

Virtual urbanism

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Abstract

Visual literacy implies a poetics of technology, one rooted in basic human passion. The visual, then, is seen as *demographic*: the form-patterns people actually make in their lives, answering basic needs; patterns like those made by people in their quotidian affairs, moving about the city (that paradigmatic immersive technology), trying to live their desires. Unfortunately, most academic forms sanctioned for students to inhabit are as monumentally dull as the urban forms in which they pass an extra-academic portion of their lives. Technology is most useful, then, when it allows the poetic spirit to infuse formal design plans. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Academic writing; Alternative technologies; College composition; Situationists; Urbanism

1. 1954 (the “real”)

For a few years now, I’ve kept returning to a paragraph from an old writing textbook I found in a retiring colleague’s garbage. I’ve used it as an example with various groups of students to help them begin to understand how American culture determines quality in writing. It’s a descriptive paragraph on the subject of college life, from a 1954 composition reader entitled *The Freshman and His World* (Wolfe, Frior, & Donahue), offered to students as a sample of college writing that is “convincing. . . real. . . well-told”:

Students here are developing a curiosity about new subjects. Only Tuesday afternoon, for instance, as I was scurrying across the campus to play some tennis, Jack Haven caught up with me, puffing like a steam engine, as usual. “Well, Jack,” I said, “are you getting what you want so far?” He turned his sweating red face toward me to see if I was serious. Then he held up the green biology book under his arm. “Yep,” he replied. “Wasn’t so curious about the old

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human machine before I came. But that prof is a whiz! Believe it or not, I'm eatin' it up!"
(p. 47)

This little snippet has become emblematic to me, standing for all of official composition, all of what I hear offered as the preferred classroom genre, the aim of our pedagogy, this weird sort of textual species I'd like to now name the *virtual academic*. By this I mean a textuality whose form and content fuse together in perfect synergy: stilted academic prose as the ideal medium to represent this image of university pomposity. The Jack Haven paper stands for the logic of mainstream composition, which has always been about bringing a conventional world more clearly into focus. We fool ourselves if we feel this kind of trite, empty prose is limited to a so-called expressivist or personal writing curriculum, for the dynamic reaches its apotheosis, of course, in David Bartholomae's (1985) "Inventing the University," the manifesto of virtual academicism. Most all the Cultural Studies curricula I've seen represented in contemporary textbooks, for example, follow this logic, the replication of the scholarly unreal, where all writing prompts can be summed up in the following generic assignment: "You've just read _____ (fill in critical theory greatest hit of choice—say, Mark Crispin Miller on "The Cosby Show"), now analyze _____ (some pop cultural artifact) in the same manner."

I want to counterpoint this to a kind of cultural undercurrent that has also been present at least since 1954, which I'm calling *virtual urbanism*: a different textuality, one in which actual humans, with needs, fears, desires, memories, drift through the important spaces of their lives, encountering other humans similarly engaged in the ongoing mystery of existence. Then, because there is this basic urge in our species to record heartfelt reflections on the life lived, some verbal meaning about that experience is made (in text vastly more indeterminate than the virtual academic's). The goal is not to heighten an approximate simulation, but simply to move through moments in the hopes of finding understanding, maybe even pleasure. This textuality is bound not by formal conventions, but human passions. Neither is it based in theories or models, but in lived spaces, where people interact at their most human, where they spend the real inner moments of their lives—a kind of verbal sifting through the sands on the primal beach that lies beneath the world's cobblestones. It is, let us say, in its most ideal state the conceptual drift we might find our mind taking in that hacienda with the window looking out on Corcovado, floating on the silence that surrounds us. Virtual urbanism, then, is the search for that hacienda.

2. 2000 (the drift)

To clear the air of the virtual academic, I offer some prose from a non-freshman and his world, a few lines from a composition by the Staten Island rapper Dennis Coles (Coles, Evans, Woods, & Burke, 2000), who raps under the name Ghostface Killah (a.k.a. Tony Starks—and right there, with all the rap pseudonyms, we're already in a space made cooler: We're back in Walter Benjamin's [1973] Paris of the nineteenth century, the way he opens his study of Baudelaire smack-dab on the poetry/conspiracy nexus, what he calls "the metaphysics of the *provocateur*," p. 14).

