The City and the City: London 2012
Visual (Un)Commons
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We make the games

There is the city, and then there is the city. Sharing starts already on the level of perception and sensation; they ground the political. This can be understood in the way in which Jacques Rancière (2004) suggests to understand politics of aesthetics that refers to the distribution of the sensible and conditions participation. But we could actually also say that this is a line from China Miéville’s (2009) fiction novel *The City & the City*, a weird fantasy of the twin cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma that are perhaps almost identical in physical space, but perceived as two different cities – where part of belonging to one city is to be able to unsee the other city and its action: a sort of complex, ongoing negotiation at the level of perception of what you see and what you must not see, forming the tension of common and uncommon. Cities are multiple, they overlap. One city multiplies into different zones, experienced in different ways, but also governed, regulated in alternative ways pending on your position, perspective, situation. Miéville is able to show how finely regulated space and commons are in terms of the bodies that inhabit, sense – and hence create – these spaces. This also, to a point, concerns the policing of that common, uncommons, to which I will return at the end of this chapter.

The refocusing of the political vocabulary to the city, the metropolis and common of cognitive and affective capacities that are produced has become rather clear in the context of past years of discussion concerning biopolitics (see Martin 2014). This focus has made topics such as ‘rent’ resurface as part of the ‘desocialization of the common’ (Hardt and Negri 2009, 258). In addition, one can spot similar patterns across a visual economy in which (urban) life is being reproduced. The physical life and the mental life of the city are entangled in topologies of perception. In Miéville’s novel, the physical act of passing from one space to the other city is, as well as the physical act that could be mapped geographically, also ‘grosstopical’: it involves a
topological and perceptual change as well. Indeed, Vilém Flusser’s (2005) statement that we need to approach cities topographically, not just geographically, in order to understand their flection (Krümmung) as a force of gravitational pull is not that far from a Situationist call for investigation of the forces of the city composing subjects. But perhaps there is a need for something more. For sure, Flusser is on to something – the distributed mode of subjectivity that is nowadays really starting to characterize our mode of individuation in the city when such processes are even further enhanced by various smart points and connections through radio-frequency identification (RFID) worlds (Hayles 2008). But Miéville points to the number of passages and the constant processes of seeing and unseeing through which we constitute constantly changing patterns, where it is not only the subject that is abstract and changing, but also the city environment itself (Cf. Flusser 2005).

From *The City & the City* to the City: London 2012. Summer 2012 in London was not only characterized by what went on in the newly built East London stadiums, part of a revamping of the earlier less economically important part of the city. It was also another sort of mobilization. Just as with all big global sporting events, a range of logistical, management and administration operations took place. One was gradually forced to encounter a revamping of the giant city with an increase in the smiling faces of McDonald’s and other official sponsors’ adverts across the city and across screens. Feel-good campaigns emoted value embedded in the logic of the transnational corporation. The touristic and economic brand value was similar to that of the much-touted Digital Roundabout – London’s and the government’s wet dream of a Silicon Valley in London’s Shoreditch area – both representing one face of Britain, the great creative industries. The legacy of the New Labour policy agenda was adapted as part of the Tory-government’s rhetorics which since the launch of the Big Society-brand of austerity politics had offered a controversial combination of populism and public cuts. The creative industries turned into the research funding stream and campaigning concerning Digital Economy, a business-focused way of channelling research towards technological development. This is also the context that started off the recent discussions concerning New Aesthetics, although the political economy of Shoreditch/London Tech City – this aesthetics of corporate creative industries – has rarely been critically investigated.

We all make the games, was the McDonald’s repeated message across tube stations and private screens. The connectedness of public sponsor space and the digital marketing campaigns was evident. Indeed, as the theorist and blogger K-Punk (Fisher 2012) put it, we can just as well talk of the ‘authoritarian lockdown and militarisation of the city’ which played its role in the creation of the feel-good spirit of the Games, and where ‘any disquiet about London 2012 is being repositioned as “gripping” or “cynicism”’ (Ibid.).