

Bernard Cohen's *Snowdome*. Somewhere in a Postmodern Time

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ABSTRACT

Occidental societies, according to certain visions of a postmodern future as reflected in literature and arts, are heading towards a dystopian decadent world order. It is inside this perspective that I place the following essay with the aim to analyse the representation of Postmodernism and Postmodernity in Bernard Cohen's experimental work, *Snowdome*. This novel can be conceived as a complex portrayal of contemporary existence and life in the city. By means of three different narrations and two stories separated by the unstable boundary of time, Cohen depicts contemporary Sidney from a nightmarish present of noise that leads to the complete isolation of the subject in a near future. The novel emphasises the multiplicity of information in contemporary society and the way in which that information becomes a constant noise flooding the city. The individual is unable to grasp a bit of that "pure reality" outside the simulacrum offered by the media and by the terrifying museum. Sidney and Australia become, in Cohen's work, a prolongation of contemporary North-American invasive culture, based on the power of the TV screen and the falsehood of simulacrum, whereas individuals are plunged into a new time-space dimension which is placed somewhere in a postmodern time.

The now is what you will remember when you are old. *These* are the days (Bernard Cohen, *Snowdome*: 125).

The postmodern contemporary world is the outcome of a complex mixture of sundry cultural, social and economical factors. Contemporary criticism has already pointed out the consequences that all these elements have provoked over the individual. Some relevant examples are the theoretical works by Frederick Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Ihab Hassan and Stephen Connor, among others; or the search for “Neo-spaces” in the case of cyberpunk literature with William Gibson at its summit. As Baudrillard affirmed (1983), this is the age of Simulacrum, the age of the representation without meaning, for the bond between signifier and signified has been destroyed. It is the age of tele-existence —*tele-*, from Greek, meaning “distant”, especially “transmission over a distance”—, which implies the destruction of two important human limitations: Time and Space —both joined in a four-dimensional conception of the universe—. The telegraph, the telephone and, more recently, the Internet and the last generation of communicative devices, have projected the individual onto a cyberspace —something like William Gibson’s matrix in *Neuromancer* (1984)—, where almost the complete world has been united. The disturbing side of this fact is the plunging of the subject into a new hypersociety —the new cybernetic dimensional spaces created by that tele-existence—, where the self becomes just a cipher —“ones and zeroes” in the binary system (Pynchon, 1996: 126)—. And thus, the individual is transformed into a faceless entity floating in the hypersociety, outside the boundaries of space and therefore time. The unity of the self is destroyed, and the modernist alienation from society becomes postmodern fragmentation. As Kellner points out:

From the postmodern perspective, as the pace, extension, and complexity of modern societies accelerate, identity becomes more and more unstable, more and more fragile [...]. It is argued that in a postmodern media and information society one is at most a term in the terminal [...] or a cyberneticized effect of fantastic systems of control (1998: 233-4).

The subject is nothing else than a serial number in the great controlling entity of the hypersociety.

Bernard Cohen’s complex third novel, *Snowdome* (1998), portrays these features in contemporary Sidney through an elaborated representation of contemporary existence and postmodern life in the city. Hence, the aim of this essay is to analyse the representation of Postmodernism and Postmodernity in this text that may be said to be a “postmodern heterotopia”. In the development of the argumentation, some other issues concerning postmodernism will be discussed, to wit, a nightmarish present of noise as heading for the complete isolation of the subject in a near future; the multiplicity of information in an age of misinformation; or the falsehood of simulacrum, among others.

The novel consists of two different but interrelated stories. One deals with the presentation of contemporary Australian city, Sidney, through the focalization of faceless —he is never physically depicted— William and his neighbourhood. And the other deals with a future Sidney where the city has become a museum under a snowdome-like crystal ball, where the reader perceives the world through the focalization of a museum guide. In

this sense, two worlds are confronted: a “real” present and a dystopian future —dystopian because of the pessimistic impressions of the museum guide—. Thus, following the definition offered by Ralph Pordzik, the novel could be considered to be a postmodern heterotopia, that is:

Texts that are written in the manner of a utopian novel, yet differ from a classical understanding of this type of fiction in that they tend to undermine or debunk the belief in the possibility of a perfect future. [...] Although heterotopia extrapolates from an imperfect present-day society (the *nowhere* of utopian discourse) into the future (the *nowhere* of utopian discourse), it does not necessarily conceive of this future in terms of a place of unity, harmony and permanence (author's italics, 2001: 3-4).

