

# INTERFACES OF HYBRID SPACES IN THE ART AND FICTION OF THE PRESENT

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**Abstract:** *A discussion of space in works of art categorized as fantastic has to start from a revision of this subgenre of non-factual literature at a time when concepts previously used, such as violation of the physical laws, estrangement, intrusion of the otherworldly, hesitation between explanations, experience of limits, etc. were rendered inoperative by the new physics and polyvalent logic. By assuming that ontological écart can still be defended as valid ground for generic identification, we examine the representation of the clash between worlds or ontological levels defined by distinct properties, the list including the physical universe, the imaginary, the order of artefacts and the 3D model of generation, which builds three-dimensional entities out of two-dimensional images, the reverse also being possible. None of these four levels can be said to emerge out of the other three, which legitimates their distinct position in a system of levels. In works of the fantastic, there is a loop or a feedback between two or more such levels. Setting out from the pioneering art of Magritte, who juxtaposes images of disrupted ontological continuity, and Borges who does the same in works of fiction, postmodernity's artists - such as novelists Christine Brooke-Rose, Kate Wilhelm, William Gibson, and painters Mariusz Lewandowski, Tullius Heuer, and Conrad Jon Godly - offer counter examples, where the issue of distinct ontogenesis is thematized.*

**Keywords:** proxemics, hybrid spaces, ontological écart, holism

## **Introduction**

How amazing it is to search into differences of form and function, observation and interpretation, surface likeness and deep anatognism! The picture drawn by proxemics - a word coined by Edward T. Hall in an article published in *American Anthropologist*. 65 (5) in 1963 ("a system for the notation of proxemic behaviour") looks amazingly similar to the one configured by Cicero in *De officiis* § 50-58 (44 b.c). Both draw circles around the individual which map out his space in relation to himself and to social others.

*Launched into the public sphere of discourse in the 50s and 60's, Edward T. Hall stands inbetween pragmatist William James, with his philosophy of the interested character of perception (the subject only perceives what falls within his sphere of interest, the rest being dispelled outside his field of vision), and philosophers of culture such as Pierre Bourdieu or Jean Baudrillard, who reduce space to the one chartered by man's signifying practices. Hall continues to use words of high modernism, such as "immediate receptors in proxemic perception", however, they no longer refer to psychological phenomena and conditions but to the senses whose processes are the result of cultural encoding:*

"It has long been believed that experience is what men share and that it is possible to bypass language by referring back to experience in order to reach another human being. This implicit (and often explicit) belief concerning man's relation to experience is based on the assumption that when two human beings are subjected to the same "experience", virtually the same data is being fed to the two nervous systems and the two brains respond similarly. Proxemic research casts serious doubts on the validity of this assumption, particularly when the cultures are different. People from different cultures inhabit different sensory worlds." (see Hall 1966: chaps. 10, 11).

They not only structure spaces differently, but experience it differently, because the sensorium is differently "programmed". There is a selective screening or filtering that admits some types of data while rejecting others. Sometimes this is accomplished by individuals "tuning out" one or more of the senses or a portion of perception (Hall 1968: 84).

*Hall distinguishes four schemes of an individual's organization of space: intimate (which occurs during intimate contact such as hugging, whispering, or touching), personal (45-120cm, occurring between people who are family members or close friends), social (1,20m-3,50, establishing among acquaintances at workplaces), and public (3,50-7,50m, experienced on public occasions, such as conferences, lectures, etc.).*

Distances are perceived in a similar way by Cicero, but their symbolic mapping is radically different. Cicero considers that

the boundaries are natural: “the principles of fellowship and society that nature has established among men”. That means that they have universal applicability, that there are no culturally generating boundaries among the races on Earth: Then, too, there are a great many degrees of closeness or remoteness in human society. To proceed beyond the universal bond of our common humanity, there is the closer one of belonging to the same people, tribe, and tongue, by which men are very closely bound together; it is a still closer relation to be citizens of the same city-state; for fellow-citizens have much in common--forum, temples, colonnades, streets, statutes, laws, courts, rights of suffrage, to say nothing of social and friendly circles and diverse business relations with many. But a still closer social union exists between kindred. Starting with that infinite bond of union of the human race in general, the conception is now confined to a small and narrow circle. For since the reproductive instinct is by nature's gift the common possession of all living creatures, the first bond of union is that between husband and wife; the next, that between parents and children; then we find one home, with everything in common. and this is the foundation of civil government, the nursery, as it were, of the state. Then follow the bonds between brothers and sisters, and next those of first and then of second cousins; and when they can no longer be sheltered under one roof, they go out into other homes, as into colonies. Then follow between these, in turn, marriages and connections by marriage, and from these again anew stock of relations; and from this propagation and after-growth states have their beginnings. The bonds of common blood hold men fast through good-will and affection; for it means much to share in common the same family traditions, the same forms of domestic worship, and the same ancestral tombs.” Cicero 44B.C.: 53.XVII-55)

### **Ancient syncretism**

What was familiar to Cicero also appeared to be natural to him, although, to us, nowadays, it is not clear at all why one should favour a cousin in court but help a neighbor rather than kindred in harvesting... The ancient/ modern binary is born out of this difference between the syncretic character of ancient thought and the schizoid character of modernity elaborating on the nature/culture divide.

In Plato, it is all one: the physical universe, the music of the spheres that brought it into being, the myth in which are both grounded. In *The Republic*, *The Statesman's Manual*, or *Timaeus*, the three ontological levels are found in perfect harmony - actually, consubstantial. The musical scale (Fig.1) is the world soul. The music of the spheres (Fig. 2) was at the origin of the universe, the other generating principle being number - the derivation of multiplicity from the one (Nous, the divine godhead). The ontogenesis of the universe follows a geometric order (of numbers) and a mythical one: divine music created by the demiurge - father and poet - but also craftsman and bricoleur. Plato's demiurge creates a soul of the world that mediates between the noetic and universally sensible, the phenomenal paradigm. He is therefore guided by three principles: similarity, difference, and a combination of the two. Harmony is a musical scale, and intervals are the energy that connects upward, to the hierarchy of angelic intelligences, and downwards to the multiplicity of things. The demiurge operates with two rows of numbers, odd and even, each consisting of four numbers corresponding to the four elements or the four seasons, and which doubles the first term (leaving the original unit). The first string generated in this way will consist of  $1 (x_2) = 2 (x_2) = 4 (x_2) = 8$ , and the second one of triplets of the previous term:  $1 (x_3) = 3 (x_3) = 9 (x_3)$ . The two progressions, arithmetic and geometric, display a regularity which proves the harmony of creation: the last term is the sum of the previous terms (8 and, 27, respectively). The first string reflects the number of planets known back then and corresponds to the seven strings of the lyre. The scale in the dialogue *Timaeus* consists of four octaves - actually tetrachords, where the final note provides the beginning of the next, plus two added notes, one symbolizing the moon (A), and the other the earth (G=Gea), as well as the musical scale. The Pythagorean Tetractys (Fig. 3) had served as a model of Creation, as the number ten results from the sum of  $1+2+3+4$ , that is, of the four elements (earth, water, air, fire).



Fig. The scale of Greek music

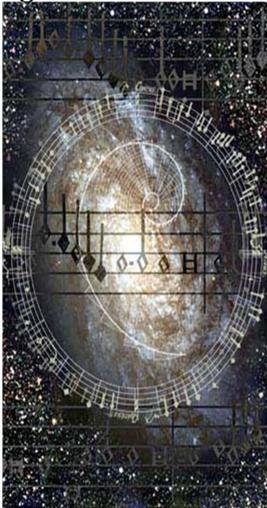


Fig. 2: The universe born of music  
Pythagorean Tetractys

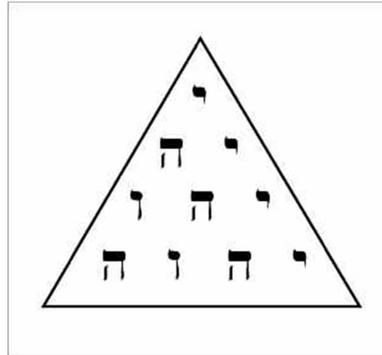


Fig. 3: The geometry of the musical scale within a

### Modernity's dissociation of vision

*Via naturae* and *via artis* no longer overlap in *Ars Nova* and in the art of the Renaissance. A secularized vision of the world sets Don Quixote in a ridiculous perspective. The modern self is summoned to the trial of reason and to the dissociation of the principle of desire from the principle of reality. The interface of realistic observation and fantastic imagination which had nourished medieval romanticism makes room for a new polarity: empiricism and epistemology. For Newton, space is

absolute, objective, self-similar and immobile. For Leibniz, space is the totality of spatial relationships among material objects. It is not absolute but relativistic, as the concept designates the order of things in relation to one another.

It is this sharp distinction between the geography of the perceived empirical space and the charted or mapped out space generated by science that provided the ground for the rise of a new genre: the fantastic. The privileged position of heuristics explains the prestige of this new literary kind, as well as the oblique character of the plot which vacillates between a realistic and a supernatural explanation. The explained supernatural reduces the contradictory space of the encounter between the this-worldly and the other-worldly to an ontological continuum.

In Herbartian manner, Edgar Allan Poe's detective applies the inductions and deductions of the unfailing mind to the exploded myth of supernatural intrusions into the empirical landscape.

Not much estranged from fantastic plots are the double spaces of the physiological psychology of the century, actually, the two types of discourses exchanging motifs and representations, such as the "doppel Ich" (Max Dessoir) released during hypnosis when the patient moves about on the psychiatrist's command, without remembering anything when restored to wakeful state. Wilhelm Wundt's "physikalisches Bild" nullified by the psychological landscape of the mind offered the fictional space of impressionistic novels and later of stream-of-consciousness novels.

### **The quantum crisis**

In *The New Scientific Spirit* (Bachelard 1968 [1934]: 18), the poetician of the elements who, along with Cassirer, dominated the theory of the imaginary in the last century intuited the radical change in the epistemology of art brought about by the rise of the New Physics. The dilemma of opting either for external profusion or internal unity was solved in the quantum notion of the wave function, which satisfied the desire of inner coherence (entanglement, the interference of all possible states of a system), and the realized states of the system, or Eigen states. Bachelard highlighted the fundamental changes made by quantum physics in the epistemology of classical physics: the

principle of complementarity or the overlapping of opposite states that contradicted the logic of identity already destabilized by the birth of non-Euclidean geometry. Space was no longer the Newtonian passive container but a variable of the observer's experience of it. Bachelard was fascinated by the Copernican turn that made knowledge of reality dependent on experimental methods and on the equipment which interfered with the system while measuring its condition, changing the way it was: "l'expérience fait donc corps avec définition de l'être". The difference between the ancient juxtaposition of matter, myth and art and the quantum superposition consists in the logic of the overlap. Platonic syncretism is grounded in a logic of identity, whereas the complementarity of opposite states, far from ascertaining the unity of being, replaced the logic of identity with polyvalent logic: "une ontologie du complémentaire moins âprement dialectique que la métaphysique du contradictoire" (17).

### **The hybrid spaces of postmodernity**

Complementarity made away with what Lacan, in his essay on Poe's *Purloined Letter*, calls reality which is always "à sa place". The sense of being in the world is replaced with the feel of being on perpetual exile from some unique and stable origin, for each realized state of the wave function is the alternative to its opposite, similar to the way bodies born of a double fertilized ovule sometimes incorporate the other twin. Spaces are always, as Foucault says, "des espaces autres"- other spaces, utopias or heterotopias. Heterotopias are the sites of complementarity:

"The heterotopia has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other. Thus on the rectangle of its stage, the theater alternates as a series of places that are alien to each other; thus the cinema appears as a very curious rectangular hall, at the back of which a three-dimensional space is projected onto a two-dimensional screen." (Foucault 1997: 334).

It is to be noticed that the opposition does not disappear in the quantum superposition or in the art works grounded in quantum epistemology, as is the case with the dialectical,

sublimated opposition of romantic irony or with the mythical *coincidentia oppositorum*. The difference is preserved, and actually it is the very principle of articulation, an irreducible, Derridean *trace*.

- The ontological spaces in Plato's universe born of music (mythical signifiers - Apollo and the nine muses, natural signifiers - the physical universe, and codes - the language of music, the musical scale) were conceived of as sharing in the same ontological substratum, like the Christian Trinity. On the contrary, the three ontological levels in Magritte's picture below are not connected by any unified narrative, the tension of the superposition of physical landscape, anthropomorphic figure and artefact remaining unresolved (Fig. 4). The relations are beautiful indeed, but they are informed by an aesthetics of the contradictory inspired by the New Physics.



