

LIBERO ANDREOTTI
AND NADIR LAHIJI
FOREWORD BY GRAEME GILLOCH

The Architecture of Phantasmagoria

SPECTERS OF THE CITY



ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN PLANNING AND URBAN DESIGN



The Architecture of Phantasmagoria

In a time of mass-mediated modernity, the city becomes, almost by definition, a constitutively ‘mediated’ city. Today, more than ever before, the omnipresence of media in every sphere of culture is creating a new urban ontology, saturating, fracturing, and exacerbating the manifold experience of city life. The authors describe this condition as one of ‘hyper-mediation’ – a qualitatively new phase in the city’s historical evolution. The concept of *phantasmagoria* has pride of place in their study; using it as an all-embracing explanatory framework, they explore its meanings as a critical category to understand the culture, and the architecture, of the contemporary city.

Andreotti and Lahiji argue that any account of architecture that does not include understanding the role and function of media and its impact on the city in the present ‘tele-technological-capitalist’ society is fundamentally flawed and incomplete. Their approach moves from Walter Benjamin, through the concepts of phantasmagoria and of media – as theorized also by Theodor Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, and a new generation of contemporary critics – towards a new socio-critical and aesthetic analysis of the mediated space of the contemporary city.

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Foreword

*

I wonder: where, exactly, did the Greeks find the wood to build their famous horse? Given that they had been encamped before the walls of Troy for some ten years, one would assume that any local forests – spare on these coastal plains at the best of times – would have long been turned into firewood to warm the long nights of those weary warriors. Yet the carpenter-engineer-soldier Epeius was able to realize Odysseus's cunning scheme in just three days. True, many of those ships that had set sail so long ago from Greece were sadly no longer needed for the return voyage, their unfortunate crew the casualties of a decade of bloody fighting. All too few were destined to return home. Some of these vessels would be broken up for their planking. Moreover, in those long years of siege, the Greeks would assuredly have fashioned for themselves all manner of artifacts to make the waiting less arduous, their littoral camp itself more comfortable: tables, chairs, stools, benches, storage chests, perhaps even a few wooden shelters had appeared, better than wind-blown, worn-out canvas, ten-year-old tattered tents. And so all these articles of everyday use would have necessarily been sacrificed to the great equine edifice, itself a sacrifice to the goddess Athena, or so the spy Sinon was to tell the initially suspicious Trojans. But, of course, this was to be no act of sacralisation, transforming mundane materials into objects of worship and veneration, but rather a sly refunctioning of them, the profane reworked and recomposed into another profane form only now in the deceptive guise of the sacred. Epeius is here the heroic bricoleur refashioning the quotidian into a weapon. A multitude of tables turned into a wooden structure that would conceal just thirty men – just enough to open the gates and steal a city.

And so Troy was taken, not by force from without, but by stealth from within, by a few shadows tiptoeing out from a horse in the dark: a nightmare.

**

In his 1934 essay on Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin describes the writer as a 'latter-day Ulysses' (SW2: 799) since:

Ulysses . . . stands at the dividing line between myth and fairy tale. Reason and cunning have inserted tricks into myths; their forces cease to be

invincible. Fairy tales are the traditional stories about victory over these forces, and fairy tales for dialecticians are what Kafka wrote when he went to work on legends.

(SW2: 799)

Two years later in ‘The Storyteller,’ Benjamin was to reiterate the utopian promise of the fairy tale in its articulation of

the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare that myth had placed upon its chest. . . . The wisest thing – so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day – is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits.

(SW3: 157)

It is precisely such a vision of the critical energies and emancipatory gestures of the fairy story that informs Benjamin’s own Surrealist-inspired ‘Arcades Project,’ his on-going and eventually unfinished exploration of Paris in the Second Empire, capital of the nineteenth century, capital of capital. Benjamin understood his task as a paradoxical one: to disenchant the modern city as the pre-eminent locus of modern mythology through enchantment; to implode the spectacular capitalist world of luxury commodities, grand edifices and boulevards, extravagant world exhibitions and fairs, and architectural dreamhouses and imperial fantasies; and to bring about an awakening of its slumbering, revolutionary collectivities.

In the spirit of Benjamin, inspired by him, Libero Andreotti and Nadir Lahiji present here not so much fairy stories but another fantastical form for their own encounter with the city and architecture of today: ghost stories for dialecticians. Central to their uncompromising and unequivocal critique of current architectural practice is Benjamin’s central category of the *phantasmagoria*, an elusive and richly suggestive term whose polysemic possibilities are elegantly interrogated and unfolded in this text in relation to a number of other more recent European critical theorists working at the intersection of aesthetics and political philosophy, among them: Guy Debord, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, Slavoj Žižek, and others. *Phantasmagoria*: literally a ghost or gathering of shades in the marketplace. In true dialectical fashion, this takes on a three-fold significance for the authors here.

Apparatus: the city as spectacle

As a complex and dynamic assemblage of bodies, technologies, techniques, constructions, spaces, forms, discourses, signs, institutions, practices, and experiences, the contemporary tele-technological, hyper-mediated city of twenty-first-century globalized neoliberalism constitutes for Andreotti and Lahiji an exemplary instance of an ‘apparatus’ (or, in Foucauldian terms,

dispositif). And just as for Benjamin the capitalist city and its most innovative architecture – the fashionable arcades themselves, winter gardens, world exhibitions, railway stations – were the pre-eminent forms and material manifestations of modern mythology and illusion, so too the city of today is home to the ideological deceptions of our time: commodity fetishism on a scale and to a degree that Benjamin could scarcely have imagined even though he was among the first and certainly most astute observers of the birth of commodity culture: the shining steel and glass towers of multinational corporations as concrete manifestations of their global wealth, power and influence; airports and railway stations transformed into luxury shopping complexes; high-rise hotels combining ‘fine dining’ with urban panoramas for their well-heeled clientele; fantastical centres of ‘culture’ (museums, galleries, concert halls) erected as part of self-styled ‘culture-led urban regeneration’; new stadia to house cyclical mega-media global sporting events; iconic edifices for gentrification and city-branding. All these spaces, structures, simulations and surfaces are expressive of our time-space compressed, hyperconnected, utterly disconnected world; all are inflected by the rhetoric of the virtual, the digital, the ‘datascape,’ of accelerated flows and (im)material folds, of aesthetics as algorithm. Phantasmagoria, then, is a term to capture this city as spectacular incarnation of capital with all its excesses and excrescences. And what of architecture and of architects themselves? For Andreotti and Lahiji, these have been only too colluding and conniving in uncritically fashