EDICIONES
COMPLUTENSE

Transcending the Scottish Postmodern City: Ken MacLeod's Future Urban Geographies[1]

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Abstract. A place cannot exist if it has not been imagined, if it has not been perceived, as Alasdair Gray famously stated. Scottish science fiction (SF) goes a step further by emphasising the need not only to recognise and represent Scottish places, but also to recreate and to (re)imagine them in their possible futures. To (re)imagine Scotland and its places means to envision its potential spaces. Ken MacLeod is one of the figures who has successfully managed to set Scotland on the SF map. His novels *Intrusion* (2012) and *Descent* (2014) are remarkable examples of what some critics have called *Transmodern fiction*. Both are set in urban Scotland in the near-future and they portray new configurations of place. My analysis focuses on the interconnectedness of place as presented in the two novels, creating a new territory that transcends Scottish Postmodern urban geographies. In MacLeod's fiction, a Transmodern urban place is conceived, where the glocal and the virtual meet in a new multifold reality without ever losing their local specificity.
Keywords: Ken MacLeod; near future; science fiction; Scottish urban geographies; Transmodern place/space; Transmodernity.

[es] Transcendiendo la ciudad postmoderna escocesa: geografías urbanas del futuro en la obra de Ken MacLeod

Resumen. Un lugar no puede existir si no ha sido imaginado, si no ha sido percibido, como dijo Alasdair Gray. La ciencia ficción escocesa va un paso más allá al enfatizar la necesidad no sólo de reconocer y representar los lugares escoceses, sino también de recrearlos y (re)imaginarlos en sus posibles futuros. (Re)imaginar Escocia y sus lugares significa también visualizar sus espacios potenciales. Ken MacLeod es una de las figuras que ha logrado colocar a Escocia en el mapa de la ciencia ficción. Sus novelas *Intrusion* (2012) y *Descent* (2014) son ejemplos destacados de lo que algunos críticos han llamado *ficción Transmoderna*. Ambas están situadas en la Escocia urbana en un futuro cercano y retratan nuevas configuraciones del lugar. Mi análisis se centra en la interconexión del lugar tal como se presenta en ambas novelas, para crear un nuevo territorio que trasciende las geografías urbanas posmodernas escocesas. En la ficción de MacLeod, se concibe un lugar urbano Transmoderno, donde lo glocal y lo virtual se encuentran en una nueva realidad múltiple sin perder nunca su especificidad local.
Palabras clave: Ken MacLeod; futuro cercano; ciencia ficción; geografías urbanas escocesas; lugar/espacio Transmoderno; Transmodernidad.

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How to cite this article: Aliaga-Lavrijsen, J. (2021) Transcending the Scottish Postmodern City: Ken MacLeod's Future Urban Geographies, in *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 29, 45-53.

> To be at all—to exist in any way—is to be somewhere.
> Edward Casey (1997)

1. Introduction

Geographic place and social space have been crucial elements in Scottish literature for several centuries. As Edward Said stated in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), in struggles for independence there is always a geographic or cartographic impulse which tries to restore a sense of cultural and national community. Despite this, criticism and literary theory have perhaps underestimated the importance of representations of place,

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although in the last decade place has become much more important in Scottish studies, perhaps due to the *spatial turn* (Soja 1989) that the humanities and social sciences in general, and literary studies in particular, have experienced since the 1980s.

Drawing on Foucault's notion of *heterotopia* (1986) and on Henri Lefebvre's seminal work *The Production of Space* (1974), geographer Edward Soja (1989) and literary theorist Fredric Jameson (1991) coined the term spatial turn in the context of the postmodern condition, late capitalism, and what David Harvey called "time-space compression" (1990: 284-307). In contrast with the period of Modernity, in which place is "not only neglected but actively supressed" (Casey 1997: xiv), Postmodernity shows a renewed interest in place and space. As Marko Juvan has pointed out, Soja insists that the spatial turn represents a deep epistemic change, super determining "the methods of individual human and social sciences in an unprecedented mode" (2015: 82). However, Juvan holds the view that "[i]n literary studies, the spatial turn has not, in itself, entailed a paradigm shift of its own" (2015: 84). While agreeing that the spatial turn might not be a paradigm shift in itself, I would argue that its importance in contemporary literary studies is unquestionable, especially if we focus on Scottish literary studies, as can be inferred from the number of seminars, conferences and publications on this matter in the last few years.[3]

One of the reasons for its current boom might be the fact that the importance of the spatial turn in Postmodernity has been integrated in what some critics have called *Transmodernity* (Rodríguez Magda 1989),[4] a concept used to demarcate a change of paradigm that transcends the Postmodern that is presently taking place (Aliaga-Lavrijsen and Yebra-Pertusa 2019). In Transmodernity—which Rodríguez Magda conceptualised as the synthesis of Modernity and Postmodernity—our sense of locality, community and home are strongly connected to globalisation (Robertson 1995: 30; Abu-Lughod 1991), and the local is constructed on a trans- or super-local basis (Robertson 1995: 26). Accordingly, the Transmodern space is constructed under the tension of globalisation and regionalisation, of non-located medial networks and the local assertion of identity (Hess-Lüttich 2012: 2).

Scottish Science Fiction (SF) author Ken MacLeod is one of the writers that has recognised this new pattern of the Transmodern space and who has creatively imagined how place(s) might be experienced in the near future. This article aims to show that in MacLeod's novels *Intrusion* (2012) and *Descent* (2014)—both set in urban Scotland in the near-future—readers are offered new configurations of place, territories that transcend both the traditional Scottish rural and romantic landscapes, as well as the Postmodern post-industrial Scottish city. As we shall see, in both these works, a new and Transmodern urban place is conceived, where the glocal and the virtual meet in a new multifold reality without it ever losing its local specificity. To highlight the change in paradigm or the change brought about by the new Transmodern perspective, this article will first give a short overview of how Postmodern urban geographies have been represented in Scottish literature. Then, a brief outline will be offered on the specificities of place in the Transmodern Age, after which we will focus on Ken MacLeod's representations of Transmodern urban places and how they reveal themselves as new palimpsestic spaces where the virtual and the real coexist.

2. The Postmodern City in Scottish Literature

Despite the popularity of the spatial turn, not much has been published specifically on the Scottish urban *loci*. Nonetheless, when we think of Scottish urban geographies, either Edinburgh or Glasgow will automatically come to our mind. Traditionally, both cities have been viewed as embodying opposite—one might say *antisyzygical*—characteristics. According to Robert Crawford, Central Edinburgh is described as something "of a splendid stage", whereas Glasgow is defined as "Edinburgh's antithesis: areas of central Glasgow (…) are almost completely and exuberantly of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries" (2013: 1759). However, I believe that this regional rivalry ignores the existence of other Scottish urban cartographies—other contemporary cities and past understandings of urban constructions, as well as future urban geographical imaginings—sticking to stereotypical images of both cities, so in this article I have preferred to transcend the old dichotomy Edinburgh-Glasgow and to focus on a multifold Scottish Postmodern city instead.[5]

Despite the relatively scant critical attention the genre has received, we can find a multitude of different representations of Scottish urban places in the works of Scottish authors such as Iain Banks' *The Bridge* (1986) and *Complicity* (1993), as well as Iain M. Banks' *Feersum Endjinn* (1994), Christopher Brookmyre's *Quite Ugly One Morning* (1996) and *Country of the Blind* (1997), Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1982) and *Poor*

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3   See, for example, Szuba 2015; Laplace 2003 and 2015; Szuba and Wolfreys 2019.
4   In the last two decades, the concept of Transmodernity has been used across the world by thinkers from various fields. For more on this, see Aliaga-Lavrijsen and Yebra-Pertusa (2019: 3-9); and Onega and Ganteau (2020: 2-18).
5   I am well aware of the fact that by doing this I am ignoring the specificities of the *Glasgow novel*, as Moira Burgess named it (1999: 7), but length constraints necessitate leaving certain things out in order to focus on others that I consider more pertinent to my analysis of the transmodern representations of urban places.

Things (1992), Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989b), Paul Johnston's *Body Politic* (1997) and *The Boneyard* (1998), Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* (1991) and *Trumpet* (1998), A. L. Kennedy's *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (1990), James Kelman's *A Disaffection* (1989) and *How Late it was, How Late* (1994), Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus novels (1987-2013), Brian McCabe's *The Other McCoy* (1990) and Irvine Welsh's *Filth* (1998), to cite just a few, all published in the late 1980s and 1990s, the years "preceding the return of a parliament to the ancient capital of Scotland" (Duncan 2007: 46). The abundance of fiction set in Scottish urban places continues in the first decades of the twenty-first century at the hand of the above-mentioned Ian Rankin and Irvine Welsh's *Porno* (2002), as well as Laura Hird's *Hope and Other Urban Tales* (2006), Alexander McCall Smith's 44 Scotland series (2005–2015), Suhayl Saadi's *Psychoraag* (2004), Zoë Strachan's *Negative Space* (2002), and many others. All these texts offer representations of fictional Edinburghs and fictional Glasgows, each one different, but all created through the use of real places. As Caroline Jones has pointed out, "[t]here is a sense (…) that the author is presenting us with the real city, yet all cannot reveal the real city" (2015: 50). Real cities might be imaginary and symbolic, after all.

Alasdair Gray's masterpiece *Lanark* (1981)—which Carla Rodríguez González describes as a skilful blend of Postmodern apocalyptic imaginary about Scottish urban culture and Glasgow's realist tradition (2016: 95)—managed to reassert and re-inscribe local and peripheral forces pitched against dominant capitalist globalisation, Paul Smethurst contends (2000: 115). As Smethurst observes, in Gray's novel, Glasgow is represented as a place that is threatened both by a dominant English culture and "by a conspiracy of multinational business and central government" (2000: 115). External colonising forces completely eradicate the differentiated Scottish identity, history and culture. In a sense, the city is viewed as a heterotopia, that is, as a place mirroring the contradictions and transformations taking place in the socio-cultural space. Glasgow, as represented in *Lanark*, would be part of a Postmodern unreality of interleaved spaces (Smethurst 2000: 116).

This Postmodern heterotopia describes spaces that have more layers of meaning or relationships to other places than immediately meet the "encoded eye" and connect to reflexive knowledge, as Foucault would put it (1973: xxi). Following Foucault, heterotopia is understood as being either a textual or a geographical site that allows the ordering of things inside, not through their resemblance to each other, but rather through the process of similitude (1973: xx). In this sense, heterotopias would only exist in relation, or opposition, to the other. A place is therefore seen as heterotopic only from the outside, not from the perspective of those inside (Wang 2017: 5). The Transmodern, however, goes beyond these distinctions and erases the inside-outside perspective. Spanish philosopher Rosa María Rodríguez Magda argues that in the Transmodern age, "the era of the post-truth", we have overcome referential theory (2019: 23). She explains that this absence of the referent "has progressively developed into a semantic idealism, a hyperrealism, a void, that, with the hegemony of the virtual, has completed a phenomenology of absence" (2019: 23).

3. Towards a Transmodern Experience of Space-Time

The death of Postmodernism has now been announced many times, over several decades. Linda Hutcheon (1989) famously proclaimed that, having reached a point of exhaustion, Postmodernism was over. Other critics, such as Christian Moraru (2008), Neil Brooks and Josh Toth (2007), Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010) and Irena Ateljevic (2013) tend to pinpoint the end of Postmodernism at the turn of the millennium in relation to the 9/11 attacks, the wars in the Middle East, as well as the 2008 financial crisis (Gibbons 2017) and "climate change, over-consumerism, increasing gaps between the rich and the poor" (Ateljevic 2013: 200).