Fig. 4: René Magritte, *Les belles relations*, 1967

- Postmodernist digital artists delight in the play with dimensions, 3D manipulations allowing them to establish third degree encounters, not between earthmen and aliens, however, but between lovers imitating Romeo and Juliet in reaching out to each other from distinct geometrical spaces: two-dimensional and three-dimensional (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5. Tullius Heuer - Digital paintings, 2017

- Whereas Hall's proxemics of non-identity remains within the horizon of a semiotically encoded perception that differs from one culture to another, there are also theories of ontologically hybridized spaces. Such is textual space which, according to Maurice Blanchot (*L'espace littéraire*, 1955), is a haunted one, as each new text is a space of encounter with previous ones in the memory of the writer or of the reader. Each text emerges like Lazarus out of the grave, each text is the locus of the resurrection of other texts:

"The poem -- literature -- seems to be linked to a spoken word which cannot be interrupted because it does not speak; it is. [...] Perhaps this word is the source of the poem, but it is a source that must somehow be dried up in order to become a spring. For the poet -- the one who writes, the "creator" -- could never derive the work from the essential lack of work. Never could he, by himself, cause the pure opening words to spring forth from what is at the origin. That is why the work is a work only when it

becomes the intimacy shared by someone who writes it and someone who reads it, a space violently opened up by the contest between the power to speak and the power to hear.” (Blanchot 1982: 36)

Both in his essayistic writings (*Répertoire littéraire*, 1960) and in his fiction (*La modification*, 1957) Michel Butor interprets the urban space as a text to be read on journeying across it: *la ville comme texte*. Visiting and revisting cities, in France or in Italy, the novelist produces palimpsests of old and new texts in an effort to uncover the “urban grammar”. In *L’aventure sémiologique*, Roland Barthes, the champion of semiotics with his 1957 *Mythologies*, uses the same textual trope for representing the city:

“la ville est une écriture ; celui qui se déplace dans la ville, c’est-à-dire l’usager de la ville (ce que nous sommes tous), est une sorte de lecteur qui, selon ses obligations et ses déplacements, prélève des fragments de l’énoncé pour les actualiser en secret.” (Barthes 1985: 268).

What is the difference between Plato’s universe generated by musical sounds and this city written over by travellers? Precisely this: in Plato, music has ontogenetic power, it gives birth to the universe like the strings of some contemporary cosmological theories, whereas Butor’s or Barthes’s city is a Deleuzian body without organs, without determinations which only acquires identity through the narratives superimposed on it by the reader/ writer/ pilgrim.

- Hybridity can also be generated by the intrusion of virtual reality into real spaces. We carry a GPS to get us to a destination, being guided by it while driving or walking, following its instructions. At the same time we get into the viewing field of surveillance cameras which transmit to others information about us. We play games which occur simultaneously in digital and in physical spaces, we are inserted into a superposition of the real and the digital.

### **The paradox of the real in the digital era: *Pattern Recognition* by William Gibson**

In William Gibson’s novel inspired by recent history (the fall of the twin towers in New York), characters are the victims of

confusion and depersonalization induced by the deceiving show of virtual civilization. Proxemics is redefined in a radical way, as people's intimate or personal space is invaded and estranged by digital devices. Proximity is deceitful, as by searching someone in the net, or on Facebook, we may get access to someone's mask, fabricated identity, which has no connection with his real character or status. Sometimes it is easier to get first-hand knowledge about someone by addressing public space (books he has written, music he has composed, documents about civil status, family, location, employment, etc.). The relationship between personal and public space has been simply turned on its head.

By borrowing something from the devastating spectacle of the world's last conflagration, post-war books and films discard the idyllic aspects of the former man / robot proxemics. The protagonist, Cayce Pollard, has an international career thanks to the intuition that allows her to identify models that will be successful in the fashion industry or commercials. Neither fictional embroidery on the margins of real events, such as computer history, nor the story of Nora, the originator of some viral sequences on the Internet, serve a logic of what we call reality, but the volatile spaces of supermodernity can be identified in this novel.

Cayce is a cool hunter capable to identify in the single and passing image a successful logo on the global exchange market, which brings substantial profit because nowadays "there is more need for creativity in marketing than for the creation of those products". She read the text of the city correctly or, better said, its space conceived, perceived and lived - Henri Lefebvre's classification of spaces in his *Production of Space*(1974), superimposed as if in a hyper-realistic fantasy magazine. The real identities are replaced by Google sites: "Google Cayce and you will find<coolhunter>". Interposed between mother and daughter are decades of technological consumption, which is the new source of conflict between generations: tape recorders, first microwave oven, etc. are pitied against digital technology. Cayce belongs to the space of the intercontinental flight era, its community is virtual (the forum partners), the geographical distances being cancelled by the globalization of all activities that create hybrid identities. She herself is carried to Russia by the curiosity of knowing personally the author of a mysterious

series of movies broadcast in the net. It is very interesting to see how members of the global community of interfaced computers react in a group, in response to the challenges of the digital society.

