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DOI: 10.15290/CR.2020.28.1.05

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The airstream futuropolis: Hauntological reading of Gibson's "The Gernsback Continuum"

Abstract. This article focuses on William Gibson's short story "The Gernsback Continuum", and its reading that may be arrived at through the employment of hauntology. Gibson's story happens in cityscapes of the American Southwest – its urban areas are turned here into a site of struggle between the disillusioned present and the ever-recurring visions of a glorified future. Among the problems tackled by this article is the nature and history of Art Deco architecture and design of the 1930s, the expectations that the Americans of the 1930s had for the future, and the influence that the surviving relicts of the bygone period still exert on the urban dwellers. This article presents hauntology as a theory capable of producing a captivating reading of the story based on the works of Jacques Derrida, Mark Fisher, and Andrzej Marzec.

Key words: hauntology, deconstruction, literary criticism, William Gibson.

Literature is brimming with distinctive images of cities: some of them are grim, like Dostoevsky's St. Petersburg; some are corrupted, like Dickens' London; some are full of petty criminals and avant-garde artists, like Bolaño's Mexico City; and some are unreal, like Borges' City of the Immortals. The urban imagery that William Gibson calls to life in *The Gernsback Continuum*, originally published in *Universe 11* and subsequently anthologized in *Burning Chrome*, is also idiosyncratic, but much different from cityscapes one may take as typical for the Canadian author. Gibson, the most recognizable artist writing in the cyberpunk subgenre of science-fiction, is commonly identified with vast, futuristic cities that sprawl over enormous areas and give shelter to

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massive corporations, marketing agencies, drug traffickers, and hackers. Nevertheless, *The Gernsback Continuum* breaks with this trope and tells the story of an unnamed American photographer hired by British publishers by names of Cohen and Dialta Downes to photograph relicts of the American futuristic design conceived in the 1930s. As the photographer sets out to complete his assignment, he realizes that as he exposes himself to the artifacts of the bygone era, the clear-cut border between the world that is and the world that could have been begins to flicker and dissolve. With each photograph that he takes, fragments of the futuristic designs that gave shape to the American 1930s begin to exert a more pronounced influence on the reality perceived by the protagonist. Eventually, when residing in the cities of the American Southwest, he becomes haunted by the elements of the urban cityscapes, ghosts of an unrealized future. Seeking rescue, the photographer decides to perform an exorcism, free himself of the disturbing specters, and reclaim the ability of experiencing urban areas without being invaded by missed designs and failed expectations.

The spectrality of the unrealized future lies at the heart of Gibson's story and its analysis is the central objective of this paper. The peculiar situation in which the protagonist of *The Gernsback Continuum* finds himself arises from his exposition to the artifacts of the future that never arrived. Because the nature of the task forces the photographer to surround himself with items denoting a particular, never realized vision of progress, he begins to experience a peculiar disconnection from reality and gets drawn to the alternate world furnished as if the prophecies that were dominant in the 1930s came to existence. Understanding the importance of the invasion of the unrealized future for the story and grasping the disturbing effect that it exerts on the protagonist may prove to be a tricky undertaking. Despite the difficulty that it poses, this critical task can be accomplished through the employment of a theoretical apparatus proposed by the theory of hauntology.

Hauntology is a term coined by the French deconstructionist philosopher, Jacques Derrida. In its original, French version "hantologie" is a Derridean wordplay: on one hand, it is a homophone of "ontologie"; on the other, it is a compound of a verb "hanter" (meaning "to haunt") and "ontologie". The seminal work that lay the groundwork for the creation and further development of this critical theory is Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, published in 1993. Hauntology denotes a highly specific way of understanding beings as amalgams of their traces and as results of their past, their heritage, and all the other elements that constitute them. An important feature of hauntology that will reappear throughout this paper is its definition of the "past as ultimate future" (Derrida 2006: 61). According to this view, the past is an absolute and can be modified neither by the present, nor by the future – in fact, every possible future can be reduced to being a function of the past (Derrida 2006: 67). For Derrida, living in a just way means being conscious of the fact that the

present is irrevocably haunted by the past, that the passage of time is a plexus of causal relationships where every conceivable future may be understood only through the analysis of the preceding events and circumstances.