As explained, Rodríguez Magda referred to this change in paradigm as *Transmodernity* (1989). Her main contention is that, currently, the constant flux and connectivity of our society fosters an emerging dialectics of totalisation that, rather than being hierarchical or pyramidal, follows a network-like model devoid of a centre (2004: 30). Information theory allows us to experience simultaneous events in many different places instantaneously (2004: 31), hence conceptions of place, as well as of the self, are undergoing a process of transformation. According to Rodríguez Magda, industrial societies found their correspondence in Modern culture, post-industrial societies in Postmodern culture, and our present-day globalised—or rather, glocalised—society in Transmodern culture, which is characterised by its fluid hybridity (2011: 7-8). She characterises the Transmodern age, or Transmodernity, as describing the globalised, rhizomatic and technological society that has developed in the countries of the first world, and which tries to transcend hyperreal and relativistic closure (2011: 2-3). Our contemporary reality, she declares, defined by "the internationalization of the financial economy, global geopolitics, and the new communication technologies (…) is both transnational and virtual" (2019: 23). In the early 2000s, the emergence of new technologies violently re-structured our relationship with the world, and, as Alison Gibbons has claimed, "a new dominant culture logic is emerging" (2017: n.p.). This massive worldwide shift indicates the end of the dominance of Western civilisation "and the parallel rise of a richly and instantaneous interwoven global culture (Novak 1994: n.p.). In Transmodernity, as the technological revolution continues its steady progression, space becomes an even more complex issue than the Postmodern

fragmentary and discontinuous space. The particle *trans-* implies that this movement "reaches beyond"; it is not just an inter-territory, it means something "further than". With the particle *trans-* another new territory is created. Boundaries are not crossed, but transgressed, penetrated, and transformed (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2019: 105-106).

Hence, in the Transmodern city, the speeding-up of technological advances has changed reality, as we shall see in the analysis of Ken MacLeod's novels: a crucial paradigm shift is taking place, as stated in the introduction to this article. It has become obvious that the technical revolution of recent decades is producing changes in the social and economic spheres, and these involve a change in the spatial paradigm. Postmodern concepts of hyperreality and globalisation have been both integrated and transcended, in order to become part of a new understanding of place.

According to Jameson (1991), in late capitalism, spatial logic is simultaneously homogeneous and fragmented, and produces what he called *hyperspace*, which is characterised by the inability of the subject to locate him/herself physically/spatially within the world. Conversely, Transmodern hyperspace has brought about an increasing global hyperconnectivity that we cannot turn off. As Rodríguez Magda has explained, in the last two decades "new forms of relationship, social networks (such as chat sites, Facebook, Twitter)" have appeared (2019: 22). The isolation of the Postmodern individual has thus given place to a "a style of static connectivity, through which groups communicate and interact" (Rodríguez Magda 2017: n.p., my translation). With the hegemony of the virtual in the Transmodern age, "we live among simulacra" (Rodríguez Magda 2019: 22), but this absence of the referent does not imply absolute relativism or a lack of meaning. In Rodríguez Magda's words:

> The theory of knowledge increasingly becomes a *simulorgy*, a discipline that seeks to describe how the simulacra that we endow with effects of truth are generated; how the great concepts operate as empty signifiers to which we performatively ascribe contents, variables, hopeful or demagogic misunderstandings. And by accepting the interweaving of power and knowledge, a conscious critique emerges that must reveal how these simulacral networks conceal or reveal certain strategies of power. This is what I have called *simulocracy*. (2019: 23, emphasis in original)

As will be demonstrated in the discussion of Ken MacLeod's Transmodern urban geographies, simulacral networks have become tangible everyday realities that transcend Postmodern understandings of place.

The other Postmodern concept that is being transcended is globalisation. "The Great Fact of Globalization", as Rodríguez Magda puts it (2019: 26), does not describe a "world that finally achieves harmonious unification" (2019: 25). Instead, it depicts a gaseous fluidified society (2019: 27) in which both the market and cyber-technology generate "spaces of exclusion, in the interior of geopolitical blocks, and within societies" (2019: 26). As she continues:

> The economic crisis, the situations of warfare, and the offshoring of production, have promoted migratory processes that—far from fostering a happy cosmopolitanism—work first to fracture national borders, and then to reinforce them—in a desperate attempt to recover the national sovereignties that built the welfare state in the past. As a residue of the Postmodern societies of abundance, there lingers an idealistic multicultural discourse that ends up legitimizing reactive identity nuclei. (2019: 26)

With all this in mind, it becomes essential to understand the Transmodern experience and its representations of places in literature. As Hess-Lüttich has suggested, "a contemporary understanding of 'space' under the sign of a balance of tension of globalization and regionalization, of non-located medial networks and local assertions of identity", is crucial when analysing literary texts, understood as media of cultural-specific codes and symbolisations of space (2012: 2).