Yo, check these up-top murderous
 Snowy in the bezzle as the cloud merges
 F.B.I. try and want word with this
 Kid who pooped out, bust a shot up in the Beacon
 Catch me in the corner not speakin
 Crushed out heavenly, U G Rock the sweet daddy, long fox minks
 Since the fake's been revealed, game got real
 Radio's been gassin' niggaz, my imposters. . .
 I'm the inventor, '86 rhymin at the center
 Debut '93 LP told you to Enter. . .
 Ghost is back, stretch Cadillacs, fruit cocktails
 Hit the shelves at Paul's Pastry Rack
 Walk with me like Dante
 Tryin' to judge these plush degrees. . .
 A pair of bright phat yellow Air Max
 Hit the racks, snatch 'em up Son, \$20 off, no tax
 Monday night Dallas verse Jets. . .
 Heavy rain fucked my kicks up
 Wasn't lookin, splashed in the puddle. . .
 Last scene: Manhattan Chase
 We drew the six-eight digit in the briefcase
 Rawness, title is Hell-bound. . .
 Hey yo, this rappin's like ziti. . .
 Crash at high-speeds, strawberry-kiwi
 As we approach the hood. . .
 These Staten Island ferryboat cats bell
 Fresh cellies, 50 Thief up in the city
 We banned for life,
 Apollo kids live to spit the real ("Apollo Kids")

Ghostface's lyric is a piled-up series of scenes in search of passion: from recollecting an incident with Biggie at the Beacon Theater (looking sharp in a mink coat, and so high he fired off a couple shots in the air for the hell of it); to celebrating his release from Riker's Island, reaffirming his talent and influence, and dismissing the competition; living large back out on the streets, our Virgil, checking out a Nike street vendor; watching some Monday Night Football, but pissed that his Wallaby's got wet on his walk over; some risky business downtown; then finally riding the ferry back home, sipping a Fruitopia and listening to people hawk cell phones. Through his vignettes, Ghost chronicles the lives of both hustlers and the artists who rap about them, two subcultures of the same urban pulse, restlessly at home in a place where they might as well be banned for life in their search for the real. There is an immediate spatialization in this text, an exscription: Ghost is strolling through the urban arcades, which he finds "the unflinching remedy for the kind of boredom that easily arises under the baleful eyes of a satiated reactionary regime" (Benjamin, p. 37). Benjamin (1999) reminded us that "whenever [*the flâneur*] went for a walk in summer. . . there was scarcely

a tavern or pastry shop where he would not look in to see whether anyone—and if so, who—might be there” (pp. 425–426).

My larger point: powerful, alternative formal possibilities are now key genres of public discourse, and kids understand them, and Composition Studies could care less. Disinterest in the alternative has been Composition’s response throughout the twentieth century: from at least 1914, with Duchamp’s *1914 Box*, through the 1930s with Bataille’s *Documents*, Duchamp’s *Green Box*, and Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, the beatniks in the 1950s, the punks in the 1970s, and rappers for the past 20 years—all stirring texts, capable of capturing rich worlds, simply presented as a sound-bite catalogue of poetic statements, “powerful short paper[s]” (Macrorie, 1970, p. 21), and they have no place in Composition. I want James Salter (1982), then, as my chief rhetor: “the power to change one’s life comes from a paragraph, a lone remark. The lines that penetrate us are slender, like the flukes that live in river water and enter the bodies of swimmers” (p. 161). The students in our classes can do this, yet we want them to do that corny stuff, that Jack Haven-speak, where phony ritual examples equals development (euphemistically code-named “the language and interpretive systems of the privileged community,” Bartholomae, 1985, p. 157). People like Ken Macrorie (1970) tried their hardest to make us abandon the “bloated, pretentious” prose of the virtual academic, written in “a feel-nothing, say-nothing language. . . devoid of the rhythms of contemporary speech” (p. 18). For the life of him, Macrorie could not remember what made us think that we were so wise that we’d never compromise on formalism, and so he turned his back on the virtual academic in favor of studying American intonation patterns, their repertoire of subtle, unconscious strategies striking him as incredible. Macrorie (1997) told an audience of compositionists they could best learn to teach writing by studying the speech patterns in the televised accounts given by people who have lived through tornadoes. This is virtual urbanity: a belief in people’s natural language patterns.

