

A Tale of Two Cities: Hong Kong and Dubai Celebration of Disappearance and the Pretension of Becoming

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1 Introduction

Why should one compare Dubai and Hong Kong? As a matter of fact, both cities have more in common than towers wearing architectural brandnames or an abundance of Philippine maids. Both cities possess port locations that are central to trade and both cities have attracted massive international capital as well as large expat communities.¹ Furthermore, both cities have been submitted to spectacular developments transforming them within a few decades from fishing villages deprived of any urban history into hubs linking the “East” and the “West.” In the 1990s, when oil riches were used to turn Dubai into an international trading center, Dubai would commonly be called the “Hong Kong of the Middle East” or the “Hong Kong of the Desert” (Gluckman 1993). Hong Kong is a forerunner of Dubai because it experimented with techniques of cultural self-invention and globalized modes of existence. However, curiously, Dubai is also the symmetrical inversion of Hong Kong. This article will show that in Hong Kong and Dubai, reality, culture, and capital are organized through patterns that display both cities as similar and at the same time as opposed. I will read the Dubai phenomenon through Ackbar Abbas’ famous concept of “disappearance” that Abbas coined for the culture of Hong Kong and will show that Dubai’s existence depends on an equally complex and tortuous process, with the only difference that here the key word is not disappearance but appearance. Abbas’ point is that in Hong Kong a sustained “aesthetic of disappearance” creates a particular cultural space of a “floating identity.” Dubai is suspended in a similar state of floating existence but at the opposite end of the spectrum: Dubai excels in an *aesthetic of appearance*.

Attracting little “culture” (and being deprived of local cultural resources), for a long time, Hong Kong’s entire existence as a city depended on financial markets. Dubai’s existence has been defined in similar terms. Neither Hong Kong nor Dubai occupies a central position within its respective region as a producer of goods, but both function as centers of facilitation and are rather “para-sites” than sites (Abbas). Dubai is the third most important re-export centre in the world just after Hong Kong and Singapore. Neither Hong Kong nor Dubai has transport rivers and, at present, neither city has a significant amount of raw materials. Though the foundation of modern Dubai depended very much on initial oil reserves that are no longer available, it is correct to maintain that both cities owe their present existence to obstacles that forced them to invest in non-traditional economies. Hong Kong had no domestic market, which pushed it towards the development of an international market at a time when few Asian countries were pursuing this path. Finally, both cities came to symbolize globalization and an extreme form of urbanity based on aggressive international capitalism.

In spite of their international images, neither Hong Kong nor Dubai are what Saskia Sassen has called “Global Cities”² because they are not sites of production or of technological innovation nor is their respective financial status linked to the process of decision-making within the global economy. However, both cities hold world records when it comes to individual consumer culture: thirty percent of consumers in the United Arab Emirates go shopping “at least once a week,” a figure only second to Hong Kong (thirty-six percent).³ Both cities can be classified as neoliberal as many of their inhabitants seem to value consumption over democratic

¹It needs to be pointed out that the proportion of expats is different in both cities: Dubai has approx. 84% foreigners while Hong Kong has only 5%.

²Sassen popularized the term ‘Global City’ in Sassen 1991.

³According to the ACNielsen Online Consumer Confidence Survey conducted in 42 markets. From Elsheshtawy 2008, p. 168.

ideals: “Hong Kong Man also has a taste for luxury items, both material and non-material . . . Hong Kong Man also likes his freedoms, but not so much in the political sense. The majority of people do not seem particularly enthusiastic about democracy,” writes Andrew Scobell (1988, quoted from Ren 2010, p. 21). In Dubai, according to Ali Syed, “expatriates for the most part are uninterested in democracy so long as they are living well” (Ali 2010, p. 114).

2 Hong Kong and the Celebration of Disappearance

In the nineteenth century the island of Hong Kong was a European trading post. The English occupied Hong Kong during the opium war and later received the city officially. In 1865, at the end of the Second Opium War, the city had 125,000 inhabitants of which about 2000 were western. In 1898, Kowloon and adjacent islands (The New Territories) were added to the colony and a 99 year lease with China was signed. In 1941, the city had 1.6 million inhabitants. In the 1960s, textile production created an economic boom and in the 1970s Hong Kong became an international finance center. Intensive construction work in the New Territories began only in the 1970s. Hong Kong was handed back to China in 1997.

In the 1980s, when Hong Kong owned the world’s largest container cargo terminals, the city’s image was that of a cultural desert determined by superficiality, internal fragmentation, consumerism, and the lack of urban history or local identity. Today, as will be shown below, all this is seen as typical for Dubai. However, a culture oriented turn promoting a local ethos based on a common language and a particular geographical location, seemingly reversed Hong Kong’s cultural situation in the 1980s, creating a film industry focusing on local stories and local people that would become famous as the Hollywood of the East. In popular music, Cantopop has been a local genre since the 1970s. This, together with a belief in typical Hong Kong virtues such as rationality and discipline, would give Hong Kong the cultural identity it needed, which changed the perception of the city. In the 1990s, Hong Kong had obtained what Roland Barthes would call an “erotic dimension” (1966-73, p. 445) as a place of personal encounters and of civic dramas.

In a way, Hong Kong became a “postmodern city:” Hong Kong is neither “pre-modern” because it does not exhibit a continuous string of histories, traditions, and culture, nor is it “modern” in the sense of de-cultured, or simply functionally economic. Mike Featherstone has called this type of city, which decides to return to culture, style, and decoration, “postmodern” because here cultural elements are most often “decontextualized, simulated, reduplicated and continually renewed and restyled” (1991, p. 97). The “alternative space of Hong Kongness” that David Clarke mentions in his article on the specific nature of Hong Kong art, tends to “express local cultural identity more in an oblique and negative than a direct and positive way” (2000, p. 92).