4. Ken Macleod's Future Urban Geographies

As the author himself stated in his essay "The Future Will Happen Here Too", "[t]he real life of a place is added to if it's lived in imagination, including in the imaginations of people who've never been there" (MacLeod 2015: 2). Hence the representation of place in MacLeod's writing is not uniquely focused on its similarity to real places, but rather on its potential capacity to change. Furthermore, he sees that SF makes an extra contribution to the reconfiguration of plausible futures: "science fiction can add an extra shiver of significance by saying of a place: the future will happen here, too" (2015: 2). Places, as understood by MacLeod, are enriched by their use in fiction—an idea employed earlier by Alasdair Gray when he complained in *Lanark* about the inexistence of Glasgow in literature: "[I]f a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively" (Gray 1981: 243). Indeed, a place cannot exist if it is not perceived and represented in the cultural space; but MacLeod—like Gray—goes a step further by emphasising the need not only to perceive

and represent it, but to recreate and to re-imagine Scottish places in their possible futures (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2019: 108).[6]

Ken MacLeod explains his use of Scottish places in his writings, as well as insights into this issue, as follows:

> The majority of my novels are at least partly set in Scotland, or have protagonists whose sometimes far-flung adventures begin in Scotland. And it made me wonder why there haven't been more. With its sharply varied landscape, turbulent history, and the complex, cross-cutting divisions of national and personal character which Scottish literature has so often explored, Scotland may inspire writers of SF, but as a location it features more often in fantasy. The result is that there have been many Scottish writers of SF—including Orbit's very own Michael Cobley, Charles Stross, and the late and much missed Iain M. Banks—but not many SF novels have been set in Scotland. (2014b: 1)

His SF novels with their direct references to several Scottish urban landscapes where he has lived in adulthood—such as Greenock, Edinburgh, Glasgow, the Clyde, the Firth of Forth (MacLeod 2015: 1)—allow these places to be reimagined, reinvented. The importance of reconceiving and representing Scottish urban places with new meanings, especially in the future, is a key characteristic of MacLeod's fiction, as he has himself stated:

> [I] turned Greenock into a vast naval base, Edinburgh into a dark haunt of terrorists and robots, Waverley Station into the target of a cruise missile strike, Glasgow into a civil war zone, the Clyde into a string of crater lochs, the Firth of Forth into a frontier in a fragmented Britain, and both of the Forth's great bridges into mangled wreckage. But (…) I've also imagined these cities enduring, Edinburgh reinvent itself as a biotechnology capital, West Lothian flourish as Carbon Glen, and the University of Glasgow sail on through dark centuries as an ark of reason, which one of the characters hails as the Church of Man. (2015: 1)

The places described are very familiar to the writer, but he sometimes uses them in an estranging mode, as they might appear in other worlds (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2019: 108). For example, we can find hints of the Pear Tree in Edinburgh—a well-known pub near the university—being humorously portrayed in his fiction as "a garden where the bat-winged aliens get drunk on the alcohol from over-ripe fruit" (MacLeod 2015: 2). MacLeod believes that Scotland is a great place to inhabit, physically as well as imaginatively: "[t]his land I live in is still the place I visit in dreams. I owe it that forming, that weathering, that uplift" (2015: 2). As he further remarks:

> In an age of increasingly metropolitan media focus, it's easy to accept that Paris, London, New York and all the other cities so readily evoked by their recognisable skylines in disaster movies and in technothrillers should have their place in imagined futures. But other towns and villages and open spaces will still be there, and deserve their piece of the action as part of our futures. Even futures that didn't happen. (2015: 2)

In the next two subsections, we will explore how these urban places are represented in two of his SF novels: *Intrusion* (2012) and *Descent* (2014), both set in a dystopic Transmodern near future.

