

ARE WE THERE YET?

*Samuel Te Kani*

"If you look at a city there is no way to see it. One person can never see a city. You can miss it, hate it, or realise it's taken something from you, but you can't go somewhere and look at it and just see it empirically. It has to be informed, imagined. By many people at a time. It's an everyday group hallucination"

Cities in their modern incarnations centre round the reuse of buildings/zones erected to the fascinations and machinations of history. To be alive today inhabiting urban space entails occupying the bones of yesterday's Mecca, be those bones showing the frays of decrepitude or perhaps blasted to a visage of gleaming modernity by various 'renewal' projects. This notion of moving through anciently-modern space, of wading through echoes of urban ancestors, has been fondly referred to as Necro-space, every city being sprawling-wriggling versions of the contemporary Necropolis.

Knowing this, how often does death and decay factor into our self-awareness when moving through urban space? Do we openly acknowledge and welcome how haunted city-living is, or are we collectively hallucinating a zero-sum togetherness under the carte-blanche tutelage of capitalist desire (because functional cities are undeniably centres of commerce, places which draw individuals from the provinces to declare their allegiance to a dream of prosperity that just won't die, no matter how unviable)?

Where does the notion of a haunted city factor into the identities of people living in a city? Beyond that, how vested are citizen's in the spectral totalising of membership within a city? By what and how does a city have a certain character, and how does that characterise them? If the question's put to someone whose decision to live in a city has been imposed by the increasing precariousness of life this late-end of the capitalist experiment, then the answer might be a radically passive one; 'it was not my decision, the world forced me here'.

Are cities then the satellite sites in which the life's blood of this New World Order is collected, collated, and generally hoarded for those proficient in the art of urban-hacking?

Possibly.

Which wouldn't be an issue if the skill-sets to navigate the demands of abstract capital were readily accessible/available for the desiring subject. Alas, that they aren't is something we call Class (lol).

Are we to believe then that cities refuse engagement with their ghosts while transmitting the collective delusion of wealth from elite to elite, simultaneously pitching the grander illusion that the wealth painstakingly managed and moulded away from anything resembling material production, is open to all. It just takes hard work. Beneath the luminous-electric flow of pure capital, like neon blood running through celestial veins, membrane upon membrane of living memory weeps on deaf ears, protesting each fresh layer of cement or plaster, directly opposed to the awesome fluidity shifting urban space which the ghosts themselves once sought with feverish intent. Or something (it's never a great idea to romanticise failure, or death; they are inevitabilities, unless you're God, and should be allowed to pass like the weather).

And what of citizens whose decision to live in the city is only too conscious, born in the crucible of sex and money, given the wings of wi-fi and rent-control and allowed full expression in the urban arena? What seances do they have in the course of a day, with the inter-dimensional underclass grumbling underfoot and in the fibres of the walls like the proverbial troll commissioning riddles for safe-passage?

Fortunately the tenets of empiricism don't provide platforms for the dead-oppressed, and those firmly ensconced in the consensus world can slosh guiltlessly through metaphysical blood without a moments hesitation, let alone an awareness of the constitutive violence with which cities vibrate like a jewel in Satan's crown.

Fuelling the hectic eclecticism of city-living are twin streams of vital incentive; Sex and Money. They are not parallel either. They touch and pull apart at a moments notice, sometimes altering each other irrevocably for better or worse, dancing in an endless double helix of attraction and repulsion. As satellites for a global order, cities signify a triumph over the local and the particular by way of Capital and Sex, in as much as cities are concentrated sites of these hailed powers to the exclusion of most other cultural imperatives. Their hegemony is undeniable.

However, their vectors are decidedly vertical, while anything alleging itself to the concerns of the 'community' are horizontal efforts in direct resistance to the tireless stratification of the former. High-rises, sky-scrapers; all are monolithic testaments to the inexorable pull of these twin gods, and the somewhat nihilistic ideological sequence of 'enjoyment'. Bodies, lands; everything is fodder to the wheel of potential pleasure, grist to the mill of the Dollar and the Fuck.

Vilem Flusser's History of the Devil cites the real demonic force in society as Time. By this he means the Saturnine forces of resistance which we face both individually and collectively, placing these forces in a uniquely Christological triangulation of suffering as Darwinian utility. Pain equals evolution. Positive pain expresses itself circuitously by way of desire, a perceived lack perhaps starting with envy (strategically inflamed by rampantly propagated lifestyle-bytes) and sequencing an identity from this synthetic void itself. What is Flusser's Devilish Time seeking to achieve? Nothing short of humanity's perfection on an infinite timeline, a figurative characterisation of the specie's progressive refinement of itself. In this light the dual vectors organising bodies in urban space (Sex and Money) become utilities to an organic process of adaptation, the ghosts and their ossified bodies haunting glass and steel resembling so much collateral in unending cycles of betterment and renewal.

Problems arise. Who should become collateral towards the embodiment of an ideal version of ourselves? Furthermore, what cultural project is worthy enough it should come at the assumed cost of so many human lives?

To be perfectly psychoanalytic, the disavowed will make a bloody return and possess the living like a plague. Perhaps this is happening already, the ecological nightmares we are entering being the very stuff of ghostly vengeance, a stain on the world courtesy of the colonial sins of our father's father's fathers. Time, ever our friend in the evolutionary innovations between organism and environment, has seemingly turned against us. The odds of survival, not just within the increasingly competitive scramble for urban subsistence but also aboard a planet distressingly near depletion, are harrowingly low. And yet. If suffering and resistance are instruments of Devilish Time with which we are given opportunities to adapt, then adversity (should we choose to meet it) might prove merely an usher into as yet unfathomable versions of ourselves, infinitely superior to what we are now (or just relative to future worlds we cannot yet imagine). If each evolutionary leap is only as great as the sheer intensity of resistance over which a champion-organism triumphs, then we are here presented with the chance to become godly (if that's something we can be bothered with).

Being the nexus of this planet's staked resources, if collective action is going to turn towards the looming worries of the future, it will start in cities. Statistically so because that's where the numbers are, especially in a country as petite as New Zealand. Utopianising aside, the practical smoothing out of difference to the effect of an emergent pan-urban culture can be avoided in pockets and fleeting site-specific moments of belligerent pacing; that is to say, from moment to moment and when it's opportune refusing to perform for every whim and eddy of the twin gods, taking animal-root in otherwise anodyne public space, being rock when you're asked to be water. Just simple stuff like that.

Because solutions won't be found under the moniker of this city's current character, being both tired and prudish. The Money is too rank, the Sex exhausted. And in this limp state the promises made to your average citizen as per (an as yet to be revised canon of) post-war constructivism, have fallen horribly short. We are not amused.

Time to wake up? If only I could find the exit.