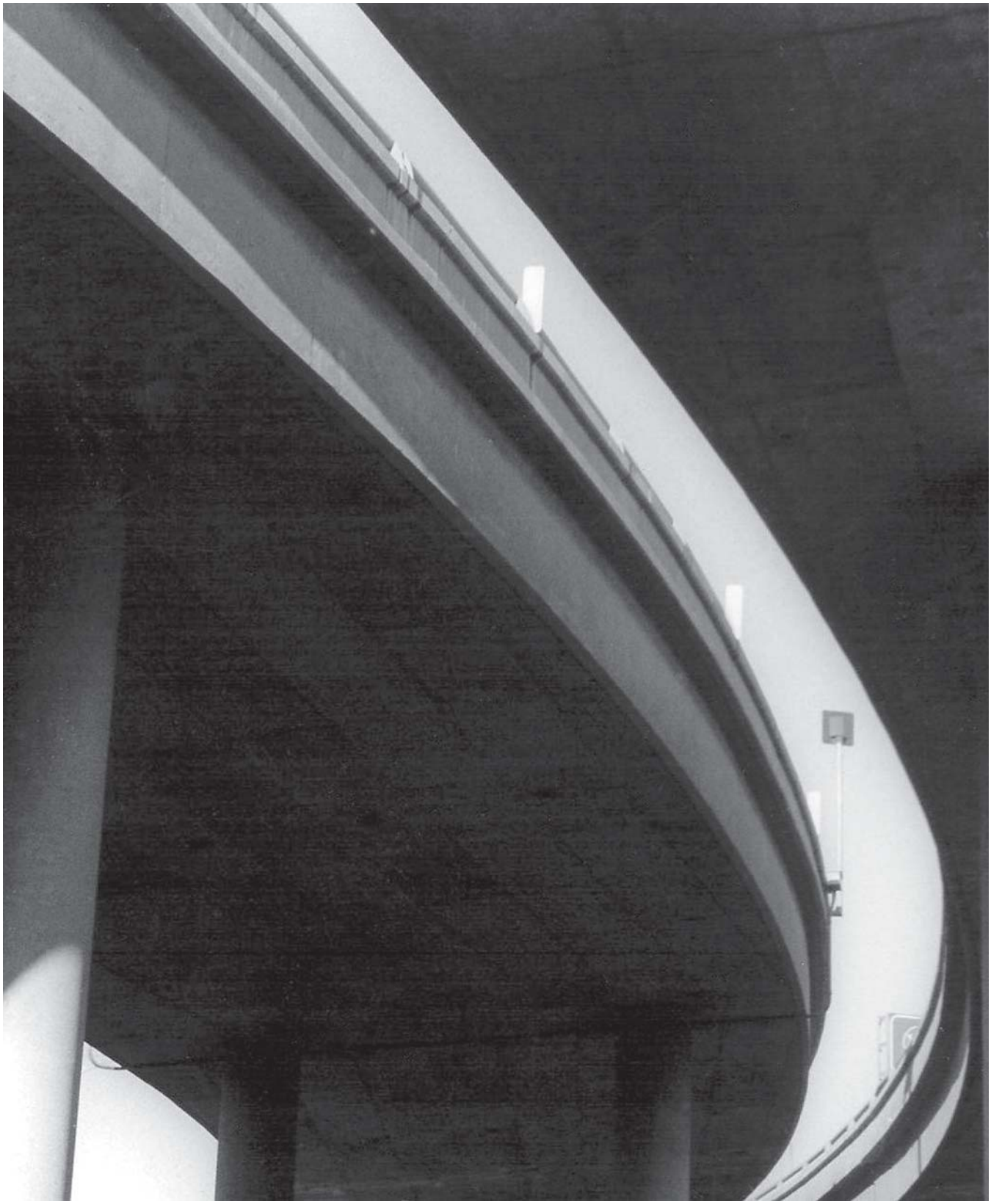

BOOK REVIEW

Imaginary and Banal Spaces: Guides for Contemplating Cities and Technology

Enrique Gualberto Ramirez

A Field Guide to Sprawl
Dolores Hayden (with aerial photographs by Jim Wark)
New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2004,128 pp. ISBN 0393731251

