Kuwait Cyberpunk - Kuwait Oilpunk: A Flaneur in Salmiya

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In the 1980s, a science fiction sub-branch called cyberpunk developed a cynical form of dystopianism by depicting the fusion of high technology and low life in post-industrial urban contexts. What started with William Gibson's Neuromancer and novels by Bruce Sterling and Bruce Bethke, became not only a literary genre but also an aesthetic code popularized by movies such as Blade Runner and The Matrix. The latter came along in greenish dark tones of dampened neon light and a material universe made of retro-futuristic items such as industrial ruins, analogue disk telephones of the 1980s, and hopelessly worn leather office chairs.

I do not find Bladerunner's slummy urban landscapes in Tokyo's glistening Times Square or in Berlin's Sony Center (two places that are normally quoted as typical cyberpunk addresses); however, I do find them in the district of Kuwait called Salmiya where I am currently living. Though rainy nights and humid sidewalks are absent (simply because there is neither rain nor sidewalks), there are many reasons why Kuwait should be seen as the film noir version of the Middle East.

Nothing could be more opposed to the sterile New World atmosphere of places like Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Nothing could be more opposed to the disastrous images that reach us from many other places in the Middle East either. In Salmiya, peoples' existence transcends both the preppily optimistic and the grittily pessimistic. Instead, protagonists are thrilled by their petro-dollar enhanced boredom. The constellation covers more or less accurately the definition of cyberpunk. Salmiya is not a postmodern shopping center but the Arab version of Gibson's imagined Tokyo-Chiba where gangs of youths on drugs constantly plough the area with their motorcycles. Like Gibson's Chiba, which is an international synthetic city built right outside Tokyo in a dystopian Japan, Salmiya, located fifteen kilometers from Kuwait's city center, has been created for expats after the damaged country's liberation from invading Iraq.

The word 'punk' suggests the articulation of an anarchic behavior of post-industrial youths. In cyberpunk it does not result in politically motivated counter-cultural actions, but rather in a consumer-oriented teenage anomie propelled by high-tech development, a phenomenon that was first observed in Japan. Cyberpunk can be defined as a-political nihilism. The shaded young males crisscrossing my neighborhood in the early morning hours are definitely technically well-equipped as they speed their Ferraris and Aston Martins and pile up their iPhones on restaurant tables (Kuwait has the highest rate of smartphone use in the world). Like Gibson's characters, they are fascinated with style and surfaces. Profundity is suspect in this postmodern universe: cyberpunk is pure attitude.

Knowledge is equally suspect. Like true punks, those Ferrari hipsters don't need to know how to play the instruments they perform with; they simply go – just for the thrill of it. And indeed, Salmiya provides plenty of thrills: gay people in cars hunting down young boys by the dozen; Philippine prostitutes in burkas; pink lighted brothels in unassuming apartment blocks where you are led by following a white rabbit; Marathon rave parties in so-called "party apartments" out of which herds of niquabed women stream in the late morning hours. Women, well women get stalked once in a while but they are used to it. Usually they take refuge in a corner shop

In Salmiya, Matrix-style leather coats have been exchanged against the impeccably white dishdasha, the traditional ankle-length robe worn by males all over the Gulf. And instead of hacking into global computer networks, those cyberpunks are smoking the shisha (water pipe). What they share with cyberpunks is the love of speed as well as the conviction that quasi everything in this world can be easily and quickly accessed without much effort. Kuwaitis will not get wired to a computer, like Neo in The Matrix, in order to be programmed, in an act of "extreme learning," into a Kung Fu master in a matter of seconds. Their patented approach is wasta, the famous 'who you know' favoritism, which, just like "extreme learning," can turn you into almost everything within seconds.

What else makes Salmiya so typically cyberpunk? The existence of towering, god-like mega-corporations, by which humans are turned into dwarfs in most cyberpunk novels and of which the oil-driven Kuwaiti economy is a caricature. Second, a punky "No Future" slogan lingers over the entire country because one day the oil will run out and the exuberant lifestyle and hyperdoped economy cannot be sustained. Third, there is the already mentioned high tech aspect: what could be more technologically advanced than a country that has to produce its own water in factories?

