

THE RACK AND THE WEB

THE OTHER CITY

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Indeed, in our political economy of commodity-signs it is difference that we consume.

- Hal Foster,
The Return of the Real¹

The physical forms of cities are systems of control and division. This includes to urban configurations made available by the computer and applies particularly to the fraught history and troubled body of the American city, where, while clearly reflecting the aspirations of an ideologically defined culture, the urban is also the physical instrument of that culture's worse prejudices and perpetuates its saddest histories.

Why is home plate not called fourth base?

- A. Bartlett Giamatti,
Take Time for Paradise²

The US was, and is, a state of mind.³ Like all conceptual entities, it is capable of extraordinary and cruel oversight. The Enlightenment contrived the nation. It was virgin territory, and this national self-image of fecund virtue still remains despite evidence to the contrary. While utopia was to remain a powerful and recurring theme in American settlement, its actualization was severely compromised by the real development of the New World city and the conflicting ideology of the new nation's constructors. The doctrinal underpinnings of all activities and forms in the U.S., the accommodation of the most egregious paradox, utopian fantasy and its disengagement from the harsh facts of raging capital: all these contributed, and still contribute to, an exploitative misrepresentation of the modern metropolis.

Hostility to the city survives as one of the powerful contradictions in an America that is decidedly urban, yet continually attempts to escape the fact.⁴ The dream of savage nobility was easily associated with the New World. During the Enlightenment, natives were brought from the Americas to roam the halls of European palaces as curiosities, and as teachers. Rousseau's atavism set a powerful directive for the New World when combined with the even more powerful thesis of his *Social Contract*, proposing the sovereignty of the people in concord with Locke and others. Rousseau suggested the format for a new society much more vehement in its intentions than

the gentle admirations of Virgil or Theocritus. These ancient writers, and the continuing tradition of the pastoral in the centuries following them, extolled the value of the simple and rustic from the position of urbane sophisticates presenting a soft chiding to their peers. But Rousseau wrote:

How greatly did my first sight of Paris belie the idea I had formed of it. I had imagined a city of most imposing appearance, as beautiful as it was large, where nothing was to be seen but splendid streets and palaces of marble and gold. As I entered through the Faubourg Saint-Marceau, I saw nothing but dirty stinking little streets, ugly black houses, a general air of squalor and poverty ... it was on the 9th of April 1756 that I left Paris, never to live in a town again.⁵

The image is that of the white and gold City of God juxtaposed to the actual "black" city. For his interpreters, Americans included, the allegory seemed more political than poetic, to be taken more as a call for action than as critical reverie. Under the pressure of industrialization and revolution, the popular interpretation of the late pastoral negated the urban rather than remaining its conscience.

As well as being the object of fascination for the intelligentsia, the New World embodied the hope of economic refugees, since the predominance of immigrants were forced there by intolerable conditions elsewhere. Cities are crucibles of change, and it was there that the tough realities of the Industrial Revolution, the practical sibling of the Enlightenment, were most felt. The American city was born in an era when urban culture would, for the first time, become truly numerically dominant, and it was the American city that would eventually embody that dominance. More than 50 percent of the English population lived in cities by 1851. Berlin increased from 150,000 to 1,300,000 from 1800 to 1890. And these European statistics are, of course, temperate compared to those for American cities which often barely existed in 1800 but held millions a century later.⁶ The U.S. is much more the nation of the practical Alexander Hamilton, given grim form in the hard industrial vernacular, more than of the rural reverie of Thomas Jefferson.⁷ His

Academical dream may have found its lowest common denominator instead as the “middle landscape” of the suburb. Certainly many of the same desires resonate discordantly there.

Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 p.m. (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final coup de grâce by dynamite. Previously it had been vandalized, mutilated and defaced by its black inhabitants, and although millions of dollars were pumped back, trying to keep it alive it was finally put out of its misery. Boom, boom, boom.

- Charles Jencks,

The Language of Post Modern Architecture⁸

Jencks goes on to write “Another factor: it was designed in a purist language at variance with the architectural codes of the inhabitants.” As if the language of the buildings caused the poor residents to attack them, driven mad by bad architecture, a perverse utopian argument within Jencks’ anti-utopian stance. At the center of many American cities, the grid of streets lies across an emptiness where urban gardeners again work the marked landscape. St. Louis is an extreme example where the urban blight and white flight have been so exhaustive that, along the corridor inland from the Gateway Arch, a series of islands of monumental buildings or village clusters scatter across the empty frame of streets, while suburban satellites like Clayton, just beyond the border of the anemic city, thrive and propose their alter-urbanism. While the demolition of St. Louis’ Pruitt-Igoe was seen by Jencks and others as a seminal example of the failings of Modernist utopianism, the vacant lots left behind speak of a more profound failure to accommodate the idea of the city in the national consciousness.

The grid itself, that inevitable mark on the American landscape, rural and urban, is an ideological form arguing for equity and authority. Its mark extends from the designation of agricultural units to the exploitable lot and the structural frame of the tall building. Returning then to “natural” language, this fertile field is coupled with an almost organic model of capital expansion, of fertilization and growth. The rhetoric of agriculture imbues economic development with inevitability and benevolence, sidestepping the brutality of such activity. The urban grid, a rough but economically egalitarian structure, has been “redlined” or filled by the cycles of poverty and exploitation that constitute an ongoing subtext to the national epic.

The Metropolis is the general form assumed by the process of the rationalization of social relations. It is the phase, or the problem, of the rationalization of all social relations, which follows that of the rationalization of the relations of production.

- Massimo Cacciari,
Architecture and Nihilism⁹

To make Birmingham, the grid was stretched from ridge to ridge in the ore-rich Alabama valley. The city

began at the center, at 19th, 20th and 21st Streets, confident that 1st would be eventually reached, against the mountain, but not imagining that the ridge would be cut in the 1970s and that 70,000 white residents would flow to the suburbs beyond the natural wall.¹⁰ The iron grid of New York was laid across farms and forest in the first years of the nineteenth century, organizing the peninsula, accommodating Broadway, and proposing a system that would extend up the Hudson 150 miles to Albany. The breaking of this conceptual frame, forging of super blocks, corresponds directly to the centralization of urban capital in the hands of either entrepreneurs or public authorities. Be it private or state controlled, vast capital does away with the intractable illusion of equality while claiming to ratify it. From the right and the left, the mega-blocks attack the individualist model while showing the best intentions. The good aims of public housing, utopian in sentiment, meet the most dire cost-cuts and uniformity in both means of production and domestic quality — a formula for fantastic failure and the institutionalization of the ghetto itself. The projects replicate, in their buildings and layout, the prison-camp. But here the walls are phenomenal, keeping the rest of the population out as much as keeping the residents, caught in the cycle of poverty, inside.

Ten Eyck Houses, Williamsburg district, Brooklyn. A blighted area, partly cleared and redeemed. The school in the center, though admirably placed and new, is an old-fashioned type that contrasts unfavorably with the apartments. Note the closing up of wasteful streets in the replanning of this area into super blocks.

- Lewis Mumford,

photo caption in *The Culture of Cities*¹¹

Note the utopian terminology in Mumford’s description. The blighted (urban) is “cleared and redeemed.” The school is at the center, its position in many utopian configurations. Streets (the grid) are wasteful and gotten rid of. Meanwhile the remaining downtown blocks become compounds, armed enclaves. The atrium building with its interior “public space” controlled by guards and surveillance cameras seems ultimately cynical as a gesture toward both the vitalization and the problems of the urban fabric, like the “compounds” of South and Central America. Two tiered circulation, Minneapolis’ skybridges or Houston’s tunnels, enforced by separate routes layered like those envisioned in Lang’s *Metropolis*, halts the heterogeneous life of the boulevard. The automobile and “defensible space” have ended the urban stroll.

...a reductive over-identification with the other is not desirable either. Far worse, however, is a murderous disidentification from the other. Today the cultural politics of left and right seem stuck at this impasse. To a great extent the left overidentifies with the other as victim, which locks it into a hierarchy of suffering whereby the wretched can do little wrong. To a much greater extent the right disidentifies from the other, which it blames as

victim, and exploits this disidentification to build political solidarity through fantasmatic fear and loathing.

- Hal Foster,
The Return of the Real¹²

In the New World of refugees, the city's image is automatically threatening. Americans inherit a distrust of the urban from their ancestors, who were in flight from whatever culture they left, be it one that persecuted them, impoverished them, or both. This former oppressing place was more than likely identified with cities, that have always been the primary metonym for society as a whole. It is thus not surprising that the problematic idea of the city is now inextricable with that one group for whose ancestors' immigration was in no way voluntary, whose passage was not a flight, the descendants of African slaves.

From its edge, the African-American city is viewed a place of frightening ghosts. Canal Street, the teeming main street of downtown New Orleans, was described as "dead" by white locals when I arrived in the city. The energetic third-world and African-American business presence there, an economic force that is more instrumental in the revitalization of American downtowns than the false vigor of enervating "festival marketplaces," was not registered as a realm of the living. In fact, no vital signs show from this quarter within the mega-structures of capital. The gray-zones of perception, sustained by fear and the resistance to an expanding field of opportunity, combine to negate cities and their residents.

Due to many of the aforementioned contradictions, Americans tend to think of themselves as non-urban, to imagine the worst manifestations of the human spirit festering in the urban pressure vessel. In the confusion of the present day, the city is a metaphorical wilderness prowled by predators returning to the primal state of "vacant lot" without either pastoral or capital ambitions — without Jefferson or Hamilton, a state without hope, structure, or mercy. "It's like a *jungle* sometimes. It makes me wonder how I keep from going under."¹³ An unfocused armed revolution is underway in this new killing ground. The disenfranchised no longer see any reason to play by the rules of a society which so obviously has fabricated those rules in disregard of or to directly disadvantage them. The carnage is intense while the combatants are etymologically marginalized as "animals" or, possibly worse, just the anonymous "them."

The city is opposed to a pastoral and affluent suburbanism, to that "naturally" correct place of American aspiration and dominance. The urban, or suburban, citizen is likely to see the city as anti-puritan by nature, blurred and complex in form. Of course, such hostility has direct political-economic impact. The metropolis is deserted by the middle-class and starves as tax revenues enrich the education and quality of life in outlying towns which still thrive on the city but give little back. The federal government does likewise. The city becomes like the bad dog chained in the backyard of culture, deprived of sustenance, becoming daily meaner and more dangerous, kept barely alive, but a necessary foil and scapegoat.

His (Wright's) scheme is eschatological beyond its humanism. In abolishing the city, he abolished the country as well, by distributing the components of the city to the limits of the of the landscape... The city becomes the nation.

- William A. McClung,
The Architecture of Paradise¹⁴

The names of the great suburban megalopoli — Phoenix or City of Angels — reflect the desire inherent in their form. While the poor and African-American are largely excluded from this realm, the post-industrial suburb and the universal machines which enabled its creation have replaced the city as the format for current social definition. A debased ideal crossed with the tough pragmatics of the frontier and of the exigencies of speculation and development, the modern pastoral finds form in the tranquil simulacra of Whispering Pines or Brookhaven Estates.

In the simple dynamism of the Midwest of the early twentieth century, the complex calculus of historical growth or loss did not seem particularly real or important... In this brief moment of fulfillment and ease, it seemed that here must be a strict logic of the relationship of site and satisfaction, something approaching the validity of natural order.

- Carl Sauer,
"Forward to historical geography"¹⁵

Fearful of the industrial city and romantic about nature, America engages paradoxically in an ongoing romance with mechanism. After all, the U.S. shared the same crib with the machine age. The new machine is often electronic, without the pumping pistons, the shafts and tendons of the industrial object. The new machine serves, producing comfort, pleasure, distraction, convenience, mobility. It is personal and expendable. An exquisite formula of puritan consumption is its point, denying the innate material satisfaction in things acquired. It is only the act of purchase that can momentarily placate, for the real material pleasure of consuming goes against basic cultural tenets. It is quantity not quality that matters, for possession replaces a forbidden appreciation. A society that compulsively consumes without satisfaction is infinitely demanding of production and vicious in its exclusionary tactics.