The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace
Vincent Mosco
Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004, 211 pp. ISBN 026213439X

In *Imaginary Magnitude* (1981), the Polish science fiction author Stanislaw Lem took a critical hammer to the very genre he perfected and concocted a series of opening chapters to books that were never written. The underlying idea was perhaps not too subtle: that science fiction writing very rarely delivered what it promised, namely, a helpful critique of contemporary society viewed through the lens of an all-too-distant and technologically-savvy future. Technology can indeed be the stuff of dreams. The individuals we associate with society-altering technology—the Edisons, Fords and Gateses—have an air of optimism about them. Each imagines a society transformed and enriched by dint of their innovation.

The rhythm of new technologies is commonly one of hype, crash and finally banality, as the once-vaunted invention gets immersed in daily life. And only when it is immersed does a technology achieve its truest and most lasting power. This theme is pervasive in sociologist Vincent Mosco's latest book, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (2004). The book is faulty in the same way that Lem's never-written chapters in *Imaginary Magnitude* are. *The Digital Sublime* fails to outline exactly how cyberspace achieves its power through banality, and focuses instead on the creation of baseless hype by the Internet's most breathless advocates. The book is, however, a very readable and selective critique of Internet boosterism, and in it Mosco argues that the 'Net's mythical ability to cure pervasive societal ills actually reinforces these ills. The Internet, that most democratic of technologies, is actually not so democratic at all. Mosco therefore examines Internet myth-making in

order to uncover the Internet's deeper political economy. For architects and urban designers, *The Digital Sublime* is an unsettling *memento mori* of the Internet's and cyber culture's promise to forever transform our cities.

Mosco begins by surveying works that give insight into the power and allure of myth. Although he later criticizes Internet hype, Mosco first offers that myths are not fictions so much as important conceits. Myths "give meaning to life, particularly by helping us to understand the seemingly incomprehensible, to cope with problems that are overwhelmingly intractable, and to create in vision or dream what cannot be realized in practice" (Mosco 2004: 14). The connection between myth, technology, and political economy then becomes the touchstone of his analysis. In his words, "I eschew determinism to demonstrate how an analysis founded on myth can build a bridge to a political economic understanding, indeed is mutually constituted with political economy. Myth is the starting or entry point to a valuable understanding of computer communication, but it leads to, requires, and … is constituted with a political economic perspective" (Mosco 2004: 7).

With this theoretical lens in place, the author begins his critiques of the myth of cyberspace. For Mosco, the rise of new communication technologies, primarily the Internet, the World Wide Web, and cyberspace, cannot be understood apart from their guiding myths. Those elaborate metaphors play a central role in the development of the technologies themselves, "both for what they reveal (including a genuine desire for community and democracy) and for what they conceal (including the growing concentration of communication power in a handful of transnational media businesses)" (ibid, p.19.). Drawing on historical examples such as electrification and the advent of broadcasting and telecommunications systems, Mosco finally leads the reader to the notion that technology achieves its truest and greatest expression of power once it becomes banal. For communications technologies, as with other innovations, banality accompanies ubiquity. Computers were novel when only a handful of them existed, in universities and government offices; today they are powerful because millions of people have them and rarely give them a second thought. The mark of a banal technology is not that we want it, but that we cannot imagine being without it. It is ironic that no one calls the 21st century "The Age of Television" "The Age of Radio" or "The Age of Telephone," although these technologies are more widespread, and thus more powerful, than ever.

Mosco does not, unfortunately, probe further into the Internet's powerful banality. Rather he embarks on a detailed explanation of the myths associated with these technologies. The rise of cyberspace, Mosco argues, has been accompanied by a dyad of unfulfilled promises, which he handily titles "The End of History" and "The End of Politics." Promulgated in popular writings during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Internet was first being introduced to mainstream society, these theses portrayed cyberspace as a motor of democracy and equality. Mosco, in his analysis of these writings, shows how their authors (often people of great influence)

ignored or underestimated the potential inequities of the technology they celebrated.

