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"[A] WINDOW INTO THE CITY'S UNDERLYING FABRIC": BOUNCING AT THE EDGE OF THE GLOBAL METROPOLIS IN WILLIAM GIBSON'S BIGEND TRILOGY

A b s t r a c t. In the article, I examine the descriptions of the globalized urban landscape found in William Gibson's Bigend Trilogy (*Pattern Recognition* (2003), *Spook Country* (2007), *Zero History* (2010)) and argue that in the socioeconomic reality Gibson projects the global metropolis functions as both a global facilitator and a global bouncer acting on the premise of selective inclusiveness. In the article, I first argue that in the Bigend Trilogy cities act as the enablers (or enforcers) of the global flows, and, what is often overlooked, are thus complicit in all the grounding (and often villainous) processes of globalization. Subsequently, I develop some critics' ideas about Gibson's presentation of the urban consequences of global exchange, and conclude that in the trilogy global metropolises are the frontline for the confrontation of globalization and local idiosyncrasies, and portend the advancing global homogenization. Finally, I compare Gibson's analyses of the post-millennial metropolis and the 20th-century edge city. Just like once edge cities, I propose, the global metropolis prides itself as the new Territory of American civilization; the opportunity it offers, Gibson illustrates, is, however, equally illusory and reserved only for the privileged minority.

Key words: globalization; metropolis; space of flows; homogeneity; Empire; edge city; American Dream.

William Gibson's Bigend Trilogy is set in cities; even though the characters are constantly on the move, they rarely abandon metropolitan areas. Nonetheless, in his 2010 review of *Zero History*, James Purdon accuses the trilogy's descriptions of the global urban landscape of flatness. Unlike Gibson's cyberpunk novels, Purdon argues, the Bigend Trilogy simply scratches the (urban) surface, failing to provide the readers with at least "a glimpse of something seedier, stickier, more troubling." Purdon's

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opinion seems unjust. While much more subtle, suggested rather than laid out, Gibson's examination of the 21st-century global urban fabric is as incisive in the Bigend Trilogy as it was in the Sprawl novels, where Gibson addressed the topic of globalization only in its potentiality.

In the article, I examine the descriptions of the globalized urban landscape found in William Gibson's Bigend Trilogy and argue that in the socioeconomic reality Gibson projects the global metropolis functions as both a global facilitator and a global bouncer acting on the premise of selective inclusiveness. Acknowledging the already existing body of criticism pertaining to the topic, I focus on three aspects of the global metropolis I find particularly important to the analysis of Gibson's literary mapping of globalization. First, I argue that in the Bigend Trilogy cities act as the enablers (or enforcers) of the global flows, and, what is often overlooked, are thus complicit in all the grounding (and often villainous) processes of globalization. Subsequently, I develop some critics' ideas about Gibson's presentation of the urban consequences of global exchange, and conclude that in the trilogy global metropolises are the frontline for the confrontation of globalization and local idiosyncrasies, and portend the advancing global homogenization. Finally, I compare Gibson's analyses of the post-millennial metropolis and the 20th-century edge city. Just like once edge cities, I propose, the global metropolis prides itself as the new Territory of American civilization; the opportunity it offers, Gibson seems to be arguing, is, however, equally illusory.

In the Bigend Trilogy, cities are the global hubs and enablers, complicit in all the global processes, transactions, and transformations. As Carl Abbot rightly agues, global metropolises, like New York, London, or Tokyo, function in Gibson's trilogy as "the nerve centers, control centers, information nodes—the places you need to be to stay in touch, to be part of the action" (125); action understood here as both the trilogy's plot and the processes inherent to the global reality. Situated at the intersection of the majority of global flows (e.g. power-political, economic, or cultural), the cites set in motion, facilitate, or support everything that happens in the trilogy[1]. Indispensable as they thus are, both narratively and in terms of the fluidity