It is for these precise reasons that it is wrong to characterize Hong Kong’s cultural ascendance as a straightforward process of acculturation. Ackbar Abbas describes in his seminal work on Hong Kong culture the city’s “cultural self-invention.” Here it is similar to Dubai because also Dubai’s identity does not depend on a historic core feeding the periphery but material culture is rather invented and appropriated (Giesen 2005). However, in Hong Kong, cultural self-invention is, in a paradoxical fashion, linked to a complex concept of “disappearance,” which comprises, for Abbas, at least three things: First, “disappearance” addresses Hong Kong’s frantic cycle of construction, demolition, and reconstruction that yields the impression of a constant *disappearance* of architectural substance. Second, as Hong Kong has been submitted to more and more aggressive and advanced stages of globalization, the newly built Hong Kong architecture remains restricted to that of the brandname kind. This tendency creates a global environment that, once again, threatens to erase the newly achieved local culture and makes the city “invisible” within an international context, letting topical cultural experience *disappear* into an anonymous international system. This internationalization concerns also the film industry as its productions have been more and more geared towards international (and Mainland-Chinese) markets. The third meaning of disappearance has to do with the “real” disappearance of Hong Kong as it is taken over by China and will presumably, sooner or later, be absorbed into an oversized motherland. Another author, Hai Ren, has reformulated Hong Kong’s disappearance in terms of a replacement or substitution, actively promoted by the Chinese government, which, for example, installed a countdown clock in 1997 on Beijing’s Tien’anmen Square in order to indicate the seconds remaining until

the takeover of Hong Kong by China: “In this sense, a new Hong Kong culture emerged through a process of ‘disappearance,’ not in terms of an absence or lack of presence but of representing a thing as something else” (Ren, p. 130-31).

The first two developments (frantic cycle of construction-reconstruction and globalization) are not unique to Hong Kong, but what is unique is the way in which Hong Kong copes with them. Abbas links all three developments (which partly overlap and are difficult to disentangle) to the nostalgic experience of the disappearance of colonial space, which created, in his opinion, not simply a space from which “the colonial” has disappeared, but rather a “colonial space of disappearance” (1997, p. 3). Abbas’ point is that “disappearance” does not lead to disappearance at all, but rather to a sustained “aesthetics of disappearance” creating, in the case of Hong Kong, the particular cultural space of a “floating identity” (p. 4). Hong Kong cinema, for example, is eager to keep pace with a subject that is always at the point of disappearing (p. 26). Disappearance is not a question of the ephemeral in the sense of *blurred images*, nor does it refer to the Apocalypse tourism current in disappearing places like Detroit, which tourists attempt to view as a set for Blade Runner (see O’Gorman 2007). For Abbas, the space of disappearance represents rather “the paradox of a space we have to second guess in order to experience” (Abbas 1997, 106).

Two other types of disappearance can be added since the publication of Abbas’ book. Before 1997, Hong Kong performed an exotic East for Western tourists but since the opening of China the city has lost this appeal. Now Hong Kong rather performs “the West” for Chinese tourists from the mainland. However, as writes Ngai-Ling Sum, “as Chinese travelers become more affluent, the attractiveness of Hong Kong as a simulation of the West may fade” (Sum & So 2004, p. 126). Abbas would certainly hold that also this disappearance does not lead to a fuller assumption of anything “real.” Sum and So’s article supports this claim because Hong Kong continues to perform a “virtual West” with theme parks, themed restaurants, and shopping malls (p. 125).

Abbas’ strong statement that in Hong Kong “dependency has been turned into a fine art” (p. 72), which he maintains even with regard to colonialism, demonstrates the particularity of Hong Kong’s culture of disappearance. Abbas believes that “to call Hong Kong a colony is hardly a misrepresentation.” At the same time, any straightforward rhetoric of anti-colonial struggle for independence never did make sense in Hong Kong because its future depended on two powers, Britain and China, whose double involvement created a unique socio-political landscape. Many authors have found that the “bipolar division into the exploitative colonizer and the exploited colonized oversimplifies social relations in Hong Kong” (Carroll 1999, p. 13). Some would even claim that “Hong Kong did not possess the conventional attributes of a colony and that late Twentieth Century Hong Kong showed little sign of a colonial presence, and even less of a colonial past” (Welsh 1993, p. 3, quoted from Ngo p. 1). Cultural identity will rather be expressed in an oblique way yielding the impression that colonialism “disappears” though it has never been fully present.

Abbas attempts to grasp the space of disappearance with the help of Walter Benjamin’s idea of the world which has become an image since “anything about which one knows that one soon will not have it around becomes an image” (Benjamin 1973, p. 87). Abbas also refers to Louis Aragon’s cult of the ephemeral as “a mode of attention directed at a disappearing space, [which is] a way of understanding what he called ‘the disquieting atmosphere of places’ and which perceives not only to what is there but also to what is no longer or not yet there” (Abbas 1997, p. 9). As the Paris of the Second Empire was absorbed by a more glaring and functional type of modernity, disappearance came to be turned into an art, issuing poetic “plaints about the disappearance of gas lanterns” and evoking the pitiful image of “a last flâneur who sadly strolled through the empty Colbert Arcade” (Benjamin, p. 51). Benjamin quotes Paul Ernest de Ratier who, in 1857, wrote in his book *Paris n’existe plus*:

“The flâneur whom we used to encounter on the sidewalks and in front of the shop-windows, this nonentity, this constant rubberneck, this inconsequential type who was always in search of cheap emotions and knew about nothing but cobblestones, fiacres, and gas lanterns (. . .) has now become a farmer, a vintner, a linen manufacturer, a sugar refiner, and a steel magnate. (ibid.)”

Hong Kong will not disappear but it has installed its existence within a peculiar aesthetics of disappearance. Abbas actually believes that Hong Kong will remain almost unchanged for another fifty years (Abbas 1997, p. 23).

The floating state of Hong Kong's existence makes it a true forerunner of Dubai, which seems to be suspended in a similar state of floating existence, though at the opposite end of the spectrum. Dubai will simply not *appear*. For this city, the act of becoming has been charged with such complicated connotations that "becoming" seems to have been eternalized. While Hong Kong revels in what is (almost) no longer there, Dubai revels in what is *not yet* there.

