Futures, imagined cities and emerging markets: the semiotic production of professional selves

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Abstract

This article focuses on the emergence of "speculative architecture" as a distinctive strand within the professional field of urban studies, one that is future-oriented and claims to "create narratives about how new technologies and networks influence space, culture, and community [with the aim of] imagining where new forms of agency exist within the cities changed by these new processes" (Liam Young 2017). In so doing, speculative architecture is conceived of as a discursive space (Heller 2007) for social performance (Briggs and Bauman 1992; Hanks 1987) and capital accumulation (Bourdieu 1986) under conditions of late capitalism. I examine how a set of semiotic and discursive features that become emblematic of "doing speculative architecture" get "enregistered" (Agha 2007) or "stylised" (Cameron 2000) in ways that regulate access to socio-institutional networks and associated material/symbolic resources. This approach is intended to shed light on the semiotic production of new professional selves while at the same time identifying the embedded forms of inequality that these may enable.

Futures, imagined cities and emerging markets: the semiotic production of professional selves

1. Introduction

On 23 October 2007, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York hosted an event titled "In Our Time: Radical Design Geographies with Liam Young". On its website, *architecturediary.org*[1] publicised this event as follows:

> *In Our Time* is an architecture and design lecture series presenting the best thinkers, makers, and builders of today. This edition […] introduces the radical new global geographies generated by changes in technology, human migration and the environment. The lecture will be followed by a conversation with Beatrice Galilee and Daniel Brodsky, Associate Curator of Architecture and Design, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The event was echoed in several online platforms of institutions involved in the production of knowledge about architecture and design all over the world, particularly in Europe and the US, where Young is often presented as a "theorist of architecture." He had also been named by *Blueprint* magazine as one of 25 people who would change architecture and design in 2010. The brief introduction of Liam Young's work shown in the publicity of this event in New York still appears today copied and pasted in dozens of webpages announcing Young's exhibitions and talks held at museums and universities in different cities between 2007 and 2017. The introduction goes like this:

> Liam Young is an architect who operates in the spaces between design, fiction, and futures. He is founder of the think tank *Tomorrow's Thoughts Today*, a group whose work explores the possibilities of fantastic, speculative, and imaginary urbanisms. He

tells stories about the city using fiction, film, and performance as imaginative tools to explore the implications and consequences of new technologies and ecological conditions. Building his design fictions from the realities of the present, Young also co-runs the Unknown Fields Division, a nomadic research studio that travels on location shoots and expeditions to the ends of the earth to document emerging trends and uncover the weak signals of possible futures. He has been acclaimed in both mainstream and architectural media, including the BBC, NBC, *Wired*, *The Guardian*, *Time* magazine, and *Dazed & Confused*. Young manages his time between exploring distant landscapes and visualizing the fictional worlds he extrapolates from them.

Young himself designates his own practice as "speculative architecture," which at an interview with the online magazine *NexNature.net*[2] he defines as "an attempt to stay relevant in a context of a city that is always changing." He goes on:

I use this type of work to think about how, as designers, we could engage with emerging technologies in a much more critical and urgent way. Traditional architecture exists at the wrong end of the technology transfer line. Technology always happens to us rather than being shaped by us. With this type of work we are speculating and acting on the potentials of technology, and being active agents in shaping the development of where it could go and what we could use it for. So, I thought that operating with networks, software, stories and fiction within other cultural forms was a timely and legitimate form of architectural practice.

But speculative architecture is not necessarily concerned with conventional understandings of this label within the field of architecture. Young makes this claim in the interview with another architectural magazine, *Strelka Magazine*[3]:

Most architects, whether they call themselves that or not, have been speculative architects for much of their careers. For example, most competition entries remain unbuilt, and the client never pays for them […] So, I think the claim in speculative architecture is actually not to say that it's a new discipline, but to legitimize it and formalize it in a way that it hasn't been before. I set up a new Master's programme on speculative architecture at Sci-Arc to try to establish it as a clear genre of architecture and a clear career path, not being something that you fall into because no one will pay you to build anything, but something that is really meaningful—and also critical.

Young adds:

As a speculative architect, I don't design buildings as endpoints or outputs, but I would still argue that what I do is architectural, or at least it's architecture in some form. Instead of creating buildings themselves, I tell stories about cities. The dominant forces of the past that shaped our cities, buildings, and public spaces are now being displaced by technologies, systems, networks, and stacks. Thus, the architect needs to change their model of practice in order to remain relevant. The architect now needs to intervene in these systems beyond shaping the physical building. And that is really about telling stories about how they operate. Speculative architects mostly create narratives about how new technologies and networks influence space, culture, and community. They try to imagine where new forms of agency exist within the cities changed by these new processes.

Speculative architecture is therefore constructed as an attempt to carve a new professional niche under changing social conditions. Young expands on this further:

I think somehow we all want to be able to effect change at some scale. I don't think the traditional role of architects is going to disappear, but classic architects are going to become a form of luxury item. Louis Vuitton handbags still exist in the world, they serve no real purpose, but we all kind of like to have them. And the role of architects designing crafted physical buildings is going to operate in a similar way. The architectural profession will have to diversify. A speculative architect will tell stories about possible futures, and there will be architects as politicians, urban planners, tech company executives, researchers, writers and performers. The change is just an expanding role of the discipline.

It is precisely this connection between the professional field of speculative architecture and the imagining of alternative futures via telling stories about cities what constitutes the starting point of this article. The argument here engages with Jaworski and Li Wei's call to approach the *city* as a site for intensive semiotic production with focus on "the multimodality, materiality and multilinguality of writing […] as a mediational means of interpersonal and intergroup relationships, hierarchies and imaginaries […] and a repository of the city's memory, or biography" (Jaworski and Li Wei this issue, 000). As they put it:

writing the city takes many different guises and is performative of the city in its own right. Thrift [2000] cites "theatre, opera, concert and dance, performance art, multimedia" (p. 406) all contributing to our understanding of the city as "a field of possibility, borne out of chance encounters, new forms of experience based, for example, on new technologies, and on the production of new more open subjectivities […]" (p. 401). Cities become accumulations of experiences, possibilities, objects, networks, and relationships, and they are both cited in and inscribed by writing in different registers, modalities,

literary genres, artworks, economic transactions, and forms of scholarship (Jaworski and Li Wei this issue, 000).

While recognising the value of such a call, this article also takes the stance that this approach should not be detached from ongoing political economic transformations, for the very encounters, experiences and subjectivities that "write cities" are always mediated by semiotic practices entrenched with larger (i.e. historically anchored) material infrastructures of (dis)possession that are enabled by them.