[1]The cities' instrumentality in facilitating global flows is symbolized by their foundation; as Gibson illustrates in *Pattern Recognition*, the cities are literally founded on "a clean, uniformly dense substrate of pipes and wiring" (130), aimed solely to enable global exchange. The global cities' unnaturality is analyzed in detail in Alex Wetmore's "The Poetics of *Pattern Recognition*: William Gibson's Shifting Technological Subject."

of global flows, the cities, just like globalization itself, function also as the trilogy's villain: they are the hotbed of secrets that fuel capitalism and guerilla market wars, they support and conceal the nefarious "them" (the powerful minority who control the majority of global flows), and provide the infrastructure for invasive surveillance.

Apart from being accessary to most global processes and undertakings, cities function in the Bigend Trilogy also as the frontline where the forces of globalization confront (and overwhelm) local idiosyncrasies. Affected by the new global geography's preference of interaction over difference, cities in the trilogy become mirror reflections of one another. Intra-network mobility and exchange progressively eliminate the cities' national/local uniqueness. The cities' increasing similarity portends the imminent, and already ongoing, homogenization of the whole globe.

In the global reality of time-space compression, to quote from Ben Jarvis, "axiomatic geographical markers such as 'here' and 'there' become permeable and even problematic" (235-236); once individualized in opposition to other locations, places come to be defined through their mutual influences and interaction. The most intense global interaction, Gibson argues, takes place in cities. Due to well-developed infrastructure of connectivity, the global urban network in the Bigend Trilogy exhibits high rates of geographical mobility and intercultural exchange; combined, the two contribute to the gradual blurring of differences between the network's (mega)nodes. Gibson, critics argue, signals the growing similarity between New York, London, Tokyo, and even Moscow in his descriptions of urban demographics, culture and city(brand)scape: regardless of the geographic location, every megacity in the Bigend Trilogy overwhelms with ethnographic diversity, offers products from all over the world, and has its skyline built from the same colorful lo(e)gos. As the blurring progresses, the cities find themselves subject to denationalization. Having "more to do with each other than with their respective regions or nations" (Link 212), the cities become what Gibson calls "mirror worlds" (*Pattern Recognition* 2), spatio-cultural reflections, sufficiently different as to "enable . . . [both the characters and the readers] to situate [them]selves in contrast to other cultures" (Suzuki 31), yet similar enough to navigate. Mirror worlds, Jarvis writes, have their "own cars, license plates and traffic, plugs and electricity, street lamps and telephone handsets, sash bolts on windows and pop stars on TV, . . . lager cans . . . in unexpected sizes and . . . a unique ensemble of morning snacks" (249). These, however, function as mere local color eccentricities, the mirror

worlds' framework being universal enough for navigation to be a matter of simple comparison(Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* 276)[2]. Still, Gibson seems to be hinting, the comparative relationship between megacities might soon be replaced by, or reduced to, one of equivalence. The more the cities interact, Gibson argues, the more homogenized they become. As Cayce is horrified to realize near the end of *Pattern Recognition*, with the steady increase in the momentum of globalization, pretty soon there might be "no mirrors to find yourself on the other side of" (341). Cayce's prediction pertains not only to cities but to the whole global reality. Global homogenization is apparently already in progress, its advancement symbolized by the ominous digital silence (no echo or background noise) during international (or maybe already simply intraglobal) calls (*Spook Country* 157).

In Gibson's literary reality, global cities both facilitate global flows and mediate the confrontation between globalization and local idiosyncrasies. As a result, the cities are not only complicit in global processes but also reflect the losing battle between the old world of variety and the charging forces of global homogenization. Another point about the nature of the global urban landscape Gibson makes in the Bigend Trilogy concerns the falsity of the global metropolis's image as the place where anyone can realize their American Dream. Though essential, the point has up till now gone unnoticed. In the Bigend Trilogy, the global metropolis produces an illusion of opportunity; the illusion seems to correspond to the fantasy of prosperity and success projected by the 20th-century edge cities. Pointing towards the artificiality of edge cities, in the trilogy Gibson simultaneously comments on the duplicity of the global metropolis. Contrary to what people think, the city is not all-inclusive; while it promotes the interests of those in power, it excludes and extorts those inessential to its functioning.