3 Dubai and the Pretension of Becoming

Being a fishing village and a British protectorate in the Nineteenth Century, Dubai had 15,000 inhabitants in 1950. Electricity and running water arrived in the 1960s and the first tarmac road was built in 1961. 1966 marked the discovery of oil and the country began to modernize at a slow pace. When the British left in 1971, seventy percent of the population was still illiterate. As recently as 1992, Dubai's Zayed Road was mostly desert. In 2006, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum took over as a ruler from his brother (he is also vice-president and prime minister of the UAE). In response to the running out of oil reserves, Dubai decided to diversify its economy, making real estate one of its cornerstones. In 2005, real estate represented 24.2 percent of Emirate's GDP and projects worth \$20 billion were built or actively planned (Elshashtawy 2010, p. 124). Dubai became most famous for Megaprojects such as the Burj Khalifa (the tallest tower in the world) and Dubailand, planned to have twice the size of Walt Disney World, to stretch over 10 km, to have hotels with 60,000 rooms, 370 hectares retail space, and coming at a cost of \$54 billion (ibid., p. 141). The two islands composing "The Palm" will have 100 luxury hotels, 5000 residential villas, 3600 luxury apartments, 4 marinas, and a water theme park (Junemo 2004, p. 181). Other megaprojects are Universal Studios, the Mall of Arabia, Sports City (including a Manchester United soccer school), ICC global cricket academy, a Tiger Woods golf course, Eco-Tourism World, Themed Leisure and Vacation World, and Downtown (a vibrant mix of retail, dining and entertainment facilities) (Kanna 2005, p. 62). Private and government-owned firms are planning not less than two-hundred new shopping malls with an investment of up to \$5.4 billion (Elshashtawy, p. 179). The Waterfront project designed by Reem Koolhaas will surpass Manhattan in size.

Some observers have held that Dubai is a sort of financial mirage or "sub-prime in the desert" (O'Grady 2009) creating an artificial economy dependent on borrowed capital. In 2008-2009, as a result of the worldwide economic downturn following the financial crisis of 2007-2010, Dubai's property market experienced a major deterioration, obliging the country to request a six-month freeze on payments of some of its \$80 billion debt. In 2009 Dubai owed 107 percent of its GDP (Hari 2009). The Ludwig Mises Institute suggests that

"the key factor behind the crisis in Dubai is the classical boom-bust policies of the UAE central bank. The phenomenal expansion in various structures in Dubai was mostly on account of massive monetary pumping. Thus in December 2007 the yearly rate of growth of the central bank's balance sheet stood at 177 percent. The bursting of the bubble came on account of the strong fall in money pumping." (Shostak 2009)

Still, in spite of the disaster's dimensions, Dubai is far from being dead but has shifted, as writes the *Chicago Tribune*, "into low development gear from hyper-drive" (Kamin 2010). Abu Dhabi stepped in as a backer with its oil money and saved Dubai in the way in which the IMF saved Iceland. Dubai critic Yasser Elsheshtawy holds that "reports about Dubai's death have been greatly exaggerated" (Elshashtawy, p. 3) and also Syed Ali thinks that Dubai "is not a mirage, and it is unlikely that it will revert to the sleepy regional city it was before the boom" (Ali, p. viii) In principle this means that many projects are on hold or that construction on some sites continues at an extremely slow pace. Responsible for the new snail's pace is also the plummeting cost of oil since 2008 (ibid., p. 1). The most spectacular project, the Burj Khalifa Tower (whose apartments remain 90 percent empty at the end of 2010), has been inaugurated January 4, 2010. However, other important projects such as the Mall of Arabia, the dredging operations on Palm Island as well as Koolhaas' Waterfront project are on hold. Dubailand is expected to be scaled down. All in all, "very little has been built, and nothing has been completed" (ibid., 2). Construction of the metro blue line

is cancelled and that of the purple line has been indefinitely postponed. Business Bay (a 6 km long strip of high rise buildings) has been significantly slowed down. According to Elsheshtawy,

“50 percent of all projects have either been postponed, re-assessed, or cancelled; property prices have declined by as much as 50 percent; layoffs will lead to a 5-8 percent decline in population. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the effects of this slowdown can already be seen in the city’s streets and public spaces – a decline in traffic and numbers of people.” (Elshashtawy, p. 11)

Of the projects worth \$1 trillion in the entire UAE (public and private), \$582 billion (equaling 52.8 percent) of civil construction projects in the UAE are on hold (ibid., 128). By the end of 2010, Dubai’s office vacancy levels rose to more than 50% in some areas and the government considered demolishing buildings and “mothballing” projects in order to limit oversupply. The financial analyst Andrew Butter stated in March 2011 that “no one with any brains is building new property in Dubai at the moment unless they managed to get some really cheap land (construction costs are rock-bottom), but most good land is tied up in litigation and has a half-finished building on it; all that’s happening now is that some of the half-competet units are slowly getting finished” (Butter 2011).

Dubai is not an overnight sensation that will somehow “fade into the desert sunset” (Elshashtawy, p. 13) but it is building its reality within a world of a prolonged becoming. In principle, nothing has changed: like before, Dubai appears as a “seemingly never-ending construction” (Ali, p. 13) and “lacking the high population density that would sustain a momentous rate of building, many areas appear empty without a sign of life. Its neighborhoods lack a sense of community – they have a transitory feeling” (Elshashtawy, p. 122).

Dubai’s prolonged becoming is not a mirage but remains a mystery, after the crash more than ever. The various projects’ finances as well as the concrete steps taken to manage the crisis have never been fully disclosed. Officially, Dubai has laid bare the extent of the financial crisis as late as June 27, 2011, revealing that 217 property transactions have been axed or put on hold in the wake of the troubles hitting the country (Gammell 2011). In general, it has always been difficult to estimate how bad the financial situation actually is because the distinction between the personal holdings of members of the ruling Al-Maktoum family and that of the state remains unclear. Analysts also constantly complain about a lack of meaningful statistics (Butter). The projects themselves are often mysterious, too, as writes the *Secret Dubai Blog*: “No one understood Dubailand. Other than that it appeared to be connected to tourism, it didn’t seem very well defined. And its history has been one of cancellations, cover-ups, shifting goalposts.” The fact that a part of Dubai’s economy is driven by money laundering and other illegal activities such as drug trade, trade of counterfeit merchandises does not make the “mystery” more transparent.⁴

Abbas’ first point supposed to establish Hong Kong’s disappearance – the frantic cycle of construction, demolition, and reconstruction – is more than obvious in Dubai. However, in this context it will rather be perceived as an “appearance.” The city is constantly reinvented, not only architecturally but also politically and socially. There are even reasons to state that “Dubai as an event” has *from the beginning* been staged as a spectacular and eternally postponed “not yet there.” According to many observers, it had always been questionable whether there would be enough people to occupy the buildings under construction. This was part of the game because the real estate sector was planning for a future population – not the current one (Elshashtawy, p. 125). The Los Angeles Times wrote in 2009 that “in a fundamental sense, many of Dubai’s skyscrapers were conceived and designed primarily as vessels to store excess liquidity. If the endless rows of stalled towers now resemble mere shells, perhaps shells are all they were ever meant to be” (Hawthorne 2009). Apartments were sold long before they were built and would change their owners up to five times. While in Hong Kong property speculation causes the absurd state of affairs that sooner or later any building might vanish from the map, in Dubai maps have been written in the future tense from the beginning. In a way, we assist in the creation of Borges’ map that covers the earth because the map is supposed to be the earth.