4.1. *Future Urban Geographies in* Intrusion

Intrusion (2012) is a dystopian novel with hints of social satire that offers a vision of a near-future "benevolent dictatorship" run by technocrats in a post-climate change North London. The technocratic government has implemented constant surveillance by means of cameras and the strict control of all electronic communication systems: "cameras in every room in the flat" transmitting directly to the police station and metal-detectors and bio-metric-scan gates in all buildings (MacLeod 2012: 1, 3). Technology also enhances the human body, as in, for example, the common use of digital glasses which allow people to identify anybody (2012: 95). Biotechnology is part of everyday life in the city; for instance, women are obliged to wear devices such as "monitor rings" which control their fertility and are connected to the health centre and the national database (2012: 92, 8, 31). Even children have become technologised and controlled by the government: there are "nature kids"—children whose genetic material has not been altered technologically— as well as "faiths kids"—children whose mothers took "the fix", "a complex of gene-correcting machinery made up into a simpler tablet which when swallowed during pregnancy fixes errors in the baby's genome" and is "freely available to all women in the EU" (2012: 17)—and "New Kids"—who were genetically engineered to be "[a] step ahead in the race" (2012: 3). However, despite the technological advances of this near-future society, the culture is still patriarchal and sexist (2012: 10).

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[6]   Gray was able to create a renewed urban place that was open to the future. As Smethurst points out: "There is a space in this new Glasgow for the future" (2000: 116).

The urban geography depicted in *Intrusion* is a glocal space made of many different interconnected places. Firstly, readers are presented with a labyrinthine near-future London represented by the many well-known street names appearing throughout the novel. In future London, as Maya, one of the characters, explains, all suburbs have been regentrified though are "still recovering from a decade or so of battering from the tsunami-like surges of population movement that had begun when Peak Oil and Peak Debt had made suburban living unaffordable" (2012: 59). Readers are also shown an ecologically conscious city of Aberdeen: "[a] city making a sharp turn, from oil rigs to windmills; [a] city of sharp edges, with a hole at its heart (…) [of] roadways, flyovers, walls" (2012: 43). This near-future Aberdeen has become "a great green monster" after the closure of its mines, and its function now is to "pick up the slack and fill the gap left by the black coal and the peak oil and the unbuilt dirty nukes" (2012: 44).

And these places are connected, by means of a click, to other close and remote places. Ken MacLeod uses virtual space to explore the Transmodern tensions of the near future between the local and the global. Hope Morrison, the female main character, has a pair of digital glasses, which she uses mainly for her job. These are an optical head-mounted display in the shape of a pair of eyeglasses that work as a ubiquitous and portable computer. They prevent the wearer from seeing the surrounding external world, and instead they watch a chosen digital reality on an LED illuminated display: "She made a coffee, hung up her apron, sat down at the kitchen table, opened her glasses and started working in China but not in Chinese" (2012: 12). She is able to log herself in and out of a virtual space that is also real, as it has become part of the place she works in, i.e., both in Britain and China *at the same time*: "One p.m. Back to China", she says to herself while sipping her coffee in her own familiar kitchen (2012: 15). While working from home in China, she can also check the latest news in Munich (2012: 12).

However, characters not only use these glasses to work, but also when running errands, for example, walking "along East West Road to Stroud Green Road to the Tesco" (2012: 48). When they put them on, "[i]nstantly the street changed. Everything was tagged: houses with their occupiers, floor by floor; vehicles with their drivers' names, shops with advertisements and reviews and supply chains, pedestrians with their IDs" (2012: 49).

This reality might seem panoptical (Foucault 1995) and obscene (Baudrillard 1981) as it is described by the narrator: "Seen through glasses, what looked like a metre-wide tangle of glistening, pulsing offal hung above the table like an obscene balloon: a realistic representation of cellular machinery on a scale where water molecules appeared as solid and pervasive as polystyrene packaging" (MacLeod 2012: 54). The thing is that the layer provided by the digital glasses does not substitute reality, but rather characters live in a world where material and tangible reality and hyperreality meet and merge forming a Transmodern whole: "Underneath the 3D diagram the men's hands moved between actual coffee mugs or pen-and-paper notes to flicking through virtual pages of newspapers" (2012: 54). By using these digital displays, characters are not entering a Postmodern *simulacrum* (Baudrillard 1981), but rather, they are moving a step beyond the Postmodernist conception of reality and entering the *Transmodern virtuality* (Rodríguez Magda 2011: 8).