As Joel Garreau explains in *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (1992), edge cities were new urban areas which appeared outside American metropolises throughout the 20th century. Concentrated around business and commercial districts, with neighboring residential areas, edge cities provided

[2]In-depth analyses of the homogenization of the global urban landscape in the Bigend Trilogy can be found, among others, in Carl Abbot's "Cyberpunk Cities: Science Fiction Meets Urban Theory,"Alex Link's "Global War, Global Capital, and the Work of Art in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*," Ben Jarvis's "'It is always another world:' Mapping the Global Imaginary in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*," Alex Wetmore's "The Poetics of *Pattern Recognition*: William Gibson's Shifting Technological Subject," Shigeru Suzuki's "A Requiem for the Fall of the Petal," or James Purdon's 2010 review of *Zero History* in *The Guardian*.

an alternative to the dispersed big city life. Over time, they were romanticized as the new Territory of American civilization—a "vigorous world of pioneers" (Garreau 7) aimed to rejuvenate American business, and "a new Eden" (Garreau 14) where balance between family and professional lives was to be restored. In the Bigend Trilogy, Gibson portrays the failure of the edge city project. Edge cities, Gibson argues, lack authenticity. Seemingly ideal, they offer only a veneer of success.

Gibson exposes the artificiality of edge cities at the very beginning of *Zero History*. Staring through a car window, Milgrim registers the duality of the observed landscape and finds himself partial not to the edenic space of Conway but rather to the remnants of what it was built on:

Conway . . . a destination you wouldn't be particularly anxious to reach. This abundantly laned highway, lapped by the lots of outlet malls, a Home Depot the size of a cruise ship, theme restaurants. Though interstitial detritus still spoke stubbornly of maritime activity and the farming of tobacco. Fables from before the Anaheiming. Milgrim concentrated on these leftovers, finding them centering. A lot offering garden mulch. A four-store strip mall with two pawnshops. A fireworks emporium with its own batting cage. Loans on your auto title. Serried ranks of unpainted concrete garden statuary. (Gibson, *Zero History*11)

To Milgrim, Conway is an example of Anaheimed reality, a hyperreal construction (to use Umberto Eco's and Jean Baudrillard's term) designed to tap people's longing for the ideal. Just like Disneyland, Conway projects an illusion, an enticing lie that in reality offers no sense of centering. Too good to be true, Gibson seems to be suggesting, edge cities rely on appearances, and even these are fading. In *Zero History*, the ultimate failure of edge cities is symbolized by the Edge City Family Restaurant sign, which towers over the Conway landscape (Gibson 12). Weathered and unreadable, the sign invites people to a place that probably no longer exists.

As Gibson illustrates in the Bigend Trilogy, in the 21st century, the edge returns within city boundaries; as once edge cities, it is now the global metropolis that prides itself to be the land of daring opportunity. Nevertheless, for most, this opportunity is once again illusory. Independence, profit, and power inside the global metropolis are not only status- and access-dependent but also come at a price. The global city, Gibson suggests in the trilogy, is only seemingly all-inviting and diversity-oriented; supporting the interests of those already in power and managing the global flows (i.e. the likes of Bigend and the remaining "them"), the city turns its back on those who

either opt out of or fail to navigate the global reality and whom it thus finds in no way useful. What is more, Gibson suggests, just like in the whole space of flows, in the global metropolis velocity drives profit; the global city, literally, cannot *afford* to have its citizens dwell/linger, whether spatially or in terms of decision making. As a result, those who choose to edge in (i.e. get involved in city processes) do so at the cost of their sense of belonging and ease.