Urbanist Elsheshtawy is fascinated by Baudrillard’s idea of simulation that lets reality crumble until people begin living “in the map” (Baudrillard is here inspired by Borges). Elsheshtawy suggests that “Dubai

⁴See Ali, 19. For example, counterfeit drugs trade is said to be a \$60 billion business yearly (Elsheshtawy 2010, p. 188).

[is] the ultimate realization of this vision” (Elshashtawy, p. 1). The tourist map I received in Dubai in 2011 continues to show, among other things, an island group conceived as a solar system, which will never be built. At the airports of Dubai and Abu Dhabi I have been handed catalogues of the most famous architectural attractions though a large part of the buildings presented in these catalogues are scheduled for the sometimes very distant future (for example Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum). A thick book published in 2009 and characteristically called *New Frontiers in Architecture: Dubai between Vision and Reality*, is meant to promote Dubai’s image by presenting a confusing mixture of realistic computer graphics images and real photos (Eugenio & Bellini). Sometimes this strategy is even part of the real estate business. In 2009, Al Fajer Group (whose CEO is Sheik Mohammed’s nephew) has been accused of fraud because “investors were shown photographs depicting three tower blocks as being actively under construction, which led many people to invest in them thinking they were actually buildings rather than merely planned properties. In actuality, there were no buildings, just holes in the ground (news agencies across the country were ordered not to report this)” (Ali, p. 58-59).

In Dubai the myriad of amusement parks, hotels, and residences that have not been built, manage to survive in the form of a non-material reality. The real estate crash spelled an end to plans that most people believed to be too fancy from the onset, but an endless series of rollover of debts and access to emergency financing postpones any “game over”. Dubai refuses to be added to the list of fallen cities such as Sparta, Carthage, Troy, and Pompeii, but sticks to a virtual dream.

4 Dubai and the Colonial Space of Appearance

The unreal character of Dubai is reinforced by the fact that its architecture is mainly based on global fantasies and, as says the Bahraini professor Ali Alraouf, the pursuit of planning whims that offer no local identity or sense of contextual authenticity (Alarouf 2005). Dubai is filled with architectural icons “designed from the top down by starting from a desired image and moving to its physical manifestation,” (Elshashtawy 2004, p. 187) a topic taken up by sociologists Robert Govers and Frank Go in their case study of Dubai. The authors conclude that “the myopic view and orientation towards the short-term yield maximization of such players leads only to the projection of ephemeral images and the creation of simulacra environments. This in turn would merely result in further commoditization of destination Dubai” (Govers & Go 2009, p. 252). Dubai transforms images “into material simulacra in the form of built environment, events and spectacle” (ibid., p. 290). The islands are primarily meant to be seen from the air, which produces, in the words of Mattias Junemo, an “intermixing of real and virtual.” Dubai has shown “the ability to transcend time and space” (Junemo 2004. P. 183). Elsheshtawy points also to the concept of an “illusive history,” which he likens to Hobsbawm’s notion of “invented traditions.” (Elshashtawy 2010, p. 72) Dubai is using historical settings as devices to establish (or reconstitute) an ‘Arab’ identity which was never really part of the city’s heritage to begin with (Elshashtawy 2010, p. 97).

A further characteristic qualifying Dubai as an “unreal” place is the notion of transience, which Ali sees as the “key in understanding and critiquing the Dubai project” (Ali, p. 13). Ninety-four percent of Dubai’s total population is foreign and almost all foreigners live on the basis of three-year renewable visas, which prevents the creation of a solid and permanent socio-political condition. Ali’s interviews with expats are telling because sentences like “I didn’t come to Dubai for anything ‘real’. I have already lived in real place” (p. 68) or “If you want a real campus you can go to the USA” (p. 77) are recurring. Ali concludes that foreigners are living in a “legal and social limbo” (p. 136) in a “liminal, in-between space, a place where ‘real life’ is suspended” (p. 120). Dubai is also “unreal” because the investments do not help to develop the economies of the region. Real estate ownership is 60 percent European or Asian (Govers & Go, p. 85).

5 ‘Déjà Disparu’ and ‘Not yet There’

The existence of Dubai obliges us to rethink the reality status of utopias in the contemporary world. In 1980, Paul Virilio predicted, in his *L’Esthétique de la disparition*, that for our contemporary “hyper-anticipatory

and predictive society” (Virilio 2009, p. 30) time will be experienced in the future perfect sense. Though Abbas uses Virilio’s idea for a conceptualization of Hong Kong, today it seems rather that Virilio has been telling the story of Dubai. The *déjà disparu* is “the feeling that what is new and unique about the situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés, or a cluster of memories of what has never been” (Abbas 1997, p. 25). It is fed by the capitalist search for the newest of the new. In the case of Dubai, the ungraspable clichés and memories are rather memories of the future creating a space so new that it could not even come into existence. The result is the production of what Baudrillard calls an “atemporal utopia” (which he had initially coined for Disneyland) (Baudrillard 1996).

It is through the cunning of this atemporality that Dubai sets also new standards for the global economy. David Harvey has described the world economy as composed of two groups - those who come first and those who come last or never at all:

“Backwardness’ (...) arises out of an unwillingness or an inability (...) to catch up with the dynamics of a western-centered capitalism, usually portrayed as the highpoint of modernity or even of civilization. Whole populations, cultures and territories are thereby presumed to be incapable of shaping their own history let alone of influencing developments elsewhere. Occasionally some place “sees the light” (e.g. Japan and more recently much of East and Southeast Asia) and forges ahead. But the rest of the world lives in the “waiting room of history.” (Harvey 2005, p. 72)

At present, Dubai is celebrating its success right in the waiting room. By the end of 2010, Dubai and its affiliated firms will have more than \$100 billion in debt. Still, the indefinable haze of New World optimism that is blowing through Dubai and Abu Dhabi is reminiscent of Matthew Arnold’s description of Nineteenth Century America: “The new West promises to beat in the game of brag (...). The time will surely come when all roads will lead to California. Here will be the home of art, science, literature, and profound knowledge...” (Arnold 1888, p. 187). While Hong Kong thrives within an aesthetic of disappearance that defies disappearance though everybody expects it to disappear, Dubai thrives as a utopia that is interesting just because the appearance of the utopia is infinitely delayed.