My interest in practices and ideas of speculative architecture emerged out of a research project that focused on the trajectories of international students in the UK's higher education system, as they became professionals in different subject areas and navigated transnationalised institutional networks and regimes of labour.[4] Since one of the project participants was enrolled in a MA programme on urban planning and design in London, theories and intellectual frameworks on architecture (including speculative architecture) soon became salient since these were offered as part of the curriculum in the research participant's MA programme as well as in other similar ones across universities in the UK and beyond. As such, these frameworks provide a point of focus whereby the city can be seen as a metapragmatic object of attention that regulates the production, circulation and valorisation of knowledge about "appropriate" ways of being professional or doing professionalism *vis-à-vis* global flows of social categories, selves and labour.

In line with this view, I draw on critical scholarship of space and infrastructure (Lefebvre 1991; Sassen 2001; Esterling 2016) with the goal of describing the semiotic packaging of doing "good" speculative architecture and the ways in which this semiotic practice shapes (and is shaped by) global flows of professionals, knowledge and labour. In what follows, the article first introduces the relevant lens with which to address these issues, with reference (and in contrast) to the seminal work that has already examined architecture as an object of

study in the language disciplines (section 2). By deploying this lens, the analysis focuses then on a particular set of institutions, social domains and communicative genres that are linked to the figure of Liam Young, who is used here as a case in point to illustrate the formation of a professional niche that he sets apart and the meanings and social/moral categories that are performed to make it recognizable. Specific attention will be paid to the enregisterment of "doing speculative architecture" as part of the manufacturing of a new type of professional self (section 3) as well as the transnational network of institutions that seem to be invested in the stylisation of this self (section 4). Finally, the article closes with a discussion of some implications of this analysis for the language disciplines (section 5).

2. Speculative architecture, political economy and metapragmatics

In their 2002 book, *The Words between the Spaces: Buildings and Language,* Deborah Cameron and Thomas A. Markus, sociolinguist and architect respectively, drew attention to the significance of language for our understanding of the built environment. In their work, they explored "how language is used, and what it does, in the particular context of writing and talking about buildings" (p. vii). They go on: "we argue that the language used to speak and write about the built environment plays a significant role in shaping that environment, and our responses to it" (p. 2). Their key position is therefore that both architectural objects and language are "irreducibly social phenomena, so that any illuminating analysis of them must locate them in the larger social world" (p. 9). However, turning our attention to "speculative architecture" as conceptualised by Liam Young and other contemporary architects provides us with a platform to take Cameron and Markus' line of inquiry a step further, both theoretically and epistemologically.

While aligning with Cameron and Markus' position that pragmatics and sociolinguistics are suitable language-based angles to account for architecture as a social practice, I depart from an approach that: (1) privileges written discourses *about* buildings; and (2) aims to

identify wider societal ideologies about power, heritage, and the nation as hidden in the linguistic and semiotic choices made by architects as they present their cultural objects. In contrast, I approach "speculative architecture" as (1) a discursive space (Foucault 1975; Heller 2007) for the production of professional subjectivities through metapragmatic discourses about architecture, urban spaces and forms of communication in them; and (2) a social field for genred performance (Briggs and Bauman 1992; Hanks 1987) and capital accumulation (Bourdieu 1986) in which "doing speculative architecture" cannot be detached from the subjectification of new professionals into new moralised types of personhood/citizenship that have exchange value within transnationalised social networks (see Jaworski 2001, for a similar approach to art criticism).

Theoretically speaking, this approach to language and architecture requires more explicit attention to political economy. It forces us to examine the re-articulation of conventional models of communication, culture and identity in daily meaning-making practices as traditional forms of social organisation get re-arranged under the restructuring of the labour market in global (but variegated) capitalism (Ong 2006). That is to say, this perspective demands a Foucauldian perspective to discourse, following Cameron and Markus' standpoint, but one that draws more centrally on his latest work on the bio-politics of governance and the associated neoliberal technologies of subjectivity and subjection (Foucault 2008; see also Martín Rojo and Del Percio 2019). Following Ong's take (2006, 6):

Technologies of subjectivity rely on an array of knowledge and expert systems to induce self-animation and self-government so that citizens can optimize choices, efficiency, and competitiveness in turbulent market conditions. Such techniques of optimization include the adherence to health regimes, acquisition of skills, development of entrepreneurial ventures, and other techniques of self-engineering and capital accumulation. *Technologies of subjection* inform political strategies that differently regulate populations for optimal

productivity, increasingly through spatial practices that engage market forces. Such regulations include the fortressization of urban space, the control of travel, and the recruitment of certain kinds of actors to growth hubs.

On a more epistemological note, a performativity focus brings about an analytical apparatus capable of accounting for the metapragmatic activities through which social groups come to recognize a set of discursive or semiotic practices as shared cultural models of action indexically linked to the enactment of specific social personae and associated stances with regard to circumstances, other social actors, or institutions. Existing strands of contemporary work in linguistic anthropology (e.g. Goodwin and Duranti 2000) and critical sociolinguistics (e.g. Cameron 1995; Duchêne and Heller 2012; Blommaert 2005) offer suitable lenses with which to identify such processes of indexical (re)configuration, and this article relies, in particular, on Agha's take on "enregisterment" (2007), and Cameron's approach to "stylisation" (2000). As such, I aim to: (1) examine the very process whereby a set of discursive and semiotic features become emblematic of the emerging professional field of "speculative architecture" and the kinds of moral/social stances that are associated with it; and (2) identify the linkages between this form of discourse register and the institutional actors and networks that contribute to its scripting and which capitalize on it.

As I shall show, a theoretical and epistemological angle of this sort leaves us in a good position to ask / address questions such as these: What does "doing speculative architecture" actually entail? Where and how is it enacted? What categories of personhood and citizenship are staged? How is it circulated and consumed by whom within this emerging social field? What are the networks of institutions and fields of knowledge production that contribute to standardize it and which capitalize on its enactment? In the following two sections I attempt to address these issues by zooming into two specific dimensions, namely: the semiotic and

discursive enregisterment of doing speculative architecture; and a key network of institutions involved in its standardisation.