Remarkably, in this world, technology thrives without having to face any "real world" ecological pessimism that could, once in a while, point out the dangers of misdirected technology. Cyberpunks are neither optimistic nor pessimistic but neutral. Garbage is brought into the desert, which means that it is swept under the Baudrillardian mega-map, which is supposed to cover, like a carpet, the entirety of the real world. Raw sewage has been funneled off into the sea right in the middle of the city for years because the maintenance and repair of the water purifying plant could not be guaranteed.

Whatever the story, the world of noir is one of corruption. In theory, Kuwait's urban waste management could raise numerous questions about the government's ability to ensure the proper disposal of thousands of tons of garbage to avoid risks taken on public safety. The World Health Organization has declared Kuwait the tenth most polluted country in the world. But who would raise such questions when the garbage has been safely deposited underneath the map on which we are living, that is, when it has simply been brought out into the "desert of the real"? It is exactly here, in this desert, that a monument of Baudrillard has been erected; more precisely, on the spooky premises of the former American military base at Bnaider, transformed by the Iraqi army into neo-Gothic ruins in 1991, where a lucid cyberpunk wrote on a bunker: "Baudrillard was here".

Courtesy: Alia Farid

This is the fourth point: Kuwait is cyberpunk because of the dystopian environment in which it is embedded. The fifth and probably most important point establishing Kuwait as a Middle Eastern cyberpunk enclave is its particular philosophy of urbanization. In 1970 there were still 113,400 shanty houses in Kuwait and Salmiya was a fishing village. Development was fast. The real estate market is highly speculative and buildings are not renovated but left to decay until they are ready for demolition on principle, and new buildings can be erected in their place. It takes thirty to forty years for a building to be so run down that entrepreneurs decide to have it replaced.

In the meantime, Asian workers, this third world underclass representing the main workforce in the Gulf, populate those ruins, swing improvised electricity cables from house to house, insert makeshift cardboard windows and fix shaggy balcony railings. In other parts of the Third World, rural immigrants move into derelict old towns. In Kuwait the old town has been demolished in the 1950s. As a result, poor immigrants move into abandoned houses from the 1980s. Urban subdivisions become less distinct. In the homes of those people we might also find a disk-telephone, or a Matrix-style chafed leather office chair. Right next to those slums are the generic gilded luxury apartment blocks complete with pink pimp sofas in the lobby (don't ask questions about taste) and a mat-black Lamborghini blocking the entrance. The fusion of the fragrance of Boss aftershave with the stench of overflowing garbage bins is unique to Salmiya. No isolated barrios or favelas like in South America, but perfect cohabitation. Social borders are floating like a scent.

Very early Kuwait opted against the concept of gated communities, those naked embodiments of colonial continuity. While abstract Dubai is eagerly investing in a distant future by building a functional

Disneyland, and while a great deal of the third world still emanates concrete elements of its colonial or post-colonial past, Salmiya decided upon the urban model of cyberpunk which is virtual. Salmiya's model is that of the benign but unstructured and anarchic society in which the real has been brought "out there," buried in the desert.

Chiba City blues - Salmiya blues. The early prayer calls, simultaneously issued from all powerful speakers attached to the numerous minarets of Salmiya, shroud the lawless cityscape into an air of illusion. While Kuwait has embraced the postmodern discourse of radical ambiguity in the field of advertising and public relations and offers economic conditions more ambiguous and virtualized than most other countries, a religious call for unequivocal truth, values, and knowledge is able to vibrate in the same space and at the same time. Or are the prayer calls merely another series of speculative signs, fluently passing into the virtual world of Slumiya - sorry, Salmiya - thus contributing to the total screen called "Kuwaiti Reality"?