In his discussion on the character of specters, Derrida states that first and foremost they need to be understood through the prism of inheritance and cross-generational exchange. One of the tasks performed by spectral beings is making us “learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But with them” (Derrida 2006: 24). According to the French philosopher, acknowledging the ghostly presence plays a vital role in our lives, as through accepting the past we may effectively find a way towards growth, self-actualization, and better understanding of the surrounding world and the processes that take an active part in shaping reality.

When a specter arrives, its actions are usually disturbing and rather destructive for the haunted subject, and the said subject becomes tasked with facing and exorcising the ghost. But this task is not an easy one. According to hauntological thought, specters always assume bodies that are alien to their nature: tellingly, Derrida calls these bodies “technical prosthesis” (2006: 41). This elaborate veiling of the specters’ identity is aimed at obscuring the real nature of the haunting ghost and at misleading its pursuers. The process of a specter assuming a mask is fundamental for hauntology, as it forces the haunted subject to embark on a quest of understanding the specter and the events that trigger its appearance, and revealing its identity. Completing these objectives is the only way through which the haunted subject can reconcile with their past, understand the reason for the haunting, and dispel the disruptive influence that the specter has on their life.

The hauntological thought coined by Derrida is gaining increasing popularity in the field of cultural criticism. One of the major contemporary thinkers who, based on this theory in delivering his incisive analyses of art, was Mark Fisher. The late British commentator was also a teacher at the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and one of the first thinkers who helped in establishing hauntology as an applicable mode of cultural critique. Fisher’s hauntological offensive happened mainly on his now-iconic blog, k-punk.abstractdynamics.org, and was supported with a series of other articles and think-pieces published in a number of academic and non-academic outlets.

Fisher’s contribution to the development of hauntological thought lies mainly in organizing the theory together with dividing it into subcategories. One of these divisions, mentioned in his article for *Film Quarterly* titled “What is Hauntology?” is of vital importance for discussing Gibson’s *The Gernsback Continuum*. Fisher tirelessly proposed that hauntings happen whenever the present moment becomes tainted with traces and

fragments of dreams of a certain kind of future that was never realized (2008b). Such an unfulfilled promise irreversibly changes the present, as it continuously lurks just below the surface of the mundane reality and causes constant distraction for those who experience it: it constantly reminds them of what was bound to happen but failed to materialize. In the article, Fisher pens the following words: “What haunts the digital cul-de-sacs of the twenty first century is not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate” (2012: 16), pointing to the overwhelming lack of originality and innovativeness that plagues the present moment in the landscape of artistic creation. Fisher observes that the glorious scenarios for the future that promised humans such conveniences as commercial flights to outer space, or robotic servants turned to dust. Instead, we live in a culture of constant repetition, of remixes, prequels, sequels, and reboots: when the mask of the glorious future fell, what we were left with turned out to be a rather underperforming present.

What is most important for the current discussion is the dichotomy of specters that Fisher proposes in the discussed article:

Provisionally, then, we can distinguish two directions in hauntology. The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic ‘compulsion to repeat’, a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern). The second refers to that which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior). (2012: 19)

While discussing The Gernsback Continuum one should focus on the second type of specters, those that arrive from the future and are shaped by our anticipations and hopes for what is yet to happen. The idea of an unrealized future is one of the main propellants of Fisher’s view of hauntology, and the main theme of Gibson’s story.

Moreover, the British critic sees the specter “not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing” (Fisher 2014: 39). This agency of the virtual is embodied in hauntological art through the overlapping of the present with the future, as well as through the semiotic pollution of the present through artifacts that are ahead of the time, such as futuristic buildings, car designs, or items of clothing. In one of his blog posts, Recording Ghosts, Fisher expresses the belief that ghosts may be literally embedded in material objects, and that the presence of these objects directly causes the haunting to take place (2003). In the same post Fisher discusses Nigel Kneale’s *The Stone Tape* and maintains that “hauntings and ghosts are particularly intense phenomena that are literally recorded by matter” (2003). The same trope of spatial haunting resurfaces in another of his posts, titled No Future 2012, where the critic states that “haunting is about space as much as time – about the spaces where the time rift becomes perceptible” (Fisher 2008a). These remarks point towards various ways in which hauntology

may be used to dissect The Gernsback Continuum. Having Fisher's idea in mind, one can perceive the objects that cause the narrator to lose his sanity as futuristic artifacts equipped with an ability to overwhelm their observer and stir the unrealized dreams that so far had lain dormant in his subconsciousness.

These dormant dreams are explained in a coherent way by Andrzej Marzec, a faculty member of the Institute of Philosophy at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. In 2015 he published *Widmontologia: Teoria Filozoficzna i Praktyka Artystyczna Ponowoczesności*, a reliable and comprehensive Polish publication focusing on the area of hauntology. In this book, Marzec comes up with an illuminating explanation of Derrida's theory. He observes that reality is similar to white light: at first glance it is just what it is, pure and white, but when dispersed through a prism it proves to be an amalgam of fragments and traces that are difficult to single out (Marzec 2015: 131). Hauntology operates much like a prism; it dissolves reality and allows one to observe the seemingly absent elements of which it is actually composed.

In Gibson's story, Cohen and Dialta Downes task the unnamed photographer with the mission to capture the images of "American Streamlined Moderne", of "Raygun Gothic" (2016: 29). In essence, the photographer is hired to take pictures of the "uniquely American form of architecture" (Gibson 2016: 29). When the protagonist focuses on visualizing the subject of his task, the submerged memories slowly come to the surface of his consciousness: "I found myself remembering Sunday morning television in the fifties" (Gibson 2016: 29). The American form of architecture — and of design in general — mentioned by Downes and Cohen is, in fact, ingrained in American history. The British publishers want to obtain pictures of the Art Deco architecture that originated in the 1930s and was widely revered for being a unique art form capable of grasping modernity and embodying the future (Betsky 1993). As observed by Ross, Gibson's story testifies to the "wide-eyed idealism of the thirties pulp romance of utopian things to come" (1991: 412). It should be noted that the period in which streamline designs became popular is of great significance — these sleek building facades, cars, and home appliances all heralded the advent of a better future looming just around the corner. As thousands of American citizens were still struggling with the aftermath of the Great Depression, this promise of a bright future was in high demand.

Among the main tools with which the future was actively shaped in the USA were the World Fairs: large, international expositions where various countries exhibited their achievements and worked towards boosting their image and reputation. The exposition that is of importance for Gibson's story is the 1939 New York World's Fair. The idea to organize this fair sprouted in 1935 and envisioned the exposition to be a remedy with which organizers could tackle the economic and social malaise that was constantly looming over the country — this ambition was reflected in the exhibition's slogan: "Dawn of a New Day" (Herman 2012: 58). Along with the impact of the New York World's

Fair, the elements of streamline design were populating an ever-expanding array of elements of American daily life: landscapes and cityscapes, postcards and malls, the shapes of houses and of the cars parked in front of them. As Gibson puts it,

She [Dialta Downes] was talking about those odds and ends of ‘futuristic’ Thirties and Forties you pass daily in American cities without noticing: the movie marquees ribbed to radiate some mysterious energy, the dime stores faced with fluted aluminum, the chrome-tube chairs gathering dust in the lobbies of transient hotels. She saw these things as segments of a dreamworld, abandoned in the uncaring present. (2016: 30)

The future was reclaimed: it was simplified to the form of a single narrative that promised an idyllic age of development and prosperity that was yet to materialize. “The gleaming visions of the Gernsback Continuum — the streamlined rockets, teardrop cars, and sleek superhighways — took on their most concrete, corporate form” (Ross 1991: 429). This optimistic colonization of the future was epitomized in the form of Futurama, one of the Fair’s most astonishing exhibits (Herman 2012: 61). It presented a vision of the social and technological advancements that were to come within the space of the next twenty years. Those who visited the exhibit were given a button that read “I Have Seen the Future”.

The Americans were regaining ground under their feet, partially due to the “thirties’ progressive thinking about technology’s capacity to manufacture a better social future” (Ross 1991: 432). The designers of the times agreed that sleek, teardrop shapes were Platonic forms denoting progress and technological advancement. These cutting-edge designs promised to take those who embraced them to the future, and to do so fast. Visionary artifacts lodged themselves in the society’s subconsciousness and, even after falling out of fashion, still managed to exert an influence on those who observed them. What is more, they even managed to repudiate the present and create an everlasting, continuous sentiment that the progress towards this idealized future was never halted (Bredehoft 1995: 7). In essence, they operated as a manifestation of “a still-present alternate universe which continues to coexist next to reality” (Westfahl 1992: 90). Gibson seems to suggest that the eponymous continuum is an ongoing and everlasting legacy of “blindly visionary thirties’ futurism” (Bredehoft 1995: 5). It does not denote a world that is behind or ahead of us, but a world that continuously manages to exert an influence on the daily life of Americans. Gernsback on the other hand, the name mentioned in the story’s title, refers to Hugo Gernsback, a science-fiction writer and editor, whose efforts in popularizing the genre helped to give shape to the way in which Americans imagined the future, scientific developments, and the conquest of space. The most prestigious literary prize given in the world of science-fiction, the Hugo Award, is named after him.