3. Doing speculative architecture

The production of knowledge about speculative architecture in my data corpus involves different socio-institutional spaces and communicative genres,[5] all of them with the character of Liam Young as the key connector.[6] These include: interviews with (online and more traditional) media, public exhibitions and lectures in museums and research institutions interested in architecture and design, and films and other multimodal artefacts produced by and displayed via think tanks and educational institutions that either are run by Liam Young in London (*Tomorrow's Thoughts Today*) or collaborate with him in other countries (*Strelka Institute*). Though such genres are communicatively arranged in different ways according to different aims and participant actors, they all have a distinguishing "interdiscursivity" (Silverstein 2005) feature: that of a salient social persona that is recurrently performed through practice.

In particular, doing speculative architecture in this corpus of data is recursively performed by enacting the figure of a professional, in this case an architect, who, on the one hand, has a critical stance towards social inequality, and particularly with normalised relationships between humans and technologies that contribute to state surveillance and economic exploitation; and, on the other, is devoted to offering or imagining alternative (i.e. liberating) forms of social organisation.

This figure of personhood is enacted through a set of practices and recurrent discursive and semiotic features that involve: (1) highly stylised public performances driven by chronotopic lamination (Bakhtin 1981) of real and fictional stories—the dispersed, fluid chains of places, times, people, and (online and offline) technological artefacts that come to be tied together along with the ways in which critical stances are held and managed; and (2)

narrated technological artefacts that are understood as a site for new forms of cultural expression (including writing and other types of digital inscription) and which involve spectators in the imagining of possible futures by way of shifts in footing (Goffman 1981) throughout the course of the narration—changes in the ways in which participants shift their alignments with each other and the activity at hand.

Extract 1 shows the enactment of (1), as taken from a public lecture delivered by Liam Young at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc)[7] in Los Angeles (USA), on 28 October 2015. The lecture was video-recorded and made available on the website of on Young's think tank *Tomorrow's Thoughts Today*, captioned as "City Everywhere: Kim Kardashian and the Dark Side of the Screen. Multiscreen Storytelling Performance." The video of the lecture shows Liam Young standing on the left side of the frame, next to a lectern from which he reads his script throughout the 52-minutes lecture. As the event begins, three wide screens to his left show changing images of Kim Kardashian with her name in the background, and the audience is seen sitting in the darkness, in front of the screens. Seven minutes into the lecture, the activity goes as follows (see transcription conventions in the Appendix):

Extract 1. Extract from *City Everywhere*

1   so what I wanna explore tonight is / who we become /

2   in this pixelated world // we become / Kimmie /

3   Kimmie is the icon / of our media architectural age /

4   and Kim Kardashian will be our guide today /

5   to help us find the city everywhere / cause Kim is / the future no one wanted //

6   uh / Kim unfortunately is also the- / the future already here //

7   she's a creature that lives in the network /

8   she's an animated media system /

9 she's not just her physical self but to understand Kim /

10 and / also to understand ourselves in the architectures we inhabit //

11 you've gotta look / not just at /

12 our physical / and digital space / uhm /

13 but at the shadows we cast across the planet in the electronic spectrum (…)

14 {loud music keeps playing. Young turns the volume down and the music fades away

15 progressively. Images on the central screen show the skyline of a city all made up of

16 residential sky crappers while the screens to the sides display street images of long ques

17 of people with phenotypical characteristics often stereotyped as "Asian" waiting to enter

18 phone stores as well as of white individuals taking selfies of themselves}

19 with Kim we go to the residential districts /

20 it's our first stop / in city everywhere (2")

21 it's a comfortable place to start our tour /

22 and we put our ears to the cool bevel aluminium door of the-

23 the apartment to listen //

24 inside we hear Dury drop a Samsung Galaxy SX phone under the kitchen table (2")

25 we hear it chime softly as it makes contact with the paper thing Samsung quiz smart

26 power charger ((mat)) //

27 we hear scream down the hallway and her husband raising the voice /

28 over the Samsung air conditioner //

29 *why does the new TV say LG on it?* /

30 she says / *because it's made by LG* /

31 her husband replies /

32 *but // our lease is up for review in three months* /

33 *you trying to get us thrown out?* /

34 *you bought an LG TV / into a Samsung housing block* //

35   *what the hell will the neighbours say?* (8")

36   {side screens display images of civilian protests from the air while the central screen

37   shows a ground-based angle to young males covering their faces standing in front of riot

38   police}

39   so in city everywhere these new relationships to technology suggest /

40   new forms of community //

41   technology breeds new subcultures in city everywhere and allegiance to ba- brands /

42   Samsung or- / Apple / defines who we are much closer to our virtual community /

43   than we are to our neighbours /

44   something like the Egyptian revolution here {points at screen} was a /

45   community formed / through a network //

46   and in a way we're not / Australian or- /

47   American anymore than / we are / Beliebers //

48   {new images displayed on the screens, now picturing global influencers} (3")

49   or Cumberbitches or Directioners or Little Monsters /

50   or Beyhives or KatyCats or Kayne Nation or – Kimmey {in soft laughter} /

51   {the image of Kim Kardashian is displayed on the screens}

52   {some laughter from the audience} (1")

53   oh Kimmey / Kimmey yey!

54   {laughter from the audience} (2")

55   so the greatest force in city everywhere is the / consumption of media /

56   that / is what defines us / unfortunately {laughs} / Kimmie defines us

Liam Young combines the syncing of his voice-over flat-tone narration, music and three

separate video feeds to move the narration from the persona of Kim Kardashian (lines 1–13)

to the residential districts in "city everywhere" (lines 14–35) to Arab spring protests in Egypt

(lines 36–47) to global influencers (lines 48–56). In so doing, the persona of Kim Kardashian as an archetypal figure of media consumption culture allows Young to construct a narrative that foregrounds dystopian future cities in which real/imaginary physical environments and forms of social citizenship appear as mediated by technologies in ways that contribute to enhance surveillance (e.g. residents in the Samsung housing block risking eviction buying home products from a different brand, lines 22–35). He adopts a critical stance towards such forms of social organization that relies on the digital embodiment of Kim Kardashian in the form of an animated system "that lives in the network."

This embodiment places Kardashian at the intersection of past-present-future temporal references and various geographical locations. That is to say, it brings about a chronotopic configuration (Bakhtin 1981) whereby habituated or normalised actions that are deemed to be mediated by technological artefacts get linked to unsettling future possibilities which are, in turn, introduced as becoming present realities. Indeed, Kim Kardashian is described in Extract 1 both as an "outcome of our media architectural age" and the undesired future that is "already here," a spatio-temporal omnipresence that drives the tour of "city everywhere" by way of juxtaposing:

1. images of recognisable mundane activities today that are emplaced in global urbanized landscapes invoked via racialized depictions of people participating in them (e.g. long ques of people with phenotypical characteristics often stereotyped as "Asian" waiting to enter phone stores or white individuals taking selfies of themselves) (lines 15–18);

2. constructed dialogues (Tannen 1986) from future scenarios of technological totalitarianism (e.g. residents in a Samsung housing block risking eviction if buying LG TVs) (lines 29–35); and

3. descriptions of shifting forms of identity whereby depicted past nation-based civil-rights movements (e.g. civil revolts in Egypt) get replaced with ridiculed media-based

identifications associated with "global influencers" who are labelled as "Cumberbitches," "Directioners" or "Kayne Nation" (lines 47–50, see also laughter from both Young and the audience in lines 50, 52, 54 and 56).