Snowdome, as a heterotopia, creates a vision of the future from an “imperfect present-day society” —William's Sidney—. In that future there is no unity, harmony or permanence, rather there is a lack of self existence and individuality. The self has become just a piece of the system, and then, there is no need for names, only the function is important —like Huxley's utopian vision in *Brave New World* (1931)—. Because of this, the museum guide is nameless and not defined but by his voice, his work tool for the system —he is the one in charge of recording the so-called official version of History—. The museum guide is no more a character in the sense of being a human being; he is rather a fragmented image of what humanity will be in the future. He is just the voice recorder in the museum's tapes, reading what he has been ordered to read, unable or unwilling to produce any kind of individual judgement that might contribute to improve society. And although this fragmentation undermines the subject's will, for he is just defined by his voice, this unease also disturbs and awakens the museum guide and pushes him to create new invented tapes, different from the official history of that hypersociety of information.

On the other hand, I consider *Snowdome* to be a postmodern heterotopia. It is postmodern in Frederick Jameson's terms in his analysis of the postmodern in “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (1984), and according to Baudrillard's ideas as expressed in *Simulations* (1983). In fact, Cohen's novel fits the pattern of the dystopian vision of both authors, in the sense that the novel analyses their same ideas and shows an example in present-day Sidney, by creating the epitome of simulacrum in the dome and the museum guide. Jameson's ideas on the changes from “premonitions of the future” to “senses of the end” (p. 53), the destruction of “neighbourhood culture” (p. 54), the American cultural dominance (p. 57) or the “schizophrenic fragmentation” (p. 73) coming from the intensities provoked by the “machine of reproduction” (p.79), which is the television and the misinformation that this machine generates, are portrayed in *Snowdome* both in the narrations of present day and the future. Sidney is perceived in the future as a dead museum, a product of the invasion of simulacra over “real” life, whereas in the present, characters worry about that sense of the end, wondering whether they should “leave traces” (p.23) to be found in the future.

The novel's structure is complicated with the appearance of an Epilogue, which introduces yet another focalizer, Philip, who gives his opinion and introduces a new

discourse in the narration. With the insertion of this fragment, the novel reinforces the postmodern idea of fragmentation in life, a quantum leap to a different ontological level—from literature to real life—, thus implying the impossibility of reaching a unity of information, a single speech. And the novel also calls our attention to the centre of its premises, the idea of noise and misinformation, in the fashion of excess of discourses. The three stories/spaces in the novel—William's, the museum guide's, and Philip's— overlap by means of continuous parallelisms and references, and sometimes it seems that the complete story has been made up by just one of them. An example of this can be found in p.7: "When they [William and his friends] summon up visions of the future, are they in it? No they are not. [...] In the future, other people will walk through the city. Who are these strangers? Governments, tourists, business people, unionists. Also, a museum guide". Thus, William and his contemporary partners in Sidney imagine a future with that museum guide, the main character of the second story in the text. It seems that the whole story of the future may have been created from the present. The case of Philip's narration is even more shocking. Philip seems to be the one who has created the whole story—both William's and the museum guide's—. The very first sentence of the Epilogue is quite meaningful: "I've got this vision" (p.153). And this vision refers to the novel as a whole: *Snowdome* is Philip's invented parable, Philip's morality warning. The epilogue is the moral of the book, and is focalized through the figure of its creator, Philip.

In this sense, the novel abounds in that feeling of excess of narrations which leads to misinformation. "Tinnitus is the spirit of [this] age" (p.3) are the very first words of the novel, and they contain its main issue. What Cohen emphasises is the postmodern effort that an urban citizen has to perform to grasp a crumb of reality out of the excess of noise coming from that hypersociety of mass-media disinformation. This idea is highlighted not only by the plot of the narration but also through its structure. This will be another important point of analysis of this essay: the fourth dimension of Time and Space in a general sense, and the Australian changing landscape, concretely as perceived in Sidney. The following pages aim to try and show the different perceptions of time and space in the novel, all of which are highly influenced by the frame of simulacrum and noise, and embedded in the symbolic figure of the museum and the mediation of television. And how the excess of narratives and "mass-media heteroglossia" (in Bakhtin's terms, in Stam 1989: 220) leads toward a feeling of fragmentation of the self and the sense of future entropy.