Conventional (non-cyberpunk) science fiction novels and films revel in the optimistic colonial submissions of Martians. Nothing like that can be seen in Salmiya. Kuwait resents neither colonial oppression nor racism, and Adolf Hitler is perceived by many of my students as a sort of a rock star. So far, nobody could explain to me what it actually is that makes this man so attractive, but one eagerly insists that he is "inspiring" and a "role model" or that he is simply "always on one's mind." No, Kuwait has no colonial complex. The world realized this in 1982 when the Kuwaiti football team made it into the World Cup Finals. During the match against France, France scored a goal while some of the Kuwaiti players had stopped, having heard a whistle. The goal was initially awarded by the referee who had not blown the whistle, which prompted Kuwait to walk off the pitch in protest. They eventually resumed playing after the intervention of Sheikh Fahad Al-Ahmed who walked on the field and persuaded the referee to disallow the French goal. [1]

Respect? There is no respect. Stars of modern architecture have designed iconic masterpieces for Kuwait but most of them have been either destroyed or transformed to the degree of absurdity. Among those are Kenzo Tange's airport and Arne Jacobsen's Central Bank.

All this contributes to the status of Salmiya as a virtual world where those civilizational clashes that we can observe in the real world (television, etc.) are absent. Like in film noir, various sources might tell stories that contradict one another but nobody will bother to resolve those contradictions. The narrative strategy of film noir is based on incompleteness and misinformation.

The result is – once again - perfect cohabitation. In Salmiya, poor immigrants are willing to shelve their lives without resistance while the others play the role of phlegmatic dandies who have simply decided to ignore the world around them. Also this is the logic of film noir: since the winner takes it all, everybody else must lose completely.

Sometimes the sand is blown into the city: greetings from the desert of the real.

Cyberpunk developed sub-genres such as steam punk and clock punk, which are retro-aesthetic categories attempting to retrieve futuristic visions of past eras and to extrapolate their actual technology. Steam punk evokes a Jules Verne-like universe filled with Victorian technologies, steam locomotives, and Captain Nemo's diving apparatus. At the same time, it maintains cyberpunk's film noir atmosphere. I suggest to call Kuwait's aesthetic category "oilpunk" because here the world of the 1980s still dominates an important part of urban objects as well as common perceptions. The 1980s was the

time before the Iraqi invasion and it might stick as a golden age in the mind of many a Kuwaiti. Apart from that, not much has changed since 1980 anyway. The dependence on oil is still as strong.

The other day I saw the head of a live cheetah hanging out of a car's window.

The Iraqi invasion took place in 1990 and would have an equivalent in the Neuromancer's destruction of Tokyo through a mysterious explosion in December 1992. [2] Apart from that, it is not more real than the Tokyo explosion. According to Baudrillard "they never saw each other: when the Americans finally appeared behind their curtain of bombs the Iraqis had already disappeared behind their curtain of smoke." [3] In February 1991, weather satellites detected extensive smoke clouds over Kuwait because Saddam had detonated almost seven hundred oil wells; soon the smoke would spread over a wide area. However, the dystopian images of an invaded Kuwait, eternalized by the IMAX movie Fires of Kuwait as well as by Werner Herzog's Lessons of Darkness, insinuate a disaster not real but gaped at by fascinated crowds all over the world. If anything at all, the invasion adds to Kuwait's particular cyberpunk feel: in this place, the future was already there, separating a near-apocalypse from a post-apocalypse, permitting us to dwell forever in the zone between both. This zone is insecure by definition (it is situated right between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the army of the Islamic State has surrounded Baghdad) though, at the same time, we have nothing to fear. There are still 15,000 American troops stationed in Kuwait, which is a reminder of the past, but also the insurance that nothing evil will happen in the future.

Kuwait might indeed be the exaltation of what some believe the Middle East to be in general: the past lives here alongside the present, and the future is already written into the past, managing to produce its own private history in parallel with world history. This is how oilpunk would extend into the deepest layers of culture: some of my students inform me that the greatest discoveries of Einstein and astrophysics had all been put into the scriptures in the seventh century.