In the inverted order of class in materialist culture, status is determined more by car than by home, driving even the underclass into excesses of conspicuous consumption and edge borrowing. The networks of highways and boulevards zone the city into enclaves. The rarely penetrable and often three-dimensional Interstate-35 presents a precise barrier in Austin between the invisible Mexican and African-American communities and the apparently liberal academic-bureaucratic city.

Often ecological or social legislation reinforces the precision of this border. Vehicles transform the breadth of the city. The dimension has changed, to the coefficient of the private automobile. Vast space can be traversed —

ten miles to the store, a hundred to work, a thousand for a weekend getaway. Public transport dooms the have-nots to a different scale.

After all, American culture is basically one of images, so that changes effected at the level of imagery cannot be underestimated. Since commodification is one of the main modes of integration in the United States, it can certainly be used as a vehicle of symbolic intervention. Rather than of active or passive cultures, one can now speak of mutual appropriation.

- Celeste Olalquiaga,
Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Systems¹⁶

The second transforming machine is the television. Its space threatens to overcome the increasing marginal space of the actual, offering charms for which there is no competition in this realm where the city is demonized. In the 1950s, the media hub became the familiar scene of television drama for a what was still a predominately urban viewing audience. The domesticity presented was happy, white and suburban. The city was Los Angeles. TV provides the modern *flâneur* with a safe promenade. From the seeming *verité* of live cops shows to vulgar comedy to the safe violence and pseudo-war of network sports, the channel-cruise provides disengaged titillation but insulation from, the freaks and horror, the unnameable, the irresistible "perversions" presented on the screen. The modern mysteries are participated in, but this time, not in blood rituals beyond the city walls. Here the immersion is voyeuristic. Pumped up on fear and xenophobia, the viewer surfs between scenes of ersatz passion, carnage, humor, and the freakshow-confessional-inquisition of the talk-show, finally incapable of separating this world from that which is experienced, replacing the city with the even more violent and bizarre urbanism of the networks.¹⁷ The talk show itself is a prophylactic penetration of "normal" society by the other. Sanctimony and repulsion are omnipresent.

The city represented, but rarely experienced in its actuality by most citizens, becomes a manifestation of desire, representing a negative of convention, a cultural id, a place in which fear and the essential notion of a "better life" can find dialectical definition. When polled, safely suburban Milwaukee residents statistically felt as threatened by urban violence as did the residents of dangerous inner-city neighborhoods. Like the allegorical imagery of the Gothic church, where the illiterate, incapable of independent access, were provided with symbol and accompanying rhetoric, the TV presents a seamless space. A new mythical relation exists, a return to the excesses that must associate themselves with this sort of information matrix — transcendence, directed consumerism, the image of choice masking control, most importantly the extreme hostility directed toward fellow citizens who are marked as "different" by race, language or sexual preference.

In the postmodern era, escape from organized communities also is likely to result in greater dependence on electronic networks of communi-

cation. Despite, or because of, their embrace of family-oriented privatism, rururbanites end up relying on the electronic media for many of the contacts with the outside world.

- Leo Marx,
"The Countryside, the Small Town,
and Rural America"¹⁸

In 1994, half the planet's population shared the same televised images of the finals of the World Cup. The number of hours of elapsed time given the repetition of the images of the Rodney King beating multiplied by the number of viewers may make that scene the single most viewed human event in history, rivaled by the explosion of Challenger 7 and certain popular music videos. The same bytes are presented to more people simultaneously than could have been imagined even in the radio age. This comes not just from the technology of medium but also from the concentration of information within the infrastructure of the broadcast network. Urban space now includes the space of media presentation. The transmitted image now stands parallel to that perceived in the increasingly indeterminate field of the real. The anti-formality of the contemporary suburb acknowledges the increasing non-physicality of its spaces replaced in the antiseptic *demi-monde* of the television and computer. The citizen replaces the city with the caricatured violence and corruption that the city has come to represent — a caricature which is also profoundly racist.

The town exists only as a function of circulation and of circuits; it is a singular point on the circuits which create it and which it creates. It is defined by entries and exits ... It is a phenomenon of transconsistency, a network, because it is fundamentally in contact with other towns

- Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,
"City/State"¹⁹

Computer communication models do seem to propose an urban form, or, like the post-industrial city, a formlessness. While skepticism is healthy about the evolutionary potential of technologies, computer models project an electronic city made up not of the nexus of transport or physical gathering, nor of any tangible objects, but a ganglia of networks, an electronic boulevard crowded with users, a city of information and needs that can project simultaneously from Australia, Mozambique, Sweden and Guatemala, meeting nowhere, shifting with the speed of reformed contacts. The computer proposes an L.A.-like mat of information and crossings at a planetary scale, but delivers a strange theater where alienation and fetish thrive and class is the lowest common denominator. This cyber-urbanism resembles its real counterpart, but in the way Disney represents, in antiseptic simulation, the urban wonders of the world. The computer has upped the consumerist ante and is thus unavailable to the underclass and projects a world where they can only appear as the opponents on computer games. The virtual gated-communities of the internet come with precise entrance requirements and economic profiles.

Finally, the air-conditioner and similar climate-control

devices have changed the city. The attractiveness of the southern US for the northern immigrant has increased as the climate has been tempered. At the same time, the architecture and urban configuration that confronted particular conditions have given way to a tacit dependence on recessive consuming machines, deconditioning a public less and less able to survive without them. This necessarily diminishes the specificity of local response and makes for an increasingly hostile out-of-doors superheated by the cooling machines and empty but for the energy-poor. Skybridges and tunnels serve to insulate in more than one way. The lure of energy-glutted artificial environments compromises a communal life that is already restricted.

The alienation that sits at the core of the modern and that clearly forms the strengths and weakness of American culture, an alienation that is both productive and disorienting, also makes a city of the periphery, a city where all urbanism is identified by absence. In between the commercial strips that often correspond to the original mile grid of the agricultural-utopian fabric, lie the residential subdivisions, composed of single-family homes isolated on their lots, pseudo farms, or in pseudo villages of town-house communities. Parking lots and subdivisions repeat the morphology of boxes in lines, brutally uniform within the look of individuality. "Gated communities" take this uniformity to another level. In fact, they restrict through homogeneity, through codes of appearance and behavior for the private home in the guise of maintenance of "property values." The force of material and market becomes literally the ideological justification for exclusion and conformity. The rules are rigorous. The "profile," like that implied by "family values," is exclusive.

...a new totality, whose elements appear to be both joined (joined in space by authority and by quantification) and disjoined (disjoined in that same fragmented space and by that same authority, which uses its power in order to unite by separation and to separate by uniting).

- Henri Lefebvre,
The survival of capitalism²⁰

Here the elliptical logic of the urban in America is particularly highlighted by one of Lefebvre's typical word order gambits. For the suburbanite the city embodies difference often synonymous with African-American culture. As Foster points out, this difference is not so much rejected as consumed while consuming. Its otherness is an essential theme, a counterpoint and ironically an active logo-encrusted market. Heterotopia may in the end be a particularly viable model for understanding all the various American urbanisms.²¹ A concatenation of "other spaces," illogical, misplaced, nonsensical by traditional European standards, addressing both deviance and crisis, form the new city. But these other spaces are class-linked, color-coded and increasingly exclusive. The enclaves infect their surroundings as they encapsulate them. The latest NASA fantasy is for a space-station, a city in the sky, a white floating engine safe from the motion-sickness that plagues the Americas, thrusting

into the open space that the new city yearns for, pointing to the heavens, avoiding the cacophony and struggle, and the change, that crust the planet.