The layering of space-time configurations and the indexed critical stance towards new technologies are also foregrounded as key features of this public talk in the entextualised (Silverstein and Urban 1996) version circulated within the professional community for which it was performed. In a review published on *Archinect news*, a website that contains architecture-related editorials, news, events, competitions and employment information, the author states the following on Young's event.[8]

> A presentation about a world that is increasingly mediated by screens and digital
> conceptualizations of space on three screens with digital conceptualizations of space is
> not just meta: it was the engaging and immersive format of Liam Young's
> lecture/performance […] Young's presentation was a quasi-fictional tour of "a city that is
> hiding in plain sight," which is to say the current urban and mental space(s) that we
> inhabit thanks to the reality of digital mediation […] While it's tempting to file that
> incident under the Darwin Awards, Young layered in a disturbing series of examples of
> how the digital has gradually come to redefine the physical. Indeed, Kim Kardashian,
> who Young invoked not even as a person exactly but rather as the most popular
> assemblage of personas in our digital age, was the ideal docent for this dehumanized
> territory.

At the end of the lecture, the consequences of this "dehumanised" world driven by consumption of media and technology are staged by introducing case reports of underpaid iPhone assembly workers in China who snap selfies with yet-to-be-sold phones to be found

later by their US buyers—as well as by images of huge amounts of e-waste and the effect of these on the physical environment of specific regions of the world. This emphasis on dehumanised representations of the social world is indeed conceptualised by Liam Young on the *Tomorrow's Thoughts Today* website as part of a "critical attitude," one that is supposed to characterise speculative architectural work in its attempt to uncover global unequal relations of labour that are concealed by the normalised spatiotemporal disconnection of actors and actions at a global scale.

The following extract and figures show the semiotic features mentioned in (2) above—narrated technological artefacts as a site for new forms of cultural expression (including writing and other types of digital inscription), and how these are used in speculative architecture not only to imagining technologies as sources of surveillance but also to point to alternative forms of social relation. They are linked to a film directed by Liam Young and premiered in IMAX at the London Film Festival on October 8th, 2016. A summary of the film is provided in Extract 2 taken from a synopsis produced by different actors involved in the exhibition, and later displayed on the *Tomorrow's Thoughts Today*'s website along with an available short extract of the film[9].

Extract 2. **Synopsis, *In the Robot Skies: A Drone Love Story***

Directed by speculative architect Liam Young and written by fiction author Tim Maughan, *In the Robot Skies* is the world's first narrative shot entirely through autonomous drones. In collaboration with the Embedded and Artificially intelligent Vision Lab in Belgium the film has evolved in the context of their experiments with specially developed camera drones each programmed with their own cinematic rules and behaviours.

The film explores the drone as a cultural object, not just as a new instrument of visual story telling but also as the catalyst for a new collection of urban sub cultures. In the way

the New York subway car of the 80's gave birth to a youth culture of wild style graffiti and hip hop, the age of ubiquitous drones as smart city infrastructure will create a new network of surveillance activists and drone hackers. From the eyes of the drones we see two teenagers each held by police order within the digital confines of their own council estate tower block in London. A network of drones survey the council estates, as a roving flock off CCTV cameras and our two characters are kept apart by this autonomous aerial infrastructure. We watch as they pass notes to each other via their own hacked and decorated drone, like kids in an old fashioned classroom, scribbling messages with biro on paper, balling it up and stowing it in their drones. In this near future city drones form both agents of state surveillance but also become co-opted as the aerial vehicles through which two teens fall in love.

Against the background of New York youth culture of the 1980s as the spatio-temporal frame of reference, with graffiti as its dominant writing practice, the film takes the spectator into a distant future of a smart city infrastructure in which both utopian and dystopian readings are allowed. In this future city, writing as a social practice is narrated as emplaced in a surveillance network in council tower blocks (social housing) in London where activists and the police compete over the digital control of drones. Although the dystopic landscape of the city is dominated by governmental artefacts of social control, the introduction of emotionally-charged actions brings about a more utopian possibility to social transformation and positive affect (e.g. actors scribbling child-like messages with biros on pieces of paper; activists and drone hackers; or stories of falling in love).

The setting up of a contrast between the use of drones for social control purposes, on the one hand, and their conceptualisation as devices at the service of egalitarian and love-related, inter-personal relations, on the other, is reinforced further by shifts in footing (Goffman, 1981) throughout the story. In the film, the two teenagers are positioned both as *prisoners*,

i.e. objects of state surveillance who are held in home custody, and as *lovers* who exchange notes through drones, which they have hacked and appropriated for their own affective purposes. In other words, *writing* appears linked to two very different sets of participation frameworks, production formats and indexed social relations which involve the teenage characters, the drones and the film spectator.

In the case of youth as objects of state surveillance, the action of writing is *authored* by the drones, and the spectator is placed in the position of a *ratified addressee* of this action. This addressee is therefore actively involved in state-based surveillance as s/he monitors the two teenagers and engages in *side-played* communication with the drones that have been assigned to the youngsters and which report about their activities to her/him (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Drones and state surveillance, film still from *In the Robot Skies: A Drone Love Story*

As for the teenagers as lovers, they appear in this instance as the *authors* of the writing practices as they communicate with each other by using this mode. They do so by inscribing notes in the drones that are then passed onto each other by means of hacking the devices' state-controlled patterns of mobility. In this case, the film spectator is placed in the position of a *non-ratified participant*, or *bystander*, watching illegitimately their love exchanges, while the drones act as mere animators of the youngsters' messages (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Hacked drones and love stories, film still from *In the Robot Skies: A Drone Love Stor*

But the enregistering of highly stylised public performances and narrated technological artefact—based on chronotopic lamination of real and fictional stories as well as shifts in footing—as emblematic of the persona of a critical speculative architect is not only recognised as a cultural model of action within a select group of members engaging (off- and online) with Liam Young's lectures and exhibitions. A transnational network of organisations that capitalise on the production and consumption of this discourse register within specific nationalised economic territories also plays an important part in its institutionalisation, and Strelka Institute offers a good entry point.

