and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 11 https://3dpeoples.com/en/shop/?yith_wcan=1&filter_type=bundles&query_type_type=and last accessed 11th February 2023.
- 12 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bundle> last accessed 11th February 2023.
- 13 Pict.1 The 'Ethnic Bundle' as it appears on the website of the company 3D People.com, at https://3dpeoples.com/?s=ethnic&post_type=product last accessed on 8th February 2023
- 14 Pict. 2 The 'Diversity Bundle 01' as it appears on the website of the company 3D People.com, at https://3dpeoples.com/?s=ethnic&post_type=product last accessed on 8th February 2023
- 15 Gregory Sholette (2020) 'Histories that Disturb the Present', at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SjeAzICGYV> last accessed 11th February 2023.
- 16 Edward Soja, (1996) *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. London and New York: Wiley-Blackwell.
- 17 Avery Gordon (2011) Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity. *Borderlands* 10, 2: 1–21. p.3
Last accessed online on [Google Scholar](#) on 11th February 2023.
- 18 Walter Benjamin (1996) *This Space for Rent in Selected Writings*, Volume 1: 1913–1926, tr. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 476.
- 19 'Affix' in Michael Taussig (2012) I'm so Angry I Made a Sign. *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 39 Issue 1, p. 56.
- 20 Linda Martín Alcoff (2015) Conclusion: A Place in the Rainbow, in *The Future of Whiteness*, Cambridge: Polity Press.