Victim of a terrorist attack, Russian Nora Volkova remains with the T-shaped fragment of a mine implanted in a portion of the brain wherefrom it cannot be extracted. Are her name and that of her sister, Stella, Russian? Cayce wants to know. No, the names are no longer associated with a people's racial filiation, but with affiliations, tastes and cultural consumption (their mother had chosen the name out of passion for the American writer Tennessee Williams). Nora had studied cinema in Paris, had been remarked at Cannes, but her invalidity had limited her forms of manifestation to editing frames and sequencing. While in hospital, nothing in the surrounding world attracted her attention except for the monitor above the hospital reserve door and the images captured by the camera. Cayce says the internet is her mirror, but Nora's world lacks depth, its reality is reduced to the computer screen, while the mysterious sequences that attract the attention of internet users are nothing but chance images captured by surveillance cameras in which they believe they can decipher a meaningful message, even if they miss it. The total absurdity of Cayce's father's disappearance in the obscure events surrounding the collapse of the New York towers and the assassination of the parents of the Volkov twins in Russia draw together the three women who come to know one another through the internet. Stella, Nora's sister, assigns to her virtual reality the chance for her sister to communicate through her work as editor rather than creator, of the filmed material, with a huge mass of net consumers, a chance that censored artists of genius had not enjoyed in the past totalitarian regime. Immaterial and non-localized, like the universe of contemporary physics, virtual reality remains the space of a constructed imaginary identity, of work as production and exchange of information, and of free communication, free from the surveillance of networks of power. These daughters at the antipodes, deprived of father or of both parents, represent another type of connectivity.

Cayce's distancing from her mother is not caused by an improper word or gesture but by technology ... Biological family ties break down, generations get alienated from each other,

intimate space is no longer desired, nor is it any longer existent. It has lost its charm, attractiveness, being replaced with the public one, shared and “liked” in the net. As in Graham Swift’s *Out of this World*, there is a general feeling that nothing really exists unless posted in the worldwide net of interfaced computers: “I wish the world to know her work. Something you could not know: how it was, here, for artists. Whole universes of blood and imagination, built over lifetimes in rooms like these, never to be seen. To die with their creators, and be swept out. Now, Nora, what she does, it joins the sea”. She smiles. “It has brought you to us”.

“Are they your parents, Stella? The couple?”

“Perhaps, when they are young. They resemble them, yes. But if what she is doing tells a story, it seems not to be **our parents' story**. Not their world. It is another world. It is always **another world**+

It's a genuine mystery, Nora's art, something hidden at the heart of the world, and more and more people follow it, all over the world”.

In his excellent book, *An Introduction to Supermodernity* (1992), Marc Augé speaks of non-places, which are the global networks of trafficking, consumption, academic exchanges, social networks, where individuals lose their association with an identity, geography, with a history of race or family, uniting on the basis of ephemeral relationships for temporary activities, without realizing organic social communities. Imagine, the author says, a Durkheimian analysis of a Passenger Salon in an airport ....

Family members get alienated from one another, while public space is all the space there is. In it, however, individuals lose their identity becoming temporary role players in a show that finishes at the gate to the next flight, or on exiting the Facebook account. In the public space of the editing of a review, with contributors from all continents, they can get on more familiar terms than neighbours living on the same floor of a residential block, but their relationships ends the moment the issue is out. The proximity provided by the internet is neither physical nor affective. It is a matter of non-locality and of instantaneous connectivity/ communication. The connection is not grounded in personal/ family/ national history, and it has no standard of authenticity.

Supermodernity, though, makes the old (history) into a specific spectacle, as it does with all exoticism and all local particularity. History and exoticism play the same role in it as the 'quotations' in a written text: a status superbly expressed in travel agency catalogues. In the non-places of supermodernity, there is always a specific position (in the window, on a poster, to the right of the aircraft, on the left of the motorway) for 'curiosities' presented as such: pineapples from the ivory coast; Venice - city of the doges; the Tangier Kasbah; the site of Alesia. But they play no part in any synthesis, they are not integrated with anything; they simply bear witness, during a journey, to the coexistence of distinct individualities, perceived as equivalent and unconnected. since nonplaces are the space of supermodernity, supermodernity cannot aspire to the same ambitions as modernity. When individuals come together, they engender the social and organize places. But the space of supermodernity is inhabited by this contradiction: it deals only with individuals (customers, passengers, users, listeners), but they are identified (name, occupation, place of birth, address) only on entering or leaving (Augé 1995:110-111).

Proxemics, as the symbolization process whereby space becomes place as site of cultural differentiation, is now being deconstructed by an anthropology of the near which can only take notice of our personalized environment breaking apart into atomistic fragments of indifferent and utilitarian performativity.

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