The logic of the global metropolis reflects that of the capitalist Empire; it is based on selective inclusiveness. Just like Empire, the global city operates with the sole purpose of facilitating global flows. As a result, while it readily sides with those who influence these flows, it just as readily rejects and disenfranchises those with little or no global sway. Gibson portrays the global city's double standards on the example of traffic privileges and c(C)ity architecture. Not everyone in global cities has to follow traffic code. In *Pattern Recognition*, those in power can simply buy themselves out of traffic regulations: "surely the truest modern equivalent of the freedom of the city" (69), parking permission grants Bigend access to all parts of London; in Moscow, special "permit[s] allowing ignorance of traffic regulations" (285) give oligarchs and those they employ the universal right of way and license them to drive unmarked, avoiding the gaze of city surveillance. While traffic privileges increase the powerful minority's freedom in the city, the city's architecture successfully limits the less privileged majority from accessing city structures. Gibson comments on the majority's inferior position in the global metropolis while describing Milgrim's escape run through the architectural maze of the City of London. "Milgrim," Gibson writes had never liked the City. It had always seemed too monolithic . . . Too few hiding places. A lack of spaces in between. It had been turning its back on people like himself for centuries, and made him feel like a rat running along a baseboard devoid of holes. (*Zero History* 255)

Gated areas, impenetrable glass walls, and the ubiquity of security in the global metropolis shut off the less privileged, both spatially and in terms of citizen participation. The City (just like the city) cares only about profit; monolithic in focus, it functions on an in-or-out basis—those who fail to contribute to its functioning are not just kept away but often also treated as pests, detrimental to the city's, and thus Empire's, concerns.

The global metropolis in the Bigend Trilogy fosters social stratification. In addition, while social mobility inside the metropolis is possible, it comes with strings attached. Just like Bigend, the global city believes that stasis is the enemy of profit (Gibson, *Zero History* 177); what pays is encouraging

the flow (of people, money, products, and ideas). Thus, in an attempt to optimize its functioning, the city curbs people's need to linger. It does so both by downplaying the importance of home and belonging and by promoting spaces whose main objective is to shake people out of their comfort zones and provoke them to act in ways they would not otherwise consider.

In the Bigend Trilogy no home feels like home. While familiar in their standardization, homes in the trilogy are so impersonal that they generate no sense of belonging or intimacy; what is more, they are often intentionally designed in such a way as to dissuade any potential residents from settling down. The characters' homes in Gibson's trilogy often call to mind interior designers' window displays. They are semiotically neutral, assembly-line clean, with empty fridges smelling of novelty, and cereal only a prop (Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*1-2); devoid of any personal touch, they are in no way cozy. In addition to being designed for show rather than use, residences in Gibson's global metropolis tend to overwhelm or prompt people to leave, rather than invite them in. An example is Bigend's penthouse in Vancouver, fortified behind gates, electronic access control, and a couple inches thick ebony doors. With its fifteen-feet-long viewing area overlooking the city, the penthouse reminds Hollis of "the central concourse in the national airport of some tiny, hyperwealthy European nation" (Gibson, *Spook Country* 252), its grandeur aimed to unsettle rather than make anyone feel comfortable.

In Gibson's global metropolis homes become their own opposites. Instead of providing comfort and stability, homes act as mere stops on the way; impersonal and transitory, they join other urban non-places, such as airports and hotels, in encouraging, or rather enforcing, mobility. Still, those wishing to tap and capitalize on what the city has to offer experience the destabilizing force of the metropolis not only on the home front but also when confronting global flows in their natural habitat—big business.

The global city is home [sic!] to various business enterprises. The operative premise of late capitalist big business is the recognition of the value of secrecy; thus, in the Bigend Trilogy, the city assists in the business strategies of firms and corporations by providing them with unexpected headquarters whose inconspicuousness surprises to the point of unsettling. Forced out of their comfort zones, the characters in the trilogy open themselves to manipulation and, eager to end their discomfort, often haste into imprudent decisions.