The arrival of the glorious future that was heralded in the 1930s never materialized. Years went by and the shapes and forms coveted by Art Deco designers lost their edge: once inspiring, they turned into subjects of pastiche or mockery. The future arrived, morphing into the present, and the concrete reality debunked streamline designs as short of the mark rather than prophetic. As later put by Gibson himself, the capital F future is not going to arise (Gorney 2010). Instead, the Americans were bestowed with the disturbed, surrogate present, where the designs of Raygun Gothic come to life: and this is the very present that the unnamed protagonist has to explore.

These failed promises about the shape of the future lie at the heart of the discussed problem. When reading critics who, in their endeavors, decided to deal with this particular story, one can clearly observe that their attitude towards *The Gernsback Continuum* is largely similar. Carol McGuirk asserts that “Gibson invokes the Golden Age intertextually only to undercut what he sees as its naive optimism about technology” (1992: 112), and Veronica Hollinger finds that “‘The Gernsback Continuum’ humorously ironizes an early twentieth-century futurism” (1991: 214). Both these statements come from papers published before the appearance of Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* and the establishment of hauntology, and thus their authors could not have used it to analyse the short story. Nevertheless, an attempt at reading *The Gernsback Continuum* through a hauntological lens may yield interesting results and produce a captivating decoding of the story.

In Gibson’s story, the photographer receives an envelope full of glossies depicting possible objects of his pursuit: Johnson’s Wax Building, winged statues from the Hoover Dam, and cover art from *Amazing Stories*. There is also a picture of a massive plane, shaped like a boomerang, with twelve giant propellers, a ballroom, and a squash court. When asked about the plane, Downes replies: “The designers were populists, you see; they were trying to give the public what it wanted. What the public wanted was the future” (Gibson 2016: 31). After Cohen and Downes introduce the unnamed protagonist to the objects of their pursuit, he commences fulfilling his task. When the photographer commences his work, the seeming uniformity of the daily reality and its coherence begin to dissolve. The protagonists roam the cities of California with a single thought in mind: “It is possible to photograph what isn’t there” (Gibson 2016: 31). As he exposes himself to the influence of this alternate reality for a prolonged period, the artifacts of the streamline future begin to shape his perception:

And one day, on the outskirts of Bolinas...I penetrated a fine membrane, a membrane of probability...Ever so gently, I went over the Edge — and looked up to see a twelve-engined thing like a bloated boomerang, all wing... (Gibson 2016: 33)

Aside from seeing the plane that escaped one of the pictures and came to life, the photographer is haunted by other specters of the unrealized future. When he stops his car outside of Tucson, he observes a breathtaking futuristic version of the city:

Spire stood on spire in gleaming ziggurat steps that climbed to a central golden temple ringed with the crazy radiator flanges...You could hide the Empire State Building in the smallest of those towers. Roads of crystal soared between the spires, crossed and recrossed by smooth silver shapes like beads of running mercury. The air was thick with ships... (Gibson 2016: 37)

Moreover, when standing on the roadside and marvelling at the extraordinary cityscape, the protagonist comes across a couple of residents of this futuristic America. They are both blond; they drive an avocado-shaped, aluminum car; they are both dressed in loose, white clothes; they consume food pills instead of regular meals (Gibson 2016: 37-38).