Snowdome can be seen as an example of the age of simulation. In Jameson's terms, this is one of the "constitutive features of the postmodern: a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in the contemporary 'theory' and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum" (1984: 58). The characters in this novel crave for a piece of "real life" (p. 5), conscious as they are of their situation in a "television city" (p. 3). They are conscious of the power of television over society. As the narrator affirms: "He [William] thinks about how much of an imposition television is, projecting all those photons into the brain" (p.57). But the real problem that this age of simulacrum creates on the individual is the blurring of boundaries between what is real and what is simulated. There is a good example of the power of reproduction of television in the novel:

Another time, the news reported a big warehouse fire. When they looked out the window they could see its flames on the other side of the railway lines, only two blocks away. They looked from the TV to the window and to the TV again. They saw the whole side of the building collapse (p.5).

This is the real power of television in the subject of Time. Television is thought to create a faithful representation of reality in the present time. And in this sense, the boundaries of time are destroyed, leaving just the trace of the present —and only the present exists and matters—, which affects the characters in the novel. At one point in the story, the narrator affirms: “They try to avoid beginnings and ends of individual shows because they want to watch all of television as one big wonderful show. This is how television works” (p. 107). In this sense, there is neither past nor future, just a continuum of present information that flows continually into the minds of the viewers. Thus, “the past is thereby modified: what was once [...] the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective project [...] has meanwhile itself become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum” (Jameson, 1984: 66). That is the reason why the verbal tense employed in the novel is predominantly the present. The whole novel takes the form of that “big wonderful show” of television: fragments, images of life, which occur all at the same time in that continuum of information which floods present-day hypersociety.

Television destroys the frontier between simulacrum and reality. The perception of time, and therefore space, is completely destroyed, and what is even more frightful, there is a percolation of TV into life. As Baudrillard points out:

Such immixture, such a viral, endemic, chronic, alarming presence of the medium, without our being able to isolate its effects – spectralised, like those publicity holograms sculptured in empty space with laser beams, the event filtered by the medium – the dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV – an indiscernible chemical solution (1983: 54).

The main aim of TV is to provide a feeling of confidence to the viewer, a confidence based on the illusion of the transmission of reality in real time, without selection, control or mediation (Connor, 1996: 115). Thus, TV percolates into real life much in the fashion of a virus, creating a fantasy which destroys the perception of reality and time. It is the dissolution of the real in favour of the simulacrum. As José María Ripalda puts it:

Por de pronto hoy la locura del origen, de la inmediatez presenta una forma completamente normal, de masas, en que todos participamos más o menos, y que a la vez es liberación del pasado: la pantalla de televisión. La televisión ofrece programas que expresamente tienen por tema hacer accesible la realidad por primera vez, disolviendo ocultaciones, olvidos y mentiras, tal y como fue. Y ya en general presenta al origen en pantalla, directamente accesible, en primera línea, sin distancia, con perfección técnica inasequible al testigo presencial de los mismos hechos, o con reconstrucciones nostálgicas de un brillo cautivador; o bien produce miméticamente otra realidad más perfecta [...]. Su misión no es informar sobre un supuesto

mundo real sino producir intensidades (1996: 194).

TV screen appears as liberation for the masses and a relief for the individual. Reality cannot be reached, and all that we can get is just a simulacrum of that reality —as can be also seen in a passage from William Gibson's *Neuromancer*: "Shin's pistol was a fifty-year-old Vietnamese imitation of a South American copy of a Walter PPK" (1995: 29)—. TV becomes a kind of drug, a soothing solution for the agony of the existence of urban citizens—in an existentialist way, trying to escape from the futility of any act for the future, from being trapped in the role of Sisyphus—. In this way, there is a recurrent use of the importance of drugs in utopian societies: in Huxley's *Brave New World*, the "citizens" avoid deep feelings by the ingestion of "soma" (the ideal substance to provide a complete evasion from the perfect world); in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Case, the protagonist, is an habitual consumer of high-tech substances in the form of pills; and in the case of Cohen's *Snowdome*, William and many of his friends are drug consumers to the point of even being defined as drug addicts. This necessity of dodging the television-society simulacrum makes all of these characters isolated from society and alienated from the official reality. This implies a necessity of simulated stimuli ("simstim" in Gibson's terms, 1995) to escape from that new space created by simulacrum.