4. Packaging speculative architects and the territorialisation of profit

Strelka Institute is an organisation based in Russia. Publicly self-presented as driven by "an experimental approach, offering a multidisciplinary academic programme," this institution is composed of a Board of Trustees that includes members of Public Council of the Ministry of

Culture in Russia and founders of Russian-based development companies, funds and publishing houses. Strelka has the city as a core focus, one that on its website is said to be addressed through an interdisciplinary lens that includes sociology, economics, architecture, and political and cultural studies. It hosts talks and consultation activities by architects and researchers from top companies, and since 2012 has been listed among DOMUS magazine's top-100 best European schools of architecture and design. Self-portrayed as having been "rated as one of the best spaces for learning by World Architects on-line magazine," [10] Strelka claims not only to provide free tuition but also monthly scholarships to all of its students to cover their living expenses.

The role that this organisation plays in the institutionalisation of the discourse register analysed above is twofold. First, Strelka has explicit linkages with Liam Young whose work is featured on its Strelka Magazine together with his Think Tank *Tomorrow's Thoughts Today* and his London-based (and British Council-supported) studio *Unknown Fields*. Second, this Institute aims to grow a pool of skilled professionals who can participate in governmental and non-governmental employability projects serving major infrastructural developments in Russia and beyond. Extract 4, from the "after Strelka" section of its website, connects this organisation's programmes with the Russian labour market via discourses of "human capital."

Extract 3. **"Development of human capital"**
Strelka aspires to create a better future that largely depends on the development of human capital. Strelka graduates go on to collaborate with city administrations and are employed in various government departments and agencies, such as the Russian Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Transport; they head architectural competitions and work for Russian and international architectural firms (AMO, Herzog&De Meuron, Bureau "Meganom", Wowhaus, Alexander Brodsky); they are also to be found contributing to key online and

offline media as authors and experts as well as writing books. Strelka alumni is growing in size and influence, and this year's class will expand its reach.

Such "human capital" is channelled through the hosting of entrepreneurial talks on how to invest and set up start-up companies in urban businesses, but more specifically by means of two English-medium postgraduate programmes at which Liam Young has taught together with other architects based in Europe and Russia. These programmes include an MA in Advanced Urban Design and a 5-month programme called "*The New Normal*," both of which aim to train professionals who can apply European and American expertise in emerging markets within developing countries where urbanisation is happening rapidly (with focus on China, South Africa and Russia). Extract 4 articulates this rationale as part of an overview to the MA programme.

Extract 4. **"Expertise in doing projects and research in developing countries"**
How does urban design work in unstable social and economic contexts? Why do developing countries need city transformations? What are most advanced methods for urban design? Strelka Institute's joint Masters programme in Advanced Urban Design with HSE Graduate School of Urbanism is aimed at the next generation of Urban Designers, combining the best of the Russian Academia and the cutting-edge experimental project-based education (…) In this two-year programme students explore ongoing dynamic urban growth in unstable economic contexts and study advanced urban design methods. The programme introduces students to the contemporary European and American design theory and practices, while at the same time offering operational toolkits for application of this knowledge in the new markets. It helps to understand the specificity of research and design work in highly volatile conditions of the cities in Russia, South Africa and the CIS, providing competencies beyond traditional urbanism.

The programme offers unique expertise in doing projects and research in developing countries and economies in transition – places where most urbanization and suburbanization is happening nowadays. By studying Russian cities, students will have an opportunity to explore key patterns of urbanization traceable in cities of similar unstable contexts. This will allow them to get experience of integrative planning in situations when all systems of urban governance and regulation are going through continuous and not always logical transformation.

In other words, and beyond the provision of tools for the application of European and American design theories and practices in new expanding markets, the MA programme in Advanced Urban Design is specifically designed to offer unique expertise that goes beyond "traditional" urbanism in order for yet-to-be professionals in the field to cope with the volatile conditions affecting urban governance. This new model of urbanism is more explicitly spelled out in the description of the *The New Normal* programme where the training provided to tap into such emerging markets is linked to speculative urbanism as a new discourse of architecture that draws on knowledge from software design, film & cinema, economy, humanities & social sciences in order to design speculative interventions. Extract 5 unpacks this new discourse in Strelka's official description of this 5-month programme.

Extract 5. **"To research and develop original speculative interventions"**
The New Normal at the Strelka Institute is a […] speculative urbanism think-tank, a platform for the invention and articulation of a new discourse and new models. Each year Strelka admits 30 students from around the world to a 5-months postgraduate programme as part of this longer initiative […] The New Normal programme focuses on research and design for the city and explores opportunities and challenges posed by emerging technologies for interdisciplinary design practices […] The New Normal 2017/18 is

designed for young designers with diverse backgrounds: architecture, urbanism, film &
cinema, interaction design, software design, humanities & social sciences, game design,
economics, and more. The programme redesigns urban design to include not only
architecture and infrastructure, but also experience, interaction and economics. During the
intensive 5-months programme students will work in small teams to research and develop
original speculative interventions and platforms. Urban design projects include spatial
plans, but the Strelka programme also emphasizes strategy, cinema and software. The
Program takes place in Moscow and includes research trips within Russia and to China.

Strelka's institutionalisation of the discourse register of doing speculative architecture,
however, involves more than well-constructed outlines of its academic offer. It also entails an
active role in the scripting of the stylised performances and narrated technological artefacts
by yet-to-be professionals in the fields of architecture and urban design. This is particularly
the case of high-stake regulated practices where the students' engagement with Strelka's
programmes is packaged as a final output that is deemed to receive the scrutiny of a panel of
experts and the public in general. In fact, *The New Normal* programme concludes every year
with a public presentation of students' projects, all of them presented by their authors in
multimodal performances similar to those by Liam Young transcribed in Extract 1, above.

Seven of these projects from the 2016/17 academic year are accessible on Strelka's
website, which are described as "risky speculations [that] became quite practical propositions
for infrastructural intervention," with many starting "with concrete history" and being
performed with "a poetic cinematic language [that] would provide the most direct expression
of what is most at stake." The seven performances, delivered on stage in outdoor spaces in
front of live audiences of about 200, all follow a very similar stylised format in all cases: the
students present their projects taking the participant role of a narrator who embeds their
proposed technology in a story that unfolds in fictional and non-fictional spaces/times mixed

altogether, from the past to the future, and which involves both utopian or dystopian scenarios that their proposed interventions are supposed to address.