NOTES

- ¹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT 1996), p. 66.
- ² A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise* (New York: Summit 1989) on the mythic force of the legend of return embodied in baseball.
- ³ The extraordinary willingness of Americans to project printed ideology on their bodies as t-shirt or tattoo, the need to expose sentiment, to become a walking sign, to advertise attitude or product; seems to resolve the unbearable and unpalatable political pressure that such an ideological entity as the United States generates. While becoming human billboards, Americans eschew actual political action and doubt political affect.
- ⁴ Rather than continue to credit Leo Marx throughout the paper every time ideas find their inspiration in his, suffice it to say that *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford, 1964) is the jumping-off point for many of the concepts developed here.
- ⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p. 375 - from Vidler, Anthony 'Scenes of the Street' in *On Streets*, ed. Stanford Anderson (Cambridge, MA: The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, 1978).
- ⁶ from Francoise Choay, *The Modern City - Planning in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Braziller, 1969).
- ⁷ The pitting of Jefferson as symbol of the pastoral ideal manifested in the *Notes on Virginia* of 1785, against Hamilton as the advocate of the industrial and pragmatic capitalist impulse as embodied in the *Report on the Subject of Manufactures* of 1791 is an historical generalization borrowed from Leo Marx and continued here with recognition of its basic accuracy but profound simplification of two very complex political theories which actually overlap. The War Between the States could be interpreted as a conflict between the contradictory versions of the American vision that still define American reality, between the agrarian but slave-owning South whose grave ideological problems the Virginian Jefferson himself had personally struggled with, and the industrial, urban, and brutal practicalities of rampant Northern capital that has come to be identified with the transplanted New Yorker Hamilton. The Hamiltonian chimera so disrupted the Jeffersonian dream, the slave-driven pastoral was so disturbed by the teeming practicality of the industrial metropolis that an horrific correction had to occur, that the "terrible swift sword" had to fall. This paradox had already nearly reached flash-point in 1800 when several states threatened to send militia to put down the Federalist block on the Presidential election of Jefferson, who had already, under John Adams, drawn legislation for the secession of states from the Federal entity that he resisted.
- ⁸ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post Modern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1977), p. 9. The appalling language of this selection indicates the social, or anti-social agenda of much of early Post Modern work and criticism. This *haute bourgeois* bias is ironically linked to populist arguments.
- ⁹ Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 4.
- ¹⁰ For this history I am indebted to my student at Tulane, John Morse, and his critical look at the southern steel town.
- ¹¹ Lewis Mumford, photo caption in "Biotechnic Civilization" in

- The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.).
- ¹² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT 1996), p. 203.
- ¹³ Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, "The Message." written by E. Fletcher, M. Clover, C. Chase, S. Robinson, (Sugarhill Music: BMI, 1983).
- ¹⁴ William A. McClung, *The Architecture of Paradise*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 139-140.
- ¹⁵ Carl Sauer, "Forward to historical geography" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 31 (1941), pp. 3-4, from Derrick Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge, MA & Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 286.
- ¹⁶ Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis: Confemporary Cultural Systems* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1992), p. 54.
- ¹⁷ "Since the Middle Ages, torture has accompanied it (confession) like a shadow, and supported it when it could go no further: the dark twins. The most defenseless tenderness and the bloodiest of powers have a similar need of confession. Western man has become a confessing animal" Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality - Vol. 1*, (New York: Vintage, 1978), p. 59.
- ¹⁸ Lee Marx, "The Countryside, the Small Town, and Rural America" in *The GSD News*, Fall 1996 (Cambridge: Harvard School of Design, 1996), p. 10.
- ¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, "City/State" in *Zone 1/2*, pp. 195-196.
- ²⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The survival of capitalism*. (London: Alison and Busby, 1976), pp. 84-85 from Derrick Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge, MA & Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 275.
- ²¹ see Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, (London: Verso, 1989) from Foucault, Michel "Of Other Spaces - the Principles of Heterotopia" *Diacritic* 16, No. 1 (1985) or in a slightly altered translation in *Lotus international* 48/49. (Milano: Electa, 1986), pp. 8-17.