Any discussion of a communication-technology-driven 'end of history' must begin with Francis Fukuyama's book of the same title. In *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Fukuyama declared that the collapse of communism and the victory of liberal democracies signalled the "end" of history. For Fukuyama, the historical record was a document of struggle whose natural end point was the triumph of liberal democracy. Mosco argues that the myth of cyberspace, generated by the animistic and sublime urgings of the Internet's and World Wide Web's most outspoken boosters, claims the same end result. Yet the notion that these technologies have created or contributed to liberal democracy is the subject of dispute. Academics and practitioners may have crafted initiatives that use technology to increase the political and human capital of disadvantaged or disenfranchised citizens, yet many of these lofty goals remain unrealized. Mosco also targets the writings of Bill Gates, Nicholas Negroponte, and Esther Dyson, who similarly describe the utopian potential of the Internet and World Wide Web. The current situation with respect to these technologies' liberalizing tendencies is well known. Cyberspace has been commercialized, its democratizing potential undercut by the portfolio of corporate and financial interests that parcel out digital space to the highest bidder.

Mosco continues his critique by analyzing another myth attributed to the Internet and the World Wide Web. In a chapter entitled "Loose Ends: The Death of Distance and The End of Politics," Mosco takes on the claim, common among Internet boosters, that the logistical convenience brought about by the World Wide Web will transform the political climate in positive ways. Just as proponents of telegraph and radio technology in the late 19th and early 20th century promised greater access to goods and services via a breakdown of geographical barriers, gurus like Negroponte and Dyson describe the Internet's similar ability to provide access to goods and services in quasi-religious terms.

In furthering this line of argument, Mosco relies on two historical examples that precede the Internet, and that show how myths are created to justify technological advances or imperatives: the Strategic Defense Initiative ("SDI" or "Star Wars") and the promulgations of the neo-conservative Progress and Freedom Foundation (PFF). The controversial SDI system—a network of missiles, satellites and radar installations whose purpose was to track down and destroy incoming nuclear missiles—was itself born in a moment of mythical proportions: a gruff Ronald Reagan (then candidate for President of the United States) touring the Dr.Strangelove-esque facilities at NORAD and being informed of America's inability to repel a potential Soviet attack. Reagan vowed on the spot to sponsor a system that would resolve the problem. The subsequent and oft-publicized malfunctions that plagued SDI, as well as its cost overruns and the impasses it spawned in Congress, did little to erode the myth behind the system: that technology could negate the threat of an incoming nuclear attack, and render obsolete the Cold War's nervous doctrine of mutually-assured destruc-

tion. There are, of course, subtle dimensions to this. Does technology policy obviate foreign policy, or is it foreign policy?

The interplay between technology and policy becomes even more evident in Mosco's analysis of the Progress Freedom Foundation. The PFF, a think tank started by Gingrich in 1993, began issuing Alvin Toffler-like prognostications about the World Wide Web's ability to transform society. For Mosco, the PFF's rhetoric demonstrates how new information technologies can be calibrated as vessels of neo-conservatism:

> With the help of information technology, capitalism is presumed to have the power to end all injustice and create a world where are all equally free to pursue life as entrepreneurs. With injustice gone, the state is made superfluous and will crumble under the weight of its own uselessness. (2004: 105-6)

As the architects of the Cold War policy relied on technologies like SDI to render the need for international détente unnecessary, so did the framers of the PFF conceptualize emergent information technologies in a way that dodged political issues. The PFF's particular vision of technology viewed information technologies as a type of private good. When seen in this way, the Internet thus becomes subject to market forces. A purportedly democratic technology now is no longer tied to issues of public resource allocation.