The paradoxical constellation that Dubai’s eternally postponed *appearance* is, in the last instance, based on the *disappearance* of oil makes the comparison even more pertinent. Oil, which Tere Vadén characterizes as an “incredible, lyrical, metaphysical substance,” has situated Dubai as a *not yet there* city and its disappearance continues to support this peculiar pattern: “The waning of cheap oil is one reason to the increase in costs for the continuous taking of loans,” which generates a fatal interlinking of the financial crisis and the oil crisis, analyzes Vadén (Vadén 2010). Though the oil reserves have been largely tapped, the shortage of oil does not lead to a disappearance but to a re-branding of oil culture as tourism and real estate culture (both of which are themselves highly unstable industries). The more the oil disappears, the more Dubai “appears.” In this sense, oil is really mystical “because it masks its existence so that neither capitalist nor anti-capitalist theory refers to it when explaining economic growth and changes in the economic systems over the last 150 years” (ibid.).

While Hong Kong engenders, in the words of Abbas, the feeling of a *déjà disparu* rooted in an irretrievable, colonial ex-past, Dubai installs itself in a perpetual *not yet there* that speaks to us through the veil of an indiscernible ex-future. Dubai’s cultural status develops towards a “colonial space of appearance” that is – not in the last instance – constituted by migrant workers. According to Mike Davis, Dubai becomes, through its neo-colonial lifestyle, “expert at catering to colonial nostalgia” (Davis 2007, p. 64). This colonial past does not refer to a reality in the form of colonial buildings and concrete memories. This makes it different from Hong Kong where, in spite of their twofold nature, discussions on colonialism as a concrete experience are possible because of the presence of the dominating father figure: Britain. In Dubai, on the other hand, neo-colonialism has been reissued in the form of “offshore urbanism.”

The first example of this new kind of urbanism was the small artificial island two hundred ninety meters away from the beach lodging the Burj Al Arab Hotel, which would be declared an independent territory. Accessible only via a sinuous private bridge, it was the perfect example of an artificial world conceived in the form of a private city-state following its own laws. The subsequent highly unusual decisions to create

and urbanize several artificial islands in the sea rather than urbanizing available space in the desert make sense only within this neo-colonial logic: like colonies, islands are separate worlds. The more and more self-sufficient character of malls (providing the simulation of the natural world such as lakes, meadows, ski resorts, downtowns, and gated communities) has the same symbolical function. In Dubai, different social and professional functions are represented not in the form of cities or compounds, but in the form of archipelagos: Internet City, Media City, the Financial Center, as well as the Gold and Jewelry Park are situated on respective islands. Significantly, each of Dubai's new islands represents a certain part of the world and the entire project will – metaphorically speaking – lead to the creation of a new world. Of course, this new geography is also influenced by oil culture that is accustomed to building out at sea and which excels in vertically built structures (oil rigs).

6 Dream and Reality

We have described Dubai as a politically organized spectacle but what is the “real” Dubai like? Journalists quite often describe Dubai as an “unlivable city of isolated enclaves, lacking convenient connections to one another, and brutal linear strips” (Kamin 2010) and that “between the malls, there is nothing but the connecting tissue of asphalt. Every road has at least four lanes; Dubai feels like a motorway punctuated by shopping centers” (Hari 2009). In my own experience, Dubai is a desert sporting an infinite number of cranes and building sites as well as fragments of planned projects such as the entrance arch of a film studio or skeletons of planned shopping centers. Hari finds that even “the projects completed just before the global economy crashed look empty and tattered” (ibid.). Specialists of urbanism deplore the “fragmented, splintered urban fabric. [Dubai's] widely discussed mega-projects seem to exist in a parallel universe within an endless desertscape” (Elshashtawy 2008, p. 168). The city “appears without any unifying visual character and more like a generic twenty-first century metropolis.” (Elshashtawy 2010, p. 116). So far, Dubai has been unable to create an ‘urban realm’ in the conventional sense (p. 123).

Another way of dealing with Dubai's *reality* is to see the city not merely as an accumulation of megaprojects but as a place where immigrants have created spaces of subculture. Elsheshtawy points to this possibility and insists that *for these people* Dubai is not a fake or artificial city (p. 1). We will come back to Elsheshtawy's interesting thought in the conclusion.

What do the tourists visiting Dubai see? Certainly, as write Govers and Go, “other resorts offer arguably far superior cultural and historical sights and experiences than those of the lower Gulf” (Govers & Go, p. 183) and one constantly has the impression that Dubai has created “a tourist infrastructure where none reasonably should exist” (Ali, p. 14). Anne Applebaum explains, in article entitled “The New New World,” that “Americans visiting Dubai know how 19th century Europeans must have felt when they saw the United States.” Though Dubai presents us what a “society looks like that was developed in the information age,” (Junemo, p. 183) at the same time there is a *déjà vu* effect. Karrie Jacobs asks: “What good is the twenty-first century if it's a replay of the twentieth on a different playing field?” (Jacobs 2008). The predicate of an “Arabian Florida” is omnipresent and the absence of any historical burden makes Dubai indeed “American” in the 19th century sense.

It is certainly no coincidence that the new utopia is situated in the desert. French authors like Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Edgar Morin have been fascinated by American “desert civilization”. Baudrillard went to America in search of “the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways (...) [of] the America of desert speed, of motels and mineral surfaces” (Baudrillard 1989, p. 10/5) and Lyotard wrote about one of “the most radical and intriguing of all utopian mythologies of California”⁵ as a resting place where all history comes to an end. Edgar Morin explained in his *California Diary* that on the shores of the absolute West the age-old procession of mankind came to an end and that history dissolved into utopia (from Mathy, p. 205). Finally, Sartre's description of the generic American city can pass as a contemporary description of any major Gulf city:

“In these cities that go fast, that are not built in order to put on age but which advance like

⁵ *Le Mur du Pacifique* quoted from Mathy 1993, p. 195.

modern armies, simply surrounding the islands of resistance that they cannot destroy, in these cities the past does not manifest itself, like in our cities, through monuments but through residues. The residues are simply there because one did not have the time to demolish them. This disorder can be found in every particular perspective. Nowhere did I find so many empty plots of land: it's true that they have a very precise function: they are car parks. But they very much disrupt the alignment of the streets. Suddenly it seems as if a bomb has fallen on three or four houses, reducing them to powder. The rubble has only just been cleared away: this is a "parking lot." Two hundred square meters of naked earth. . . Suddenly the city appears to be unfinished, badly adjusted, suddenly we are in the desert. In the middle of the city two modern buildings - two white cubes - frame an empty plot of land. Some cars are standing there, they appear to be abandoned..." (Sartre 1949, p. 105-106)

Urbanists have explained that the "tabula rasa type development has resulted in large gaps or patches between developments; vast expanses of sand which need to be filled" (Elshashtawy 2010, p. 122).