They do so with the support of images projected onto wide, white screens where the narrated scenarios and designed technologies are most of the times portrayed as 3-D computerised models of physical environments and objects, all of it accompanied by music and sound effects playing simultaneously in the background. But these projects are far from just artful performances. They also showcase the potential of the programme in developing applications with economic relevance in specific geopolitical locations, as in the case of SEVER, one of the projects presented by a team composed of a journalist/media researcher (Russia), film maker (Russia), artist-educator (Russia) and architect (France). [11]

SEVER is devised as a futuristic decentralised governance with which to manage circulation of goods through the Artic once this region is completely melted and made available as a key route for global commerce (Figure 3). Extract 6 is a summary of the SEVER Project posted on Strelka's digital archive:

Figure 3. Screenshot of video from the SEVER project

Student presentation at The New Normal Showcase (18:03)
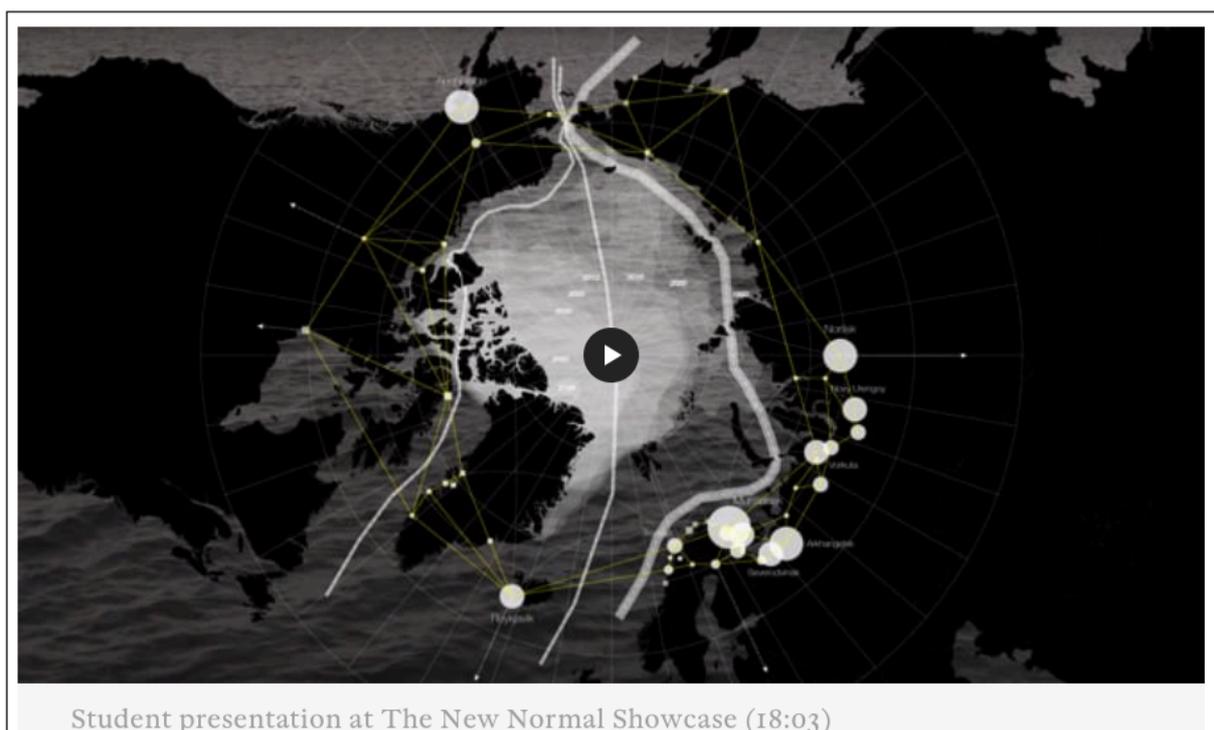
Extract 6. **SEVER**

SEVER [SVR] is location-based cryptocurrency whose value increases with the degree of latitude at which it is used. It is conceived as a speculative intervention into the contested territory of the Arctic. Scientists are unanimous: climate change in the Arctic is irreversible, and the melting of the polar ice cap is now unstoppable. Perhaps the most vivid manifestation of the Anthropocene, this rapid and disruptive transformation is giving birth to a new ocean, across which the globe could be thoroughly rewired. The prospect of an open Arctic draws competing interests to the region: geopolitical tensions are on the rise, while the risk of an environmental disaster lures over the horizon. Opposing this new wave of quiet colonisation, numerous NGOs and rights groups demand that the Arctic be regarded as a sanctuary, and as such be left untouched. Yet, given the scale of change that an open Arctic ocean would bring to the world's balance of power, such an argument is all too easily dismissed by key geopolitical players and stakeholders; as such, it is ultimately ineffective. SEVER emerges as a tool to bring about desirable and sustainable Arctic future(s). Its location-sensitive protocol is designed to foster exchange and cooperation across a networked Arctic economy, and to have a positive geo-engineering impact on the regional ecosystem. As a scalable, blockchain-based infrastructure for decentralised exchanges and governance, SEVER would lay the ground for the development of an alternative model of globalisation, first trialled in the new Arctic frontier. Specifically, the project explores the urban consequences of this alternative model of Arctic development through the case study of Murmansk.

At the intersection of environmental damage caused by humans over time, current conditions of climate change, and an uncertain future associated with the Arctic Ocean that will connect Europe, Asia and America, SEVER appears in this written summary as a

technological device that can potentially ease the geopolitical tensions arising from the struggle to control regional trade and economy. That is to say, the embedding of this artefact in this particular chronotopic lamination of (real and imaginary) space-time configurations paves the way for its framing as the solution given its capability to foster decentralised cooperation and thus to generate a new alternative form of governance in the future. The video of the actual public presentation of the SEVER project, held in Moscow, is led by the French architect of the team who, after setting up this background, imaginatively explores the urban consequences of this alternative form of development through the lens of the Russian city of Murmansk in the Arctic:

**Extract 7**. **"An Arctic that runs at the forefront of automation"**

1   {the screen shows a cargo ship and automated machines placing containers which are

2   digitally signalled through moving coloured squares}

3   SEVER's location based block chains supports the development of automation across all

4   industries (4")

5   it provides a language for machines to communicate autonomously (2")

6   and to collectively verify where they are and where to go next (2")

7   {a digital representation of points and moving squares is shown over black background

8   on screen}

9   this automated industrial complex will remove the need for much of the human labour //