In a sense, the Transmodern overlaying of real and hyperreal realities could be understood as the different settings of a "GPS tracker app", as this excerpt shows:

> Hugh looked down at the black squiggle of his route on the screen map.
> (…) "See the place where you turn around?" he said.
> (…) "Now flick to… wait a minute."
> His father tapped at his own phone. The route line remained but the underlying map had changed, from a satellite pic with tags to a gridded white sheet with contour lines and little symbols. Right at the point where the route line doubled back was a row of tiny red arrowheads.
> "Culvert," his father said. (MacLeod 2012: 79)

In contrast to Baudrillard's Postmodern hyperreal map (1981), the Transmodern digital map does not precede the territory, but rather, both map and territory coexist and establish a dialogue of symbols and meanings that constitute a whole perceivable reality. As we shall see, this idea is further developed in Ken MacLeod's subsequent novel, *Descent*.

4.2. *Future Urban Geographies in* Descent

Descent (2014) is set in Scotland in the near future—*circa* the 2040s. It tells the story of 16-year-old Ryan Sinclaire, a middle-class boy living in Greenock who, after having seen a UFO in the sky while having a walk in the hills, is abducted one night by extra-terrestrial beings. This traumatic experience changes the way he perceives the world, a place where everything seems to be connected and which is a synthesis of the global and the local, "an in-between space highlighting the relativity of Transmodern locality" (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2019: 113).

This overlapping and coexistence of both local and global places is characteristic of the Transmodern. Glocalisation, which views the local and the global as dialectical forces that transcend polarity, is a key

element to understanding this homogenising and heterogenising phenomenon. According to Roland Robertson, "[m]uch of what is often declared to be local is in fact the local expressed in terms of generalised recipes of locality" (1995: 26). In fact, globalisation has involved the production of renewed ideas such as "home", "community" and "locality". Therefore, the local can be regarded "as an aspect of globalization" (Robertson 1995: 30). Anthony Giddens has argued that "[g]lobalisation concerns the intersection of presence and absence, the interlacing of social events and social relations 'at distance' with local contextualities" (1991: 22). It is a dialectical intersection of presence and absence; a node that, in the case of McLeod's novel, is enhanced and represented by the digital technology used by its characters.

The digital glasses that the narrator refers to as "iGlasses" in *Intrusion* are also used by the characters in *Descent*. This virtuality offered by technology has no space limits since it can represent space in any place on any scale: "'Great,' said Calum. 'Put your glasses on and I'll show you.' He put his own glasses on, and conjured space in the space between us: a four-sided wedge of vacuum and atmosphere, wide at the top in low Earth orbit and narrowing to a point at the ground" (MacLeod 2014a: 266). With an app called SkEye—which "amount[s] to real-time Google Earth"—they will be able to "[m]ake a virtual visit anywhere on Earth" (2014a 266, 267).

The Transmodern space as created by these near-future technological devices is rather an overlapping of realities of differing natures—of reality and virtuality—that is, different spaces that coexist at the same time depending on the perspective taken on them. Through the use of the iGlasses, the intradiegetic narrator in *Descent* interweaves various places and realities into one single experience:

> [A]s I walk up the Mound and down the High Street, the alternative Edinburghs I distract myself by calling up in rapid succession on my glasses aren't just the standard historicals, entertaining though it is to stroll the main drag of Hume's and Smith's Athens of the North and watch the chamberpots tipped from upstairs windows to splatter heads below; or to scroll the city's growth from Neolithic settlement to modern capital, or let the smoke of Victorian lums and Edwardian slums rise to swap the streets and then, with quite surprisingly suddenness, disperse the miasma with a wave of the Clean Air Act. (2014a: 4)

In this way, Ryan Sinclair has access through his iGlasses to a multifold world. The particular does not exclude other possibilities.