7 The Towers

At the heart of Dubai is the Burj Khalifa. Being rather empty for the time being, the tower seems to illustrate Roland Barthes' idea of "the zero degree of the monument" that *must* be empty and useless in order to fully realize its utopian potential. For Barthes the Eiffel Tower is a supreme example of an empty signifier or a pure sign, whose meaning, constantly bordering on the irrational, can never be exhausted:

The Eiffel Tower is essentially a metaphor (...) the Tower is nothing. It achieves a kind of zero degree of the monument. It is particularly in no rite, in no cult, not even in art. You cannot visit the Tower as a museum: there is nothing to be seen inside the Tower. This empty museum nevertheless receives each year twice as many visitors as the Louvre. (Barthes 1997, p. 7)

Why then do we visit the Eiffel Tower? Barthes could not have been more predictive: "To participate in a dream of which [the tower] is much more the crystallizer than the true object" (ibid.). Projects like the Eiffel Tower or the Burj Khalifa do not want to fuse, in the way in which it was once attempted by Walt Disney, dream and reason, or childish innocence and adulthood; they are clearly aspiring to *overcome* reason.

Walter Benjamin described Haussmann's activities that led to the disappearance of Paris as being linked to Napoleonic imperialism: "Louis Napoleon promotes investment capital, and Paris experiences a rash of speculation. Trading on the stock exchange displaces the forms of gambling handed down from the feudal society" (Benjamin 1999, p. 12). On the same page Benjamin characterizes the gambler as being addicted to the phantasmagorias of time. This gambler has become the main protagonist in the creation of Dubai as he continues to invest in phantasmagorias not only of space, but also of time. Strictly speaking, Dubai is not even an image, which makes it different from Hong Kong or Nineteenth Century Paris where disappearance could at least be photographed. In postmodern Hong Kong, culturally self-conscious expressions tend to become images or can be reduced to images. The *déjà disparu* can be grasped just before it disappears: photography or film lend disappearance the kind of "thereness" that it cannot produce out of itself. According to Abbas, "a spatial history of disappearance will attempt to evoke the city rather than claim to represent it, in the sense of giving a definitive account of what it is 'really' like" (Abbas 1997, p. 74).

The *not yet there* cannot be photographed, but appears rather on computer screens in the form of computer graphics or images from Google Earth. Though, at first sight, Dubai might represent what Michel de Certeau has called the project of "materializing the utopia that was yesterday only painted" (de Certeau 1984, p. 7), in reality, this urban system works towards the non-material, shifting the utopia from the painting to computer graphics. Dubai is neither a hybrid of East and West nor, as its promoters insist, a hybrid of tradition and modernity. As shows Elsheshtawy's argument about Dubai's "illusive history," Dubai rather circumvents the integration of any real elements. The most suitable metaphors describing Dubai are those that point to the city's systematic *transgression* of reality. For Mike Davis, Dubai is an

“eerie chimera,” a “hallucinatory pastiche of the big, the bad and the ugly” (Davis, p. 51). Hisham Elkadi speaks of an “etherealization of culture” that results from pervasive electronic mediation leading to “killing the present time by isolating it from its here and now” (Elkadi 2006, p. 86). This is amazing because normally architecture is the non-ephemeral art par excellence, distinct from theatre or dance by its capacity to produce lasting expressions. Michael Benedikt begins his *Introduction to Cyberspace* by pointing out that, normally, architecture creates durable physical worlds (Benedikt 1997, p. 14-17). The problem is that this durability can also be felt as a limitation. Spelling out that “reality is death,” Benedikt forecasts the existence of “gilded dreamworlds” such as Dubai, which Mike Davis characterizes as “willful, narcissistic withdrawals from the tragedies overtaking the planet” (Davis, p. xvi). An architect himself, Benedikt knows how to tell the story of an architecture that attempts to overcome the limits of durable reality by engaging in an “architecture of abstraction.” First, there were gravity defying cathedrals. Then came the modern vocabulary of lightness. Finally, the city became a node of communication. For Benedikt, “ephemeralization of architecture and its continuing capitulation to media” (Benedikt, p. 28) is an unavoidable process: “thinking architecture itself as an abstraction” has a tradition reaching back to ancient Egypt and Greece and the meeting of mathematical knowledge with geometry. In a way, architecture is always about “transcendence, about a desire to go beyond,” an idea that finally led to the “ephemeralization and self-dematerialization of architecture, as buildings became light, hollow, and transparent” (p. 15). At the end of this development emerges, for Benedikt, cyberspace as a liquid medium. The ur-model of all these utopias is “Heavenly City,” that is, Jerusalem as it is described in the Book of Revelation, which epitomizes the impulse towards abstraction: Heavenly City represents “weightless[ness], radiance, numerical complexity, palaces upon palaces, peace and harmony through rule of the good and wise, utter cleanliness, transcendence of nature and of crude beginnings, the availability of all things pleasurable and cultured” (ibid.).

Le Corbusier’s Radiant City was a Heavenly City as described above, but it has never been built. Hong Kong managed to develop at least partially towards this aim. However, while Hong Kong had to undergo a complex process of culturization and disculturization in order to develop a “tendency towards placelessness and timelessness” (Abbas 1996, p. 215). Dubai has chosen this option from the beginning. Dubai never did attempt to be more than a computer generated image, *immediately* engaging in an act of self-abstraction, which is the contemporary mode of disappearance. While Hong Kong had to be first a British Empire colony before becoming a “Disney Kingdom Outpost” (Ngo 1999, p. 9). Dubai went immediately towards what Mike Davis calls the “cyclopean fantasies of Barnum, Eiffel, Disney, Spielberg, Jon Jerde, Steve Wynn, and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill” (Davis, p. 51).

