The City on the Edge of Forever: The Digital Environment of Paul-Emile Rioux

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THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT OF PAUL-EMILE RIOUX
In “The City on the Edge of Forever,” the penultimate episode of the first season of the American science fiction television series Star Trek (broadcast on April 6, 1967), the crew of the starship USS Enterprise discover a portal through space and time, a living time machine called “The Guardian of Forever.” Captain James Kirk and First Officer Spock are permitted by the machine to pursue a crazed Dr. McCoy through the portal in order to repair the timeline that he has breached, accidentally altering history and murdering their collective future. Kirk and Spock arrive in New York City during the 1930s Great Depression, make the repair and return through the portal. The Guardian then says, “Time has resumed its shape. All is as it was before. Many such journeys are possible. Let me be your gateway.”

Montreal-based digital artist Paul-Émile Rioux repeats the Guardian’s mantra in his recent Landcuts images (comprising the interrelated City, Downtown and Suburb sequences): “Let me be your gateway.” Our destination and itinerary: posthuman cities of the future that read alternately as utopian and dystopian. They form remarkably holistic images: seamless, dimensionally rich and layered formal wholes into which we readily project. They are at once exhilarating and disturbing. They have a sweepingly interrelated form.

Rioux’s cities on the edge of forever possess unusual gravitas and multi-layered metropolises. As we examine Rioux’s work, we side with Virilio’s belief that future states will not have to defend themselves against external threats, but against the internal threats proliferating within their own dense and multi-layered metropolises.

Rioux’s cities speak eloquently of the construction of identical places, the proliferation of gated communities, the progressively widening net of surveillance, the sheer cataclysm of the now. As we examine Rioux’s works, we side with Virilio’s belief that future states will not have to defend themselves against external threats, but against the internal threats proliferating within their own dense and multi-layered metropolises.

Virilio developed the notion of the “Overexposed City” as a radically intense and dynamic city, whose aspect is being continually
reconstructed by electronic screens. With this he alludes to one of his key themes: the dematerialization of the city under the impact of information technologies. According to Virilio, these technologies have altered how human beings perceive time. Chronological and historical time has given way to the real time of computer screens and television sets, where everything appears instantaneously. Real time annuls the notion of physical distance, since the faster we move around the world, the less we appreciate its vastness. Virilio discusses the disappearance of real space as running parallel to the disappearance of local or historical time, or rather that the “urbanisation of real space” gives way to “urbanisation in real time.” This new form of creating a city is based on computing and television logic, and is characterized by an architecture constructed with materials that are highly processed and finishes that are extremely polished, shiny, like luminous skins. Similarly, the complex modular architecture of Rioux’s cities is being constantly deconstructed and reconstructed by software that mirrors the impact of information technologies. Consider Downtown 1, in which the tiered sentinels seem to be multiplying like binary code, blossoming like Mandelbrot fractals across the surface of the downtown core and far beyond.

Virilio’s work is the manifestation of a future that has already arrived, in one sense, and one that is still being born, in another. It is a future that, like a proverbial supernova, is still accelerating and irradiating at warp speed across cyberspace. At the heart of our existential void, Rioux builds highly intricate digimorphic structures that investigate salient issues of being and dwelling, becoming and inhabitation. His work is interrogatory and genetic in the extreme. His “cities on the edge of forever” possess myriad dovetailed nodal points, signs and rhizomes, as well as a fractal dimensionality and a simply immeasurable aura. These semiotic palimpsests may well belong to tomorrow’s dream worlds, but they are being bravely built in his studio today.

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2 Ibid.