Big business in the Bigend Trilogy knows that it pays to act stealthily; corporations' headquarters reflect their politics—they are aimed not to attract attention and overwhelm, but rather to surprise and defy expectations. Thus, instead of overpaying for the limelight of downtown skyscrapers and business centers, in the Bigend Trilogy businesses fight over the most inconspicuous venues, either well-hidden and thus out of sight of the general public or located in pre-gentrified neighborhoods. Gibson comments on the trend on the example of the headquarters of Gabriel Hounds, Tanky & Tojo, and Blue Ant. Gabriel Hounds is located in the rear of a nameless denim shop in Upper East Side; Tanky & Tojo resides in Soho, its shop front narrow, austere, and in no way inviting. Blue Ant's office, finally, is hidden away inside the poorest possible and most run-down district of Los Angeles. In *Spook Country*, Bigend pities the decreasing availability of inconspicuous locations and comments on their value, which is the effect they have on people:

"We're losing the better part of the neighborhood's edge, as the reclamation continues," . . . [Bigend] said, guiding her around a ten-foot stack of drywall.

"'Better part'?" [Hollis asked.]

"Majority of. I'll miss it, myself. It unsettles visitors. Unsettled is good. (Gibson 101)

The less obvious a venue, Bigend seems to be arguing, the more unsettling the influence it has. The anxiety the visitors experience in an unexpected location works to the business's advantage: unsure what to think, the visitors become either curious (as is the case with Gabriel Hounds or Tanky & Tojo) or intimidated (Blue Ant), and as a result let themselves be manipulated into making choices they should consider twice. This is, for instance, what happens to Cayce and Hollis, who act against their better judgement and agree to work for Bigend, thus letting themselves be sucked into the global vortex.

In the Bigend Trilogy, the global metropolis acts not only as the meeting ground for locality and global flows but even more importantly as the facilitator and enforcer of global processes and transformations. The city lures the characters with the promise of opportunity and success. Access to its structures is, however, strictly rationed. The rule the city operates on is one of (natural) global selection: only those capable of making themselves indispensable to the fluidity and efficiency of global flows can count on the city to have their back. Others are bound to be ignored and—stealthily—bounced out the window.

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BALANSOWANIE NA KRAWĘDZI (W) GLOBALNEJ METROPOLII W TRYLOGII BIGEND WILLIAMA GIBSONA

Streszczenie

Artykuł poddaje analizie opisy zglobalizowanego krajobrazu miejskiego w Trylogii Bigend Williama Gibsona (*Pattern Recognition* (2003), *Spook Country* (2007), *Zero History* (2010)) i stawia tezę, że w socjoekonomicznej rzeczywistości trylogii globalna metropolia nie tylko wspiera procesy zachodzące w przestrzeni przepływów, ale także pełni rolę „globalnego bramkarza", strzegąc dostępu do struktur globalnych w imię tzw. selektywnej (w)łączności. W pierwszej kolejności artykuł prezentuje Gibsonowskie miasto globalne jako węzeł komunikacyjny oraz pierwszą linię frontu w starciu między globalizacją i lokalnością. Z racji swojego strategicznego położenia w usieciowionej przestrzeni przepływów, miasto współuczestniczy we wszystkich (często negatywnych) procesach globalnych. Zmieniający się pod wpływem tych procesów krajobraz miejski zwiastuje rosnące ujednolicenie krajobrazu globalnego. Następnie artykuł przyrównuje globalną metropolię do „miasta krawędzi" Joela Garreau. Jak kiedyś miasta krawędzi, tak dziś megamiasto zwodzi propagandą sukcesu; możliwości, które oferuje są jednakże dostępne tylko dla nielicznej, uprzywilejowanej mniejszości.

Streściła Julia Nikiel

Słowa kluczowe: globalizacja; metropolia; przestrzeń przepływów; homogenizacja; Imperium; miasto krawędzi; American Dream.