8 Dubai is not Disneyland

Jack Barwind writes about his stay in Dubai that “when I was a young man I wished I could live in Disney World; my wish has come true” (Barwind 2007, p. 198). Certainly, Dubai shows that differences between theme parks, hotel complexes and malls are eroding, an observation that had first been made with regard to Disneyland (Waldrep 1993, p. 147-47). The creation of Dubai’s image falls into the “age of reproduction” that fascinated Benjamin because here, in the most extreme case, any dilemmas between the authentic and the inauthentic have become irrelevant. This is surprising if one considers how much even Disneyland as a fantasy world claiming to be unreal still had to face the issue of architectural *authenticity*. One of the reasons is that Disneyland is a project of high modernism that is never working towards disappearance, but towards presence. For Dubai, the predicate “disneyfied” is highly unsuitable though it occurs relatively often in theoretical literature, first because both Disneyland and Dubai are artificial cities devoted to entertainment; and second, because Disneyfication is seen as a major force of aesthetic globalization. True, there are resemblances with Disneyland, one of which consists in the fact that Dubai also

produces a kind of aura-stripped hypercity, a city with billions of citizens (all who would consume) ... Physicalized yet conceptual, it’s the utopia of transience, a place where everyone is just passing through. This is its message for the city to be, a place everywhere and nowhere, assembled only through constant motion. (Sorkin 1992, p. 13)

It is also true that details of Dubai seem to have sprung from Disney-like phantasms. The monorail leading to Palm Jumeirah, for example, is strikingly reminiscent of the monorail in Disney's EPCOT Center. When in 1964, at the New York City World Fair, General Motors designers created an exhibit showing people living under water and weekendening at the "Hotel Atlantis" in the "sun-bright gardens of the sea," they were said to have tapped their inner little mermaid. However, in the end, Disney's project flows mainly out of the ambition to create a "Europe in the desert" (a project that has been pursued by many American millionaires), while Dubai attempts to recreate Los Angeles, but not Europe in the desert.⁶

It is clear that, in some respects, Sorkin's above analysis of Disneyland overlaps with that of today's Dubai. Also, Elkadi puts forward the Disney-effect of Dubai as a "wonderland that people experience with no real contribution to it or exploitation of it" (Elkadi, p. 90). However, if we mean by "disneyfication" the "shift from ethics to aesthetics," that is, a shift from a sound and authentic city to an image of a city, this shift is rather characteristic of the later-age Hong Kong because here Mainland Chinese tourists come to consume and to gape at a disappearing colonial city. Apart from that, even Hong Kong is not compatible with the romantic clichés of exotic lands that visitors of Disneyland are fed with: this city of disappearance is a product of severe competition and real needs.

What about Dubai? The only event that Dubai tourists can gape at is a globalized city located in a prosperous though identity-less future. Or is it not rather the after-image of a future that they will first have to imagine? In any case, Disneyland would not consider selling such a product.

If walking through Disneyland has been compared to a stroll through Walt Disney's head (Steiner 1998, p. 3), walking through Dubai might appear like a stroll through the head of Dubai's poet-ruler Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. However, the images we grasp in Dubai are vague and seem to evoke an eerie kind of transcendent modernism that has gone out of control. This is very different from Disney whose main purpose has always been concreteness and highly controlled play. Disney allowed architecture to smash the modernist glass box aesthetics in order to materialize a dream that is certainly childishly concrete but never arbitrary.

For Baudrillard – and for Louis Marin long before him – Disneyland has been created "in order to make us believe that the rest [of America] is real." Otherwise, we would think that "Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and the order of simulation" (Baudrillard 1994, p. 12). As absurd as this situation might appear, at least it enables us to distinguish between the real and the imaginary, between the authentic and the inauthentic: if Disneyland is unreal, then Los Angeles must be real. Dubai, on the other hand, has no such anchor in reality at all because there is neither a Los Angeles nor a big motherland comparable to Mainland China. Dubai itself is like Los Angeles, whose mystery, in the words of Louis Marin, "is precisely that it is nothing more than a network of endless, unreal circulation" and that it is desperately in need of a neighboring enchanted village in order to gain "reality-energy" (Marin 1990, p. 256). Hong Kong, in spite of its identity problems, has always been aware of its proximity to China, which represents Asian civilization just like America represents Western civilization. Dubai does not even have this default identity: it does not represent Middle Eastern civilization. Instead, it attempts to be something completely new.

9 Cultural Step Printing or Does the "Angle of History" have a GPS?

Of Dubai's three planned palm islands, only Palm Jumeirah (the smallest one) can be considered as achieved though it remains uninhabited. The large external arc that is supposed to protect the other islands against floods is only sparsely populated. Still this does not inspire the image of disappearance (though the name of the nearby Hotel Atlantis could inspire such a witticism); the world is patiently watching the emergence of the island as if it were watching a spectacle at an *unbelievably slow speed*.

⁶Early projects of Jebel Ali, a new city seventeen miles away from Dubai and planned in the 1970s, can be considered as such a "mixture of European grandiose and Islamic echoes." See Melamid 1980, p. 473. But these projects were discontinued in favor of the Los Angeles style Dubai.

Abbas explains that the life of buildings in Hong Kong has become shorter and shorter, *accelerating* the rebuilding process and creating the feeling of a culture of disappearance. A further acceleration of the process will logically lead to a situation in which nothing will be completely built at all. The existence of a new building will have been supplanted by that of the next one before it had the “time” to come into existence. Dubai has arrived at this stage, which is why Elkadi calls Dubai an “experiment in the evolution cycle of human settlement”.

Within this negation of time, extreme slowness and extreme speed begin to overlap. Abbas observes such an overlapping in Hong Kong culture. Wong Kar-Wai’s film *Days of Being Wild* painstakingly re-creates the Hong Kong of the 1960s without being merely a pastiche of the sixties, but rather an endless consecution of perceptions that disappear into the past:

The result is then a history of the sixties that, like the experience of disappearance itself, is also there and not there at the same time. The film does not give us Hong Kong in the sixties viewed from the nineties, but another more labile structure: the nineties are to the sixties as the sixties are to an earlier moment and so on. (Abbas 1997, p. 53)

The paradoxical effect of a “delayed immediacy” that Abbas observes also in Wong’s *Chungking Express* comes about when extreme speed and extreme slowness overlap. Wittgenstein once said that philosophy is like a race in which the slowest runner will be the winner, an allegory conveying the idea of an absurd overlapping of absolute speed and absolute slowness. In film, the editing method of *step printing* (or undercrank) creates a highly pixelated and delayed kind of “motion freeze” that can best be described as a dreamlike slow motion effect. Wong Kar-Wai uses this method abundantly in several of his films. I believe that this “step printing” symbolizes Dubai’s cultural situation. In step printing, speed acquires a new dimension because it establishes a paradoxical relationship between the past and the future. Is the next, “delayed” picture appearing within the step printing sequence to be considered as an afterimage of the past or rather as a projection of the next image of the future? Does the preceding image *disappear* “into” the new image or does a new image *appear* “out of” the old one? Obviously, both happen at the same time, which leads to the conclusion that disappearance *is* appearance.