3. Modernism (the un/official city)

I choose *virtual* urbanism because, for high times and breathless passions, the modern urban is definitely lacking. It’s difficult to drift through today’s cities, ones laid out according to Modernism’s project-planning creed, where a good model means a good building. It’s the influence of Le Corbusier and his ilk, with their architecture of “right angles” and “cadaverous rigidity” (Michel Colle, qtd. in Sadler, 1998, p. 7). Le Corbusier boasted that his functionally-designed, self-contained Radiant City was a “machine for living in” (Sadler, p. 7), each area of the city having a specified function—this is residential, this is commercial, this is leisure. The anti-Corbusiers were the situationists, the street-theorists whose goal was a city of plush degrees, in which they could be permanently crushed out heavenly; take Asger Jorn’s demand, for example, that modern buildings should express “a source of poetic sensation” (Sadler, p.11). Modernist design plans repulsed them: They preferred, as Ivan Chtcheglov put it, an “architectural complex [that would] be modifiable. . . chang[ing] totally or partially in accordance with the will of its inhabitants. . . a means of experimenting with a thousand ways of modifying life, with a view to a mythic synthesis” (Knabb, 1989, p. 2). As COBRA architect Michel Colle complained in 1948, “we have been given the machine

for living in, where very often nothing is sacrificed to the only truly human parts of life, to poetry and to dream” (Sadler, p. 7).

Colle’s complaint holds true for Composition’s virtual academic machines, our “compositions for living in,” neatly inflected according to the design principles of clarity, simplicity, harmony. Everything orderly, visible, easy to understand. And utterly uninteresting, because the pedestrian’s need for inner drama has been actively designed against. It’s all about the flow of information, streamlining the audience-traffic through the city-text. Look at the *Bedford Handbook*, as Diana Hacker (1994) specified the compositional program: “Can readers tell where the introduction stops and the body of the essay begins? . . . Does the body of the essay fulfill the promise of the introduction?” (p. 45); “A draft is well organized when its major divisions are logical and easy for readers to follow” (p. 46). Hacker is a functionalist, a rationalist architect. Her goal is to keep the communicative avenues regular, clearly marked. There is no foot-traffic worried about here, no thought for the discursive *flâneur* who would loiter and explore strange, attractive nooks. No room for text that follows a kind of conversational pattern, loopy and languid, hyperlinking, full of pleasant encounters, rough spots, boring stretches, and—if lucky—intense, brilliant moments, pursuing *outré* avenues in the hope of finding some fluky, penetrating line of prose. Our goal is speedy delivery, E. D. Hirsch’s (1977) philosophy of efficient composition, with its swift, automotive movement through text: “the speedy resolution of semantic-syntactic ambiguity and the speedy fulfillment of semantic-syntactic expectations” (p. 62). But according to situationists Attila Kotányi and Raoul Vaneigem, designing for the needs of auto traffic “is the organization of universal isolation. In this regard it constitutes the major problem of modern cities. It is the opposite of encounter, it absorbs the energies that could otherwise be devoted to encounter or to any sort of participation” (Knabb, 1989, p. 66). The issue for the writing teacher as virtual urbanist, then, is building in encounter-possibilities; to do that we need to pile on, not clear out. According to visionary situationist architect Constant, developer of the New Babylon project (an endlessly morphing dream-phalanstery), “if an intimate relation between environment and behavior is to be produced, the built-up area is indispensable” (Sadler, 1998, p. 54).

4. 1952 (technology)

You know, those *Freshman and His World* authors should have gotten out more; that’s the problem with their book: it’s all *freshman*, no *world*. Had they, say, made the rounds of some of the more avant-garde museums a year or so prior to writing their text, they might have found themselves, in April of 1952, at a wonderful little show put on by London’s Institute of Contemporary Art (which was the only forum in postwar London for artists to discuss crucial compositional issues). That month, the ICA put on the epidiastope show one night for its younger, hipper members. The epidiastope was the brainchild of collage artist Eduardo Paolozzi. Graham Whitham (in Robbins, 1990) described the show:

Paolozzi projected images—tearouts from popular magazines, postcards, advertisements, and diagrams—through an overhead projector called an epidiastope. It was significant that many of the images were from sources not usually associated with fine art and that he showed the

material in no particular order—a random selection of imagery, with no hierarchy of good or bad, no conscious thematic pattern, and no commentary other than judgments such as, “This is better; it’s bigger.” (p. 20)