As the hauntings become increasingly frequent and powerful, virtually tangible, the photographer starts to worry about his sanity and blames his visions on “amphetamine psychosis”. He recognizes the severity of his condition and decides to contact a friend, Mervyn Kihn, a freelance journalist well versed in the “loonier reaches of the American mass mind” (Gibson 2016: 33). Kihn explains to the protagonist that sometimes people see *these* things not because they really exist, but because of a need to see them. He calls these supernatural presences semiotic ghosts, “bits of deep cultural imagery that have split off and taken on a life of their own...That plane was part of the mass unconscious, once. You picked up on that, somehow” (Gibson 2016: 35). As observed by Bredehoft, “Kihn suggests that by focusing on architecture from this future-glorifying era, the narrator has become susceptible to hallucinations based upon such former dreams of the future” (1995: 4). Thanks to Kihn’s explanations and Bredehoft’s remarks, one can make a straightforward connection between the story and the theory of hauntology. Fisher expressed the view that ghosts may arrive from the future, that there exists a certain type of specter foreshadowing events that have not yet happened but are already effective in shaping reality. The ghosts seen by the protagonist of the story belong exactly to this type of spectral presence: they are rooted in hopes and expectations that failed to materialize but were powerful enough to affect people’s perception of reality. The fact that the photographer still manages to get enthralled by these ghosts testifies to their power, but also shows that these unfulfilled promises continuously belong to the American mass unconscious.

To finish the project and deliver the pictures that Cohen and Downes ordered him to take, the photographer needs to get rid of the visions and to exorcise the futuristic ghosts that plague him. When shaping the theory of hauntology, Derrida stated that

haunting happens when a border separating the proper interiority of a clear-cut reality from the inexplicable world of traces and echoes that happen outside gets upset:

An indivisible line. And one always assumes the institution of such an indivisibility. Customs, police, visa or passport, passenger identification – all of that is established upon this institution of the indivisible, the institution therefore of the step that is related to it, whether the step crosses it or not. Consequently, where the figure of the step is refused to intuition, where the identity or indivisibility of a line ... is compromised, the identity to oneself and therefore the possible identification of an intangible edge – the crossing of the line – becomes a problem. There is a problem as soon as the edge-line is threatened. And it is threatened by its first tracing. (Derrida 2006: 11)

In the case of Gibson's story, the border that separates the mundane reality of daily life from the undercurrent of dreams is located within the overlooked, forgotten fragments of reality. By pursuing the relics of the bygone era, the photographer sensitizes himself to their influence and becomes possessed. The French philosopher argues that when haunted by the spectral presence, one should take a step back and return to perceiving the reality as a uniform whole. Only this action may alleviate the effects of a haunting.

Surprisingly, this is exactly what Kihn suggests doing. The method he proposes may at first seem to be a joke, but it does its job. After the episode on the outskirts of Tucson, the protagonist calls Kihn and tells him all about the strange encounter. In turn, the freelance journalist offers him a remedy: "Watch lots of television, particularly game shows and soaps... I'm letting you in on a trade secret: really bad media can exorcise your semiotic ghosts" (Gibson 2016: 39). The photographer listens to this advice and absorbs all kinds of low-brow artistic endeavours that finally liberate him from the grasp of the futuristic ghosts. Towards the end of the healing process, the photographer remarks that he "spotted a flying wing over Castro Street, but there was something tenuous about it, as though it were only half there" (Gibson 2016: 40). Quite possibly, this process of exposing oneself to bad media operates in the story as a mirroring of the solution proposed by Derrida. The photographer walked the thin line between reality and expectations for too long, finally becoming overexposed to the visions of what could have been, and thus falling victim to the ghosts of the unrealized future. In order to revert back to his normal life, he had to free his mind from thinking about the media denoting a vision of the future coined in the thirties, and instead had to plunge himself into the world of the new, contemporary bad media: movies, pulp horrors films, and newspapers. "I rushed into the nearest newsstand and gathered up as much as I could find on the petroleum crisis and the nuclear energy hazard...I headed down the street with my little bundle of condensed catastrophe" (Gibson 2016: 40).

The Gernsback Continuum is a story that can be read in a variety of ways. Numerous critics read it as a work that shows the futility of dreams about a utopian future, as a refutation of science-fiction that is too scientific, or even as an assessment of a dystopian nature of reality where the protagonist has to escape the utopian visions *via* reading articles on the atrocities of the contemporary world. Nevertheless, reading this story through the Derridean apparatus of hauntology manages to produce a new perspective. By deconstructing the work one can unearth and observe the mechanism that causes the appearance of the haunting specters. While Gibson chose the urban cityscapes of the American Southwest as the site of struggle between the present and the future, Derrida and Fisher provided his readers with tools allowing for understanding the importance of unrealized promises. So far, haunting ghosts have been categorized as belonging to the past – in his short story, Gibson shows us that the future is also populated with haunting specters.

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