



BOOK REVIEW:

*Vision, Technology, and Subjectivity in  
Mexican Cyberpunk Literature*

*Michael Pitts*

Tobin, Stephen C. *Vision, Technology, and Subjectivity in Mexican Cyberpunk Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. ISBN 978-3-031-31155-0.

In *Vision, Technology, and Subjectivity in Mexican Cyberpunk Literature*, Stephen Tobin illuminates the centrality and significance of the screen in 1990s–2010s Mexican cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk fiction, namely how these works present and frame such technology. He examines “specular fiction,” which he defines as “literature whose principal thematic and rhetorical focus pertain to the dynamics involved in the changing visual sphere of contemporary Mexican society” (2). Tobin focuses his analytical lens upon the novels and short stories *La primera calle de la soledad* (1993) and “Esferas de vision” (1997) by Gerardo Porcayo, “Ruido gris” (1996) and *Punto cero* (2000) by Pepe Rojo, *Virtus* (2008) by Eve Gil, and *Él piensa que algo no encaja* (2014) by Guillermo Lavín. His interest is in visual regimes, which he defines as “particular modes of seeing that are expressions of given culture” (3), drawing upon the theoretical framework developed by Christian Metz and Martin Jay. Tobin asserts that three such regimes most clearly manifest in Mexican cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk science fiction from 1993 to 2014: the male gaze, the televisual, and the cybernetic. As he argues, contemporary Mexican speculative fiction makes a productive site through which to analyze the changes in the nation’s visual practices (3). The selected texts, Tobin claims, respond to the ever-growing societal influence of the screen by increasing the presence of visual elements within contemporary science fiction as they critique this technological and social development. He is particularly interested in how Mexican science fiction centers these changes to the *sensorium*, a term he adapts from Walter Ong to describe “the entire perceptual apparatus as an

operational complex,” of its originating culture (4n4). Like Valeria de los Ríos' earlier work in *Espectros de Luz* (2011), Tobin analyzes the significance of visual technologies in Latin American fiction. Unique to his monograph, however, is its narrower focus on a specific social and historical context.

Tobin organizes his monograph both thematically and chronologically. Moving from the oldest to most recent cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk texts, he centers each chapter upon the aforementioned visual regimes. Chapter 2, for example, analyzes the male gaze in Porcayo's novel and short story. Comparing these texts that are set within the same narrative universe, Tobin finds that they both employ a pivotal intersection of the male gaze and the visual. Specifically, he contends that *La primera calle de la soledad*, with its male protagonist who is able to disrupt corporate power by using an ocular prosthetic, is reflective of the time in which it was produced, a time marked by increased use of television and computer screens and the intensification of the male gaze via these technologies (81). Likewise, he demonstrates how Porcayo's "Esferas de vision" reflects this visual regime as this story also focuses on a protagonist who loses an eye. This narrative, however, follows a female protagonist, and unlike her male counterpart in the novel, she never succeeds in replacing the missing eye. According to Tobin, this lack of an eye reflects her lack of a phallus, thus demonstrating the narrative's adherence to the visual regime of the male gaze (78). Overall, Tobin argues that these texts "link to several socio-political phenomena operating in contemporary Mexico, such as the spectacularization of femininity and a particularly Mexican male gaze cast by, and constitutive of, neoliberal masculinities" (50). In this way, his discussion illuminates the tendency of Porcayo's fiction to reflect predominant visual apparatuses that manifested in Mexican culture in the final decade of the twentieth century.

Moving forward to works published at the turn of the twenty-first century, Tobin considers two narratives by Pepe Rojo that explore the televisual scopic regime in the third chapter. Examining "Ruido gris," he argues that the story "illuminates and critiques" the historical ramifications of NAFTA and specifically its impact on television (39). Observing how the impactful trade agreement led to the development of and competition between increasingly violent reality television shows, Tobin asserts that Rojo's story critiques this development "via a metaphorized, near-future dystopia set in a megalopolis where ocular journalists receive payment for seeking and filming acts of aggression and gratuitous violence" (39). Moving his attention to the televisual communication of the news in the private sphere, he focuses the second half of this chapter upon Rojo's novel *Punto cero*. Pivotaly, Tobin argues that the televisual regime permeates the structural and narrative elements of Rojo's text. Connecting these narrative aspects with the text's psycho-social dimensions, he asserts that *Punto cero* illuminates how visual media alter viewers' subjectivities and the way they experience time. Tobin effectively demonstrates how Rojo's novel and short story both chronicle televisuality as pivotal to the optical regime of the final decade of the twentieth century.

Rounding out his analysis in the fourth chapter of his monograph, Tobin explores the cybernetic, the most recent of the scopic regimes in his study, via two narratives appearing in the opening decades of the twenty-first century: Eve Gil's *Virtus* and Guillermo Lavín's "Él piensa que algo no encaja." Tobin ties these texts to the technological developments that shaped the environments in which they were published: the proliferation of computers in the 2000s and

the rise of the smartphone in the 2010s. He argues that *Virtus*, with its presentation of a president in hologram form, asserts that “politicians are constructs wholly created by media industries and controlled by national elites, and that this is most perceptible – and powerful – in the visual realm” (178). His analysis of Lavín’s story likewise emphasizes how it reflects the milieu of its creation. As Tobin compellingly explains, “Él piensa que algo no encaja” presents the complex nature of modes of knowledge in a society populated with cybernetic devices and in many ways predicts the post-truth world that succeeded it (179). Overall, Tobin asserts that these texts are directly tied to their originary societies and therefore reflect shifts in the Mexican sensorium and its attending technological advancements (132).

At its heart, Tobin’s book makes a compelling argument: technology, as demonstrated by his analyses, mediates vision in Mexico in the era of globalization. By moving chronologically, Tobin also manages to illuminate how the key features of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – television, computers, and smartphones – correspond to scopic regimes. This enables a focus on how these regimes have a profound effect upon the individuals inhabiting them. Tobin demonstrates that these regimes shape subjectivity itself, that they are fundamental to the construction of the subject. It is this attention to Mexican subjectivity during a specific and pivotal milieu, the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, that lends, perhaps, the greatest value to the monograph. Positioned at the intersection of visual culture, contemporary Mexican science fiction, and cyberpunk/post-cyberpunk narratives, *Vision, Technology, and Subjectivity in Mexican Cyberpunk Literature* is a sophisticated and valuable analysis suitable for graduate study and useful to scholars who are similarly focused upon these timely issues of technology, vision, subjectivity, and speculative literature.

*Biography:* Michael Pitts is director of media studies at the University of New York in Prague. He specializes in American literature at the intersection of science fiction, utopian studies, and gender, and his first monograph, *Alternative Masculinities in Feminist Speculative Fiction: A New Man*, was published by Lexington Books in 2021. He is currently co-editing a new book, *Manhood in 21st-century Science Fiction Television*, which will be published by Bloomsbury in early 2025.