Good news! We can thus relax and participate in the consensual illusion called Kuwait and look for thrills in Salmiya. Oil is adrenaline and Kuwait is oilpunk.

The red and green Budweiser neon sign shines brightly in the Buffalo Café in this puritan country where alcohol is forbidden. Ubiquitous dark glasses create inscrutable and inaccessible images. Busty shisha smokers with heavily painted faces are looking through me. This is an estranged version of Chandler's sleazy bars in Los Angeles. A car races by wearing the sticker "I don't care, I'm Kuwaiti" on its bumper. Another one has a swastika. Right now it is driving past the Catholic church of St. Therese, which is serving mainly Christians from India.

In spite of striking similarities with the conditions of the "Rebel without a Cause" culture of the 1960, I do not see a single Kuwaiti James Dean. In the 1960s, rich, bored and spoiled kids imitating James Dean were trying to be different. This was a typical '60s symptom, impossible to reenact in Kuwait of today. The reason is that oilpunk emanates a machoist aristocratic feeling permitting neither Deanian confusion nor social commentary. The cultural icon is not Dean but rather the "rock star" mentioned above.

What is it like to live in a desert overgrown with landscapes of simulacra serving the upper circle of global capital? Thank you, I can't complain. I'm just watching the film.

That was a good answer. Still the guy insists. He wants to know what's the most interesting part for me in this film. Well, to say the truth, what fascinates me most is that Kuwaitis seem to be incapable of anger. Milan Kundera describes Central Europe in an essay from 1984 as "an uncertain zone of small

nations between Russia and Germany." Small Eastern European nations exist on the edge of extinction or absorption by larger powers and are therefore constantly angered by their own disappearance: "A French, a Russian, or an English man is not used to asking questions about the very survival of his nation. His anthems speak only of grandeur and eternity. The Polish anthem, however, starts with the verse: Poland has not yet perished." [4] Like Poland, Kuwait is situated between competing powers and above that threatened by a terrorist state; still it enjoys the lightness of being that is normally common to large and secure nations. Maybe faith makes anger impossible. Or maybe the logic goes like this: having survived one invasion by plunging the entire nation into a dream world, the sequel can only be a further dream in a dream in a dream... Or am I dreaming?

I decide to visit the marbled luxury shopping center that sticks out between ruins and rubble and in which unyielding glass and steel surfaces multiply the images of fascinating objects. Today I want to examine the kinetic wristwatch chargers. Kinetic watches are self-loading watches that need no batteries but use the movement of the wearer's body to create the power. But what if you never move and, as a result, your watch won't move either? In that case you put your watch into a kinetic wristwatch charger, which is a small box that will shake your watch the whole night (using, of course, electricity). The model I am interested in has a remarkable cyberpunk retro design and costs $400 for a single watch unit. Of course, the whole idea doesn't make sense, but I find that it fits perfectly well into the cyberpunk setting. Only cyberpunks will send their robot to the gym to work out for them! (The other advantage of this machine in a post-apocalyptic world is that your watch will continue working even when you are dead). But I hesitate: shall I take the single unit or the six slot model for the whole family?

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Notes:

[1] And why should they have a colonial complex anyway? The closest the Arabian Peninsula has come to colonization was probably under Ottoman rule, an era that they have chosen to erase from their cultural memory. Similar things have been said about the United Arab Emirates which are "characterized by a general lack of resentment. With the sights set firmly on the future rather than in the past, the spirit that dominates is one of openness, discovery, [and] the authenticity problem in the sense experienced by directly colonized countries, is largely avoided." Sally Findlow: The United Arab Emirates: Nationalism and Arab-Islamic Identity (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2000), p. 35. The goal in the 1982 World Cup was recognized but Kuwait got nevertheless penalized by the FIFA for misbehavior.

[2] Sometimes the date is given as 1982, depending on the edition of Gibson's book.

[3] Jean Baudrillard, The Gulf War did not Take Place.

[4] Milan Kundera: "The Tragedy of Central Europe" (1984)