In *Snowdome* a new space in a postmodern society is depicted, a new space which requires an effort on the part of the citizen to grasp a crumb of reality. As Joseph Tabbi points out: "The obvious difference is that while simstim is passive and anodyne, a vicarious experience, cyberspace is interactive and dangerous, requiring the intense focus of a disembodied consciousness" (1997: 186). In Cohen's novel, William looks desperately for a place to escape from that oppressive Sidney, by means of drugs and by moving continuously around the city (p. 81: "The bus route passes every place William has ever lived"). However, as sad as it may sound, the only possible way out seems to be death.

There are many symbols of death in Cohen's novel; one of the most important is the symbol of the snow, which automatically reminds the reader of the use given by Vladimir Nabokov of the same image. For instance, this is what we can read when William attends a sculpture exhibition, and stares at a postcard: "This gives the sense of the melting snow feeding the river, which William finds especially pleasing. There is a sense of having arrived somewhere" (p. 143). The symbol of the snow melting and becoming water, which makes the river flow onto the sea and the infinity of the ocean, is a kind of metaphor of the perception of death and eternity. The Freudian symbol of the sea as the beginning of life and a return to the womb is highly related to this idea. William is thus lost in this world of simulacrum ("it was he who had become lost, not them. Somewhere, he is. He is dissipated like an atmosphere", p. 144), until he reaches the point of no return of the last entrance of the present time in the novel (p. 148), where through symbols, William grasps that union/fusion with the sea and eternity, staring up at "the green green filtered sky" (p. 148)—a sentence that may remind the reader of the famous "green, green grass of home", this being the title of a popular 60s song by Tom Jones. Once again, mass culture percolates into existence—.

Sidney is the source of tinnitus. Tinnitus, an illness which makes one hear noises, such as ringing, that are not there, defines urban existence in the present-time Sidney of the novel. The city is the new space where multiple narrations and discourses flow at the same time. It is “a mumbling city”, “an endless conversation with itself, constantly self-asserting” (p. 3). This inevitably brings to mind Bakhtin's notion of polyphony: “The concept of ‘polyphony’ calls attention to the coexistence, in any textual or extratextual situation, of a plurality of voices that do not fuse into a single consciousness but exist on different registers, generating dialogical dynamism among themselves” (in Stam, 1989: 229). As has been pointed out before, these ideas of noise and misinformation are also reinforced by the structural arrangement of the novel, which presents at the same time three different discourses. And all those voices in a postmodern context strive to be heard above the mainstream discourse coming from the media hypersociety. This is what Iain Chambers affirms when relating this point with the postcolonial world:

Perhaps the first significant element to register in the discussion of a sense of history, language and identity that emerges in this period is that there is a growing hesitancy in pretending to offer a rationalist synthesis of the voices and forces released in the post-colonial world, as if these can simply be plotted on to the existing map of knowledge. Sometimes the voices met with may converge, but they may also separate out to the point of incomprehension and dissonance (1995: 69).

In the post-colonial context of *Snowdome's* Australia there are several different voices craving for attention, and in particular, one stands over the rest, William's voice.

William's discourse warns the reader about Sydney heading for the wrong future, the museum guide's future. It is an attack against the death of neighbourhood culture (Jameson, 1984: 54), embodied in the community of young people who are continually losing expectations on the future (“Some friends expired or exploded, but most continued. William's friends embodied the twentieth century: thousands of moths forgetting to fly moonward against the incandescent tide”, p. 18), at the same time as they are losing their home—even their nation, their Australian identity—by means of eviction notes (p. 66). Their multiplicity of voices—which recalls a metropolitan symphony proper of the *avant-garde* movement in 1920s movies—is under the attack of a monolithic discourse coming from the media and of the controlling force of power, in this case, North American culture. The same that happened to science fiction in Britain, according to Nicholas Ruddick, is depicted in *Snowdome's* Australia: “Science fiction in Britain, under economic pressure from America-dominated multinational media, has since the late 1970s hardened into a formulaic subliterate, largely parasitic on a video-based popular culture” (1993: 178). In this way, Sidney loses its particular character in favour of that “video-based” culture of simulacrum, where all signs of individual identity are destroyed.