Well-known places in near-future (still literarily and culturally rich) Edinburgh—which is extremely similar to the present-day Edinburgh known by locals as well as by visitors—are playfully confronted with other past and future Edinburghs in this narrative, producing an entertaining kind of estrangement in readers. As the narrator himself explains, this Transmodern reality is a palimpsest that expands both towards the future and towards the past: "I play with overlays of alternate pasts and possible futures, with steampunk and cyberpunk, utopia and dystopia" (2014a: 4).

In Transmodernity, space exists in a state of continuous flux: "One spatial arrangement replaces another, but the latest version of space cannot entirely erase the earlier version, rather, all previously existing spaces permeate one another" (Gregorová 2015: 62). The resulting product is a palimpsest, "a composite landscape made up of different built forms superimposed upon each other with the passing of time" (Harvey 2004: 147). The palimpsest—a concept first used by Thomas De Quincey (1845), who defined it as an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are interwoven, competing with, and infiltrating each other—has an intricate structure that illuminates and advances Modern thought, refiguring concepts such as history, subjectivity, temporality, metaphor, textuality and sexuality, as Sarah Dillon has put it (2007: 27). In a similar line, Soja argues that "the sequence of urban spatializations is cumulative, with each phase containing traces of earlier geographies, already formed urban spatial divisions of labour which do not disappear so much as become selectively rearranged" (1989: 175). However, the palimpsest becomes a Transmodern trope in which, since all the existing realities coexist, one can access them depending on the perspective taken.

In Macleod's fiction, not only Edinburgh, but the whole of Scotland has become a Transmodern palimpsest, as the following description denotes:

> Layers in and imbricated with the new [future Edinburgh of sun-powered vehicles and loitering drones], of course, are the strata of earlier looks and times: diesel-belching buses, petrol-burning taxis, trouser suits and short skirts and jeans and skip cars and bare heads and bare legs, (…) and so on and on, but here is nonetheless, an iffy skiffy future like none I would or could have imagined in my teens.
> Oh, wait. That's reality. (MacLeod 2014a: 7)

As Ryan's narration continues: "Looking down towards Waverly Station, I replace its long sheds with the Nor Loch, stagnant and stinking. (…) The vista along George IV Bridge gets an instant make-over as a Blackshirt mob storms the National Library, then I time-shift the street to the metropolis of concrete, glass and steel the agitators fancied themselves fighting for" (2014a: 4). By moving temporally, space is also transformed.

The virtuality present in the Transmodern paradigm, which encompasses the glocal—as it is also based on the tension of globalisation and regionalisation—produces a multiplicity of geographies and palimpsestic places that unfold and contract within a single space we refer to as reality (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2019: 118). Moreover, the contemporary experience of place, as well as conceptions of self and identity, are being modified by these changes.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, the Transmodern representations of urban geography emphasise the interconnectedness of identity, culture and place, and are capable of linking the local and geographically specific places with a global relational web through transversal dialogues (Onega and Ganteau 2020: 17). Place is thus understood in antilinear and relational terms; that is, in Transmodernity, the different meaningful geographies overlap, intersect and are transformed. By transcending static conceptions of place, future possibilities are opened, allowing for dialectical imaginings that move forward in multiple directions, palimpsestically incorporating the past, as well as different present locations.

The places represented in Ken MacLeod's novels *Intrusion* and *Descent*, in which urban geographies overlap with the spaces created by technological devices, are in constant flux and negotiation. These near-future urban *loci* are built upon the dialectic global-local as well as the interaction with non-located medial networks, without forgetting the local assertion of identity. This vision is deeply ethical in the sense that it acknowledges the inherent interconnectedness of all people and all places, taking into account its specificities. In short, Transmodernity recognises the fact that we are all interdependent, vulnerable and responsible (Ateljevic 2013: 203).

Perhaps, in the light of events brought about by the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the interdependency, vulnerability and responsibility of people, the importance of the fluidity and interconnectedness of places, and the growing role of digital presence, which McLeod's novels have shown, have become more evident than ever before. Not in vain, SF is a genre that has been characterised by its deep accuracy when portraying unexpected situations, as can be seen in Ken MacLeod's work. As Margaret Atwood put it: "Prophecies are really about now. In science fiction it's always about now. What else could it be about? There is no future. There are many possibilities, but we do not know which one we are going to have" (qtd. in Allardice 2018: n.p.).

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