As the framers of SDI's and PFF's policies demonstrate, technology thus has an aspect of the transcendent. But there remains a palpable disconnect between mythmaking and technological reality. As Mosco demonstrates, technology policies are at best incomplete. This level of policymaking depends even more on the perceived, as opposed to the actual, abilities of technologies to address putative social problems.

This is not to deny the power of actual technology to reshape policy. This is a redoubtable undercurrent in urban historian Dolores Hayden's latest book, *A Field Guide to Sprawl* (2004). This field guide reads like a dictionary, yet it is a dictionary more in the spirit of Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* than with, say, Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* or even Denis Diderot's *Encyclopaedia*. Like Bierce, Hayden plays with the form of the discourse in order to create a distinct viewpoint.

Hayden's attendant issue is the proper documentation of sprawl. She believes that to properly combat sprawl's vicissitudes, urbanists, architects, and planners must be able not just to describe it, but also to see it. Her dictionary format thus becomes a necessary field guide for those whose charge is the proper management of the built environment, a "Visual Dictionary of Sprawl" comprised of 52 entries arranged in alphabetical order and replete with ravishing photographs. It provides a lexicon which is not only descriptive ("Tire Dump"), but also politically charged ("Ball Pork," "Mansion Subsidy") and often humorous ("Sitcom Suburb," "Litter On a Stick," "Putting Parsley Around The Pig").

In an introduction that presents a brief history of the reality and ideology of sprawl, Hayden picks up

on a current that Mosco ignored. If technology becomes more powerful when it becomes banal, then perhaps it is the banal technologies, and not the much-hyped new and experimental ones, that we should look to for help in combatting society's ills. Thus the camera, that ubiquitous and signature device of modernity, takes a central role in Hayden's polemic. In explaining the inclusion of Jim Wark's aerial photography, Hayden writes:

> When people struggle to interpret their local landscapes, aerial photographs reveal the scale of existing and new development. In an era when a truck stop can be larger than a traditional town, aerial images convey the vast spread of much twenty-first-century development and can bring up-to-the-minute data on the progress of construction. Also, aerial photographs can be understood by people without technical training, in a way that zoning maps, zoning codes, satellite surveys, and traditional site plans cannot. If shot at altitudes from 1,000 to 2,000 feet, they can show building facades as well as site massing. Although they rarely include recognizable people, when aerial images are shot at oblique angles and at relatively low altitudes, showing land and buildings together, they entwine natural and constructed elements. Low-level, oblique-angle pictures can establish a complete visual inventory of a town because they can show inaccessible places such as wetlands or steep terrain, and reveal hidden sites such as dumps or gated communities. (2004: 14-15)

The banal technology is aimed at the banal landscape with startling results. The photographs show the physical symptoms of sprawl: over-paved areas, wasted spaces, low-density tracts. The pictures show the all-too-apparent misuses that the field guide documents.

The actual text that accompanies the field guide leaves much to be desired. One wonders, for instance, about the selection process. Hayden sets her sights on only some aspects of sprawl, generally its deleterious effects and overlooked causes. Hayden may sound a klaxon in her introduction, reiterating calls for "better, not bigger" developments. But despite this broad advocacy of sustainable development and reinvigorated urbanism, her field guide feels incomplete.

In the end, the works of Mosco and Hayden, though incomplete on their own, complement each other well. As Mosco does not delve deeply into how technologies become more vital and lasting despite their so-called "banality," as *The Digital Sublime* asks us to consider how mythmaking is inseparable from policy making, Hayden uses banal technologies as a complement to anti-sprawl sentiments. Although technology has become a sina qua non of everyday urban life, these two works provide urbanists, planners and architects with an arsenal of tools that will enable them to ask the right questions and approach the issue of smart growth in a sensible way.

References

Fukuyama, Francis. 1992.*The End of History and the Last Man.* London: Hamish Hamilton.

Enrique Gualberto Ramirez is a second-year MA student in Urban Planning at UCLA, specializing in issues of technology and urbanism. In Fall 2005 he will begin advanced studies in architecture history, theory and criticism at the Yale School of Architecture.