10   currently involved in the same operations //

11   rather than working themselves in the often hostile Arctic conditions //

12   humans could be tasked with overseeing collectively the labour of machines (2")

13   {a computerized representation of a cargo ship is displayed}

14   most importantly / due their inherent transparency /

15   block chains enable to tr-

16   track every single operation that is performed along the given supply chain (…)

17   {the frame on the screen moves horizontally along the computerized representation of the

18   cargo ship}

19   for a short moment we are going to let this idea of an autonomous automated future /

20   sink (2") while adopting the vision of machines (2")

21   and moving through the point clouds /

22   through which they will negotiate their path (3")

23   perhaps the time to ask ourselves the following question (2")

24   in order to protect the Arctic milieu /

25   throughout its inevitable transformation /

26   who are we to trust? /

27   the laws of humans / or the scripts of machines (8")

28   {an area of residential buildings is shown from above, with the image zooming in

29   gradually accompanied by a background sound effect}

30   we will now be zooming into Murmansk //

31   the largest city above the Arctic circle //

32   and the main site from which we have conceived the SEVER project (3")

33   {the same residential area is now displayed from the ground level, with the frame moving

34   laterally from right to left, with the same background sound effect}

35   an Arctic that runs at the forefront of automation would land itself quite naturally to a

36   further experiment (2")

37   {the image of the residential area is displayed with a grid of vertical and horizontal lines

38   connecting the buildings}

In Extract 7, the syncing of the presenter's voice-over flat-tone narration, the sound effects

and the video feeds displaying digitized representation of objects (e.g. a cargo ship,

residential buildings), move the narration from a very uncertain future characterized by environmental destruction and political conflict towards an alternative one where there is room for human cooperation. In this context, SEVER is narrated as an automated system that is able to provide "a language for machines to communicate autonomously" (line 5) and "remove the need for much of the human labour" (line 9), a future prospect that is supported by a description of the actions that can be performed by this technology in contrast to humans (lines 9–12) as well as by the visual display of images of the cargo ship embedded in digital inscriptions that signal such actions (lines 1–2, 7, 13, 17; see also Figure 4).

Figure 4. Automated systems and cargo shipment
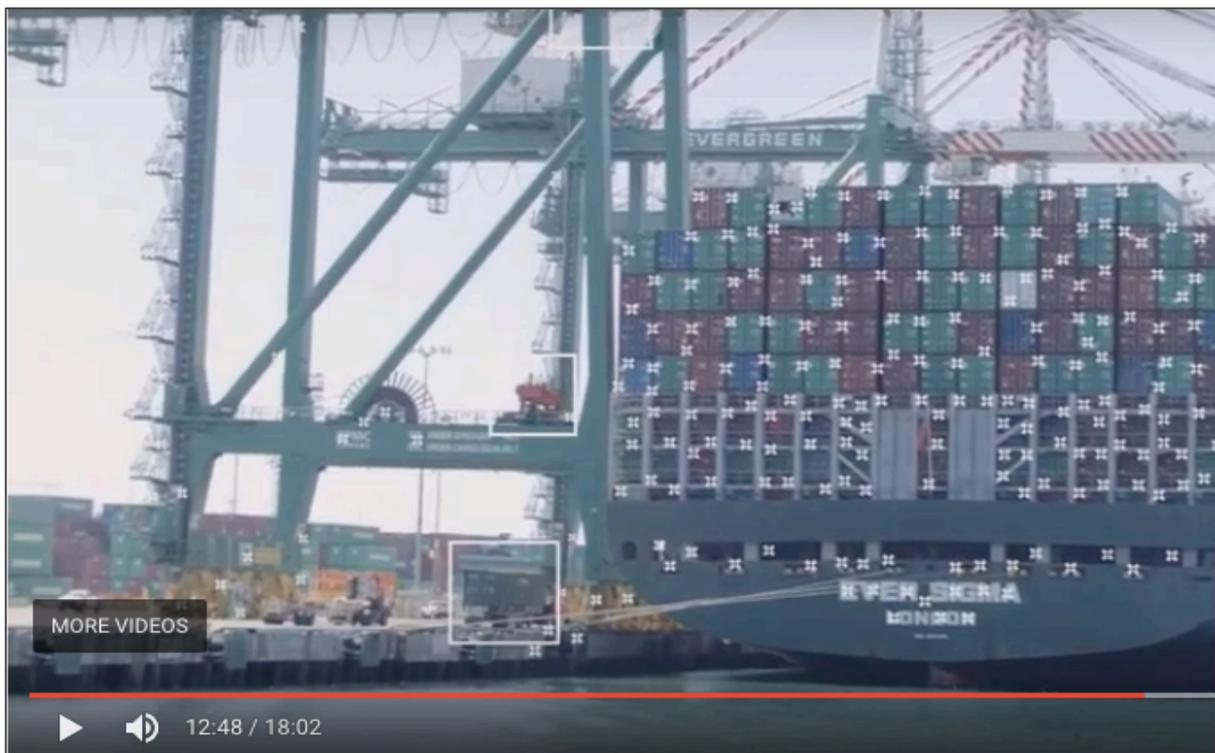
In addition, and similar to Young's film (see Extract 2, also Figures 1 and 2), the presentation of SEVER draws on changes in footing that re-frame the spectator's participation status and production format, away from her/his experience as a *bystander* who watches the actions performed by the machines (and the inscription practices of the automated system) towards

that of the *author* of the very digital inscriptions by way of adopting the view of the machines themselves (lines 20–22). In other words, the spectator is positioned as the producer of "machine scripts" (line 27) as they operate in the city of Murmansk. This is accompanied by a succession of images, first a documentary-like image of a high-rise, residential area of Murmansk (lines 28, 33) followed by the same image overlaid by a computer-generated grid of lines connecting the buildings (line 37; see also Figure 5).

Figure 5. Automated systems and city management

Taken together, these examples point to the institutionalisation of key emblematic features of the discourse register of "doing speculative architecture," with particular focus on stylised performances driven by chronotopic laminations of real and fiction-based stories, and narrated technological artefacts involving spectators in the imagining of alternative futures via shifts in footing. These features, performed discursively and semiotically, contribute to make a given type of professional subject recognisable within new expert-based fields and provides her/him with access to valuable transnational network of actors, institutions and economic markets; they allow new professionals in the field of urban design and architecture to occupy emerging niches in yet-to-be urban spaces.

5. Concluding remarks, and the question of criticality

This article feedbacks to a well-established tradition interested in documenting the commodification of communicative practices in the service industries, for these industries are representative of the economic restructuration that has been brought about by the conditions of late capitalism. Away from what is often termed as the "Fordist" (i.e. factory-based) form of economic production / distribution / consumption, these new industries have been described as having re-arranged the spatiotemporal organisation of labour relations as well as the normative forms of knowledge and associated moral / social categories about language, culture and identity that come with them (see, for instance, Heller 2010; Duchêne and Heller 2012; but also more recently Lorente 2017; Martín-Rojo and Del Percio 2019; Garrido and Sabaté-Dalmau 2020). Speculative architecture offers a window to such reorganisation through the lens of the communicative practices, forms of expert knowledge and professional categories involved in the packaging of a speculative architect as a recognised cultural model of action within transnational institutional networks.

Against the background of what is presented by architectural organisations as "the radical new global geographies generated by changes in technology, human migration and the environment" (see section 1 above), a speculative architect is envisioned as "a new type of architect [who] needs to change their model of practice in order to remain relevant;" (see endnote 3) an attempt to diversify the architectural profession: "The change is just an expanding role of the discipline" (see endnote 3, also section 1 above). In contrast to more traditional understandings of architecture, this new professional subject is then linked to a "critical" stance towards social inequality that is conventionally performed through public exhibitions (e.g. lectures) and cultural artefacts (e.g. films) whereby the relationship between humans and technologies is explored via imagining dystopian and utopian urban spaces.

Drawing on the epistemological perspectives of critical sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropological work on indexicality of language, this article has analysed the enregisterment of a set of discursive practices and semiotic features that are recognised as emblematic of this new professional subject. These features, which involve chronotopically laminated narrations of real and fiction-based stories as well as changes in the footing of actions concerned with writing and digital inscription, are staged to foreground a critical stance towards the use of new technologies at the service of global consumption and surveillance; they too perform the imagining of alternative futures where technologies are made to mediate more sustainable socio-economic relations. But this approach has also identified linkages between a set of institutions, actors and economic markets that are involved in the production, circulation and consumption of these enregistered features.

In this sense, the category of "speculative architect," the entailed stylised practices, and the set of values (criticality) and forms of knowledge (European and American academic expertise) indexed by the performance of doing speculative architecture constitute a "bundle of skills" (Urciuoli 2008) with exchange value. They provide this new repackaged professional subject with the necessary cultural capital, legitimacy, and authority, to operate within emerging economic niches, thus reinstating long-standing structures of territorial differentiation and hierarchisation—that is, European and American experts/institutions as producers of technological forms of knowledge that are then applied into the growing economic territories of China and Russia.

That is to say, the circulation of these forms of professional knowledge and subjectivities favours what Ong refers to (see section 2 above) as "the recruitment of certain kinds of actors to growth hubs" (2006, 6). The interlocking of governmental and non-governmental think tanks, educational institutions and urban developers based in London and Moscow can also be considered in relation to Ong's discussion of technologies of subjection and subjectivity: on the one hand, they provide an infrastructure that regulate a particular population, that of

professional architects, for "optimal productivity, increasingly through spatial practices that engage market forces" (ibid.); on the other hand, the training component of this infrastructure relies "on an array of knowledge and expert systems to induce self-animation and self-government" (ibid.), this allowing yet-to-be speculative architects to "optimize choices, efficiency, and competitiveness" (ibid.) by actively engaging in the scripting of the discourse register of doing speculative architecture.

In addition, and more broadly speaking, this article also invites us to rethink often taken for granted notions of criticality. Actors involved in the circulation of changing ideas and models of 'appropriate' ways of doing speculative architecture may well be driven by critical attitudes towards growing inequality in urban settings and the dystopian personhoods that such forms of inequality make possible; they may even be actively engaged, as in the case of Liam Young, in the re-imagining of utopian futures through providing alternative ways of thinking about architecture, architects, cities and citizens. Yet, the semiotic production, enactment and circulation of such dystopian and utopian models should never prevent us from considering the institutional conditions under which they get attributed value, for these valorisation processes may be engrained with larger logics of inequality that get reinstated as we continue reimagining alternative futures. This calls on us to revisit our own critical projects, which in turn may require further digging into the very reasons why we do critical research, the notions of criticality that we draw on, and the forms of knowledge production and circulation that we rely on to achieve our aims.

Notes

1. http://architecturediary.org/newyork/events/5633 (accessed on January 2020).

2. https://www.nextnature.net/2015/03/interview-liam-young/ (accessed on January 2020).

3. https://strelka.com/en/magazine/2017/06/01/what-is-speculative-architecture (accessed on January 2020).

4. "Becoming a professional in the new global market: Language, mobility and inequality", funded by UCL Global Fund and UCL IOE Seed corn grant, University College London. Special thanks to Yu (Aimee) Shi, Du (Dery) Yunpeng and Kathleen Painter for their collaboration in this project.

5. The corpus data traces the links between Liam Young's public performances and interviews concerned with speculative architecture, including the online reactions to these, over a period of 10 years from 2007-2017.

6. Note that this article uses the publicly performed professional persona of Liam Young as an entry point to describing how global networks of institutional, semiotic practices and shifting forms of knowledge get re-articulated under the very socioeconomic conditions that speculative architecture responds to. Thus, the focus of this analytical inquiry is not an individual *per se*, but rather the very situated processes that constitute meanings of professionalism *vis-à-vis* the larger structures of inequality that such processes enable, both with intended and unplanned consequences.

7. https://vimeo.com/144835155 (accessed on January 2020).

8. https://archinect.com/news/article/140004615/liam-young-s-triple-feature-review-of-city-everywhere-at-sci-arc (accessed on January 2020).

9. https://vimeo.com/184429206 (accessed on January 2020).

10. Text examples in this section are extracted from: https://strelka.com/en/home (accessed on January 2020).

11. https://thenewnormal.strelka.com/research/project/sever (accessed on January 2020).

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Transcription conventions

word   (italics) reported/constructed speech

/   short pause (0.5 seconds)

//   long pause (0.5–1.5 seconds)

(*n*")   *n* second pause

((word))   unintelligible speech

{word}   contextual / visual information

wo-   truncated speech

Figure captions

Figure 1. Drones and state surveillance, film still from *In the Robot Skies: A Drone Love Story***.**

Figure 2. Hacked drones and love stories, film still from *In the Robot Skies: A Drone Love Story*.

Figure 3. Screenshot of video from the SEVER project.

Figure 4. Automated systems and cargo shipment.

Figure 5. Automated systems and city management.