In the future, Sidney becomes a kind of pessimistic *hortus conclusus* based on simulacra. Sidney is transformed into a fantasy of nature and history which hides the barren lands beyond, as the museum guide affirms in his unofficial tapes: “In the forestry areas, trees line the highways to a depth thick enough that the wasteland behind cannot be seen. [...] To the

uninitiated, the predominant feature of this landscape is its desolation” (p.93). In this sense, there has been a complete separation of the human being from nature. And therefore, the city becomes “a fixed place, a place without future” (p. 94). The destruction of this important aspect of Australian culture —the narrow bond between human being and land— is in the head of a set of many other losses. That Neo-Sidney which is the Snowdome has expanded vertically instead of doing it horizontally, in parallel to the ground. As the narrator affirms: “Verticals strobe by: fence-posts, telegraph poles, stringy-barks, television towers. All the time he [the museum guide]’s fighting the impulse which allows them to blend” (p. 9). This “vertical city” (Ruddick, 1993: 163) has become the “*derealization* of the whole surrounding of everyday reality” (Jameson, 1984: 76), the dehumanization of the human space, thus provoking, in Baudrillard’s terms, “the vertigo of simulation” (in Docherty, 1993: 356).

This vertigo, together with the destruction of that community existence of the neighbourhood, leads to a feeling of isolation in the individual, and to a harsh individualism more proper of the North American ethos than that of the Australian myth. In a new conception of time and space, in an age of technological control, the community as a unity is destroyed in favour of the importance of the individual in isolation in his/her role for the continuum of the new society. This is the case of the museum guide, who is not even given a name, or of the rest of human beings in the future who are just suits (p. 9), or shoes walking along the street (p. 27) —an image which brings to mind Antonio Buero Vallejo’s *El Tragaluz* (1967)—. They are just ciphers in the matrix (in Gibson’s terms) for the correct functioning of the simulacra-based society, the Neo-Sidney of the Snowdome. Therefore, individuals become islands in the great sea of misinformation. No communication is possible, and thus, interpersonal relationships are completely impossible.

The museum is the great symbol of this new age of present time and simulated space. The museum is one of the topics that postmodernist critics have more frequently analysed. Aurora León is highly pessimistic when she states that “el museo es como una inoperante experiencia funeraria” (1978: 10). A museum is one of the most representative cases of simulacrum in postmodern society, because it is a collection of images of the past embedded in the present, fragmented, isolated from their “natural” surroundings, trapped in a photographic moment of the present. Therefore, it means the death of history. Significantly enough, for the museum guide “history is a joke” (p. 47). History is a monolithical discourse coming directly from the controlling power —“Big Brother” in Orwell’s *1984*—, and for this reason the museum guide reacts by creating different versions of history in alternative cassettes, thus “overcoming [his] vertigo” (p. 92). However, Sidney becomes a dead piece of History —official history— in the huge graveyard of the Snowdome. Sidney is trapped in an endless present tense, fixed in time and space, just for the attraction of tourists who try to follow the steps of William and his destroyed community. Those visitors act as Aurora León affirms: “En el museo, el hombre se siente libre de sus preocupaciones [...], se aísla en un mundo que parece visionario pero que es real [...]. Predispone a la evasión, evoca un pasado que puede ejercer una acción concreta en el presente y porvenir” (1978: 72). However, this predisposition to an evasion from everyday life is just the product

of a simulacrum, for everything is under control and none can escape the net of the media. In this sense, Philip, a kind of alter-ego of the author's voice in the novel, is right when he affirms at the end of the text: "I'm optimistic. [...] I really am". At the end of the story of the future, the museum guide has escaped from the prison of the museum and the monolithical discourse of history. He has started to think for himself, and this is the most dangerous behaviour for the system.

To conclude, Bernard Cohen's third novel, *Snowdome* (1998), is a complex representation of contemporary existence and postmodern life in the city. By means of three different narrations and two stories separated by the unstable boundary of time, Cohen depicts contemporary Sydney from a nightmarish present of noise as heading for the complete isolation of the subject in a near future. The novel emphasises the multiplicity of information in contemporary society, and the way in which that information becomes a constant noise flooding the city. The individual is unable to grasp a bit of that "pure reality" outside the simulacrum offered by the media and by the terrifying museum. Sydney and Australia become in Cohen's work a prolongation of North American invasive culture based on the power of the TV screen and the falsehood of simulacrum, whereas individuals are plunged into a new time-space dimension which is placed somewhere in a postmodern time.

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