The paradoxical nature of time in Dubai can also be illustrated with the help of Walter Benjamin’s famous allegory of the “Angel of History” inspired by a painting by Paul Klee that Benjamin owned. On the painting, the angel’s

face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1969, p. 257)

The storm and the debris still exist, but in Dubai, Benjamin’s “Angel of History” has been equipped with a rear-view mirror in order to become the “Angel of the Future.” The angel is still blown into the future, but as he is looking into the mirror he perceives the future as the past. Moving backward, he sees the present disappear into the future in the same way in which the Angel of History once saw the present disappear into the past. As a result, the angel perceives *disappearance* as *appearance*. Or perhaps the angel is equipped with a GPS (Global Positioning System) that interweaves a global system with real space shaping, in the words of Belinda Barnet, the human experience of countries and regions “in advance by its representations through a mnemotechnical reterritorialisation of real space.” Equipped with an anticipating GPS, “the place I am approaching is already the future anterior, it is already memory” (Barnet 2005). The paradoxical constellation is reinforced by the fact Dubai’s present past is financed by future oil because, as explains Mike Davis, Dubai’s projects are based on future revenues that will be made through peak oil (Davis, p. 54).

Benjamin’s Angel had to put up with a limited vision of the world’s happenings because he could see “only” the past though constantly moving into the future. Dubai’s Angel of the Future has a similarly

limited horizon because in his mirror he can only see that fragment of the future that is a past future. Abbas quotes Benjamin's phrase that "with the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled" (Benjamin 1999, p. 12). In Dubai we see them crumbling even before they have been built. This has nothing to do with a "retro-future," whose typical representative has been said to be Walt Disney. Dubai resembles utopian or "futurist" architects of the 1930s and 1940s more than anything else. Great ramps of freeways attempt to recreate California and Florida. However, if Dubai would be nothing more than a suburban utopia of universal accessibility by the automobile in the style of Los Angeles, then Dubai would have been outdated from the beginning. The reality is that Dubai is more than such a suburban utopia. While Disneyland has been conceived in cooperation with television as a sort of film able to engender concrete experiences, Dubai has been conceived for computer graphics and Google Earth. In Disneyland we feel, in the words of Disney, the future penetrating us; in Dubai we are watching the future appear in the rear-view mirror of our computer screen. While in Hong Kong we need "a second guess in order to experience" (Abbas) the space of disappearance (Abbas 1997, p. 106), in Dubai we need to guess the appearance of a future that is already past and cannot be experienced at all.

10 Conclusion

Elsheshtawy has made an interesting observation about Hong Kong that illustrates the difference between both cities. In 2005 Hong Kong's authorities accepted Norman Foster's design of the new Kowloon Cultural District, a project seen as an attempt to turn Hong Kong into a world city and to further enhance its status as a major global financial center. However, "the project was met with widespread opposition questioning its scale and its relevance within the context of Hong Kong, which (...) led to the 'opening of new spaces to imagine alternative modernities based not on the official 'world city' rhetoric but on social responsibility and ongoing cultural work.'"⁷ After intense public criticism the project was scrapped and altered designs had to be proposed in 2009 and 2010.

This kind of civil engagement is unthinkable in Dubai. Paradoxically, Hong Kong, by slowly disappearing, manages to write its own history in order to become a "real" city. Dubai, on the other hand, erases, through its rush to modernity, its own history and reverts to a pure contemporaneity, which excludes the possibility of such "alternative modernities." Thomas Friedman's claim that "Dubai is where we should want the Arab world to go" (Friedman 2006) is naïve because, first, Dubai is to a large extent built with oil money (without Abu Dhabi's bail out Dubai would be bankrupt) and, second, the low wages working conditions of the largest part of the population are similar to those which contributed to revolutions in other Arab countries. All this is opposed to Hong Kong. Janet Ng points out that here the "'surplus population' is a stabilizing factor in a successful capitalist economic system and is crucial in the continuing prosperity of the city" (Ng 2009, p. 11). In Hong Kong, the second class citizens have a chance to become citizens, which is not the case in Dubai.

In 1982, William Gibson described "cyberspace" as looking like "Los Angeles seen from five thousand feet up in the air" (Gibson 2004, p. 78). Around the same time, Paul Virilio described the future disappearance of constructed geographical space through immaterial electronic broadcast emissions whose sense of space is two-dimensional (like that of a computer terminal). More precisely, Virilio conceptualized a space that had lost its dimension under the influence of *speed*. Fifteen years later, Abbas would employ Paul Virilio's concept of a nonphysical and dematerialized space to characterize Hong Kong's cultural situation. Under conditions of speed, our concept of physical dimensions loses all meaning because of sensory overload (Abbas 1996, p. 106), a condition that Abbas sees fulfilled in Hong Kong: "It is as if the speed of current events is producing a radical desynchronization: the generation of more and more images to the point of visual saturation" (Abbas 1997, p. 26-27). The result is "the breakdown of the analogical in favor of the digital, the preference for the abstract dot (pixel) over the analogical line, plane or solid" (Abbas 1996, p. 215). All this is also true for Dubai, but here the same development is sparked not by speed, but by slowness. While

⁷Elsheshtawy quotes from C. Chu 19xx. From Elsheshtawy 2008, p. 294

speed makes us lose the dimensions, Dubai creates, through its slow and eternally delayed appearance, a fourth dimension. Elkadi sees this fourth dimension as “neither real nor virtual” (Elkadi, p. 87), which is the reason why Hong Kong and Dubai are similar though at the same time symmetrically opposed. Both work towards a “colonial space of disappearance” though one uses high speed and the other uses extreme slowness. In Dubai, the feeling of a *déjà disparu* rooted in an irretrievable, colonial ex-past has been transformed into a neo-colonial *not yet there* of an indiscernible ex-future. In the end, this difference is important for the outcome of both cities’ *realities*.

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