The scene that night in April of 1952 must have been intense. Here’s this white-hot projector, shriveling each image that goes into it, to a soundtrack of Paolozzi’s “heavy breathing and painful sighing” (Whitman in Robbins, p. 21), as he takes viewers through his psychogeographic tour of popular media. Something as stupid as that: a virtual drift through the arcades of commercial media, POWER POINT *avant la lettre*, and it changes the world. Paolozzi was the most influential artist of his circle, which came to be called the Independent Group (a sort of British counterpart to the situationists), a group formed, in fact, the night of Paolozzi’s show. He was the first, then, to recognize the key nexus between technology, media, and the visual—formalizing nothing more than an arbitrary catalogue of images from the contemporary urbanscape. The idea itself was fairly unoriginal: Paolozzi got it while touring Duchamp’s Paris apartment in the late 1940s, seeing Marcel’s walls covered with pages from American magazines. Leave it (certainly not to the American academy but) to the European avant-garde to recognize the greatness in our country’s popular materials.

I’m always interested in the uses students make of the technology offered to them, the real uses that bubble up through our preferred designs. Julian Dibbell (1999) wrote recently about Pomona College as an example of a school that has “jumped feet-first into the Digital Age. . . offering its students. . . a dedicated, broadband Internet connection, screamingly fast and always on. . . so that the flower of America’s youth can drink freely from the ocean of the world’s knowledge” (p. 103). But the postwired reality: pedagogical applications have taken a back-seat to students buying stuff, sending pirated videos over email, playing networked video games, and, most of all, downloading MP3 files. Pomona students, then, as the European avant-garde.

I think I’ve been most intrigued by that *Freshman and His World* paragraph lately because my son Evan started college this past year (at Pomona, of all places). I’ve been interested in the kind of writing prescribed for him both locally and historically, plus the kind of writing he likes. When I visited my son recently, I really wanted to check out his dorm room, see how he set up his own space. It was the wall on his roommate Zamir’s side that most interested me because taped up on it was the only thing that wasn’t a poster. It was a sheet of words. Imagine that, I thought, some bunch of lines of text is prized highly enough by these guys to put on display. I couldn’t wait to go over and read it; it turned out to be the lyrics to that Verve Pipe hit, “The Freshmen.” I loved that song: classic pop melodrama, a kind of vague, sort of *Dawson’s Creek* scenario in which young people alternately move between sensual passion and fear of commitment; there’s the suggestion of tragedy (a young woman’s overdose on Valium) and the narrator is left with the guilt-stricken, sobbing, head-on-the-floor realization that “we try to wash our hands of all of this, we never talk of our lack in relationships” (Vander Ark, 1997). Despite its title, the song not so surprisingly has nothing at all to do with academics (except that line I quoted seems incredibly relevant to the textual politics of virtual academicism). I remember the summer it came out, I really wanted to work it into my fall quarter writing class, but never found a space I could make mutable enough to infill it with the Verve Pipe. My mistake.

5. 1953 (the fantastic)

As anti-Hirsch, I've tried to retune the writing class around a basic compositional strategy, field notes from our long strange trip through mystery and melancholy, a textual form "determined at a decisive moment precisely by the street song last on everyone's lips" (Benjamin, 1979, p. 229). Those situationist urban-drifters "sought out the *unité d'ambiance*—an area of particularly intense urban atmosphere" (Sadler, 1990, p. 69). Each *unité* was broken into smaller *zones d'ambiance*, which is a good way to conceive of text, as a whole that can be broken into these smaller little pockets of interest. An inviting compositional space must allow enough of these ambient unities to explore, and one way, I think, is through infilling the space with a lot of pleasure-zone texts that readers want to poke around in: make the curriculum a more colorful, human-scaled street-scene. Those *Ways of Reading* courses are like the newly gentrified downtown America, which has cleaned out all the people-sized little shops and bars and plunked down monumentally dull and imposing corporate stripmalls. So, instead of a delightful mess of idiosyncratic readings for students and us to get lost in, we now have a tidy little text-scape: "The 'Banking' Concept of Education" and "The Achievement of Desire" are the Niketown and Virgin Megastore of our contemporary curriculum. I suggest a new allegory: Writing Classroom as Cyber Coffee Bar, where students can have encounters, get together to chat (and they'd talk about stuff that interested them, like the Verve Pipe; they would not extend the virtual academic ritual through peer response of their papers—students have more interesting things to talk about than the papers they wish they didn't even have to write in the first place. My writing textbook, then, is called "*The Freshmen as Their World*"). If the classroom is thought of more as a sector in a larger zone of unitary urbanism, then text might be thought of as constructed situation (*situation construite*)—modifiable, charged (hopefully) with the contingency of a momentary ambiance (achieved through the transitory formations of technology), rather than the permanence of "good writing." The key is in the world(s) we make available to our freshmen and the ways of reading we give their papers, whether we view them as part of the urban poetic. The dominant classroom genre could be the *passagen-werk*; our chief evaluative criteria would then include intense desire, evocative ambiance, interesting statement, cool material, traces of the poetic, and the frisson of the buzz. Theodor Adorno (in Benjamin, 1999) suggested our new post-Paolozzi textuality: "to eliminate all overt commentary and to have the meanings emerge solely through a shock-like montage of the material" (p. 1013). New forms of representation come in large part from needing new ways to represent space, to articulate the intimacy between environment and human emotion. Benjamin (1979) admired the Surrealists, in the way they were

the first to liquidate the sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom, because they [were] convinced that 'freedom, which on this earth can only be bought with a thousand of the hardest sacrifices, must be enjoyed unrestrictedly in its fullness without any kind of pragmatic calculation, as long as it lasts.' (p. 236)

But the problem, of course, was how that radical functional program could be carried out in the urban forms available: "How are we to imagine an existence oriented solely toward Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, in rooms by Le Corbusier. . . ?" (p. 236).

I close with my freshman-and-his-world fantasia: I dream situationist Ivan Chtcheglov as a first-year student, just one year earlier, in 1953, in a class that used the *Freshman and His World* proto-curriculum. He didn't turn in a paper for that first assignment: He was too depressed after reading the Jack Haven example (*I can't be held responsible*, he thinks, *won't be held responsible*). But he rallied for a later assignment, which was to write a "Mood Sketch" ("to select a mood for sketching, think of a recent two or three, perhaps ten, minutes, when your thoughts were all of one dominant, intense color. It may have been a mood of intense delight, or one of weariness, frustration, discouragement. . . [Y]our problem now is to show the reader the stream of your thoughts, at the same time picturing for him the sensation of the moment" [Wolfe et al., 1954, pp. 71–72]). Ivan can definitely get behind that assignment: *intense color*, *weariness*, *the sensation of the moment*. As his thoughts drift, one mood crystallizes over all others: an obsession with the city that's there and the city that's not there, "a place that isn't one" (Coles, 1985, p. 326). Out of that mood, out of that as-yet-unframed space, he proceeds to sketch something he'll end up calling "Formulary for a New Urbanism." He knows from the textbook the importance of a good opening sentence:

It tells the main point of your paragraph; it expresses your opinion, your impression of the place you are describing. It contains a *key word* that describes your attitude and sets the mood of your theme. . . The instructor will find it easier, too, to judge your theme because he knows your purpose as soon as he has read the opening sentence. (Wolfe et al., p. 14)

And so he begins: "SIRE, I AM FROM THE OTHER COUNTRY." [The key word, Ivan thinks, is *other*. He continues,]

We are bored in the city, there is no longer any Temple of the Sun. [W]e really have to strain to still discover mysteries on the sidewalk billboards, the latest state of humor and poetry. . .

Sports Pharmacy. . .
Translucent Concrete
Golden Touch Sawmill. . .
Hotel of Strangers
Wild Street

[Hmmm, he thinks, as he writes, this is starting to sound like a Ghostface Killah song. . . He goes on,] And the swimming pool on the Street of Little Girls. And the police station on Rendezvous Street. . .

And the strange statue of Dr. Phillippe Pinel, benefactor of the insane, in the last evenings of summer. To explore Paris.

And you, forgotten, your memories ravaged by all the consternations of two hemispheres, stranded in the Red Cellars of Pali-Kao, without music and without geography, no longer setting out for the hacienda *where the roots think of the child and where the wine is finished off with fables from an old almanac*. Now that's finished. You'll never see the hacienda. It doesn't exist.

The hacienda must be built. (Knabb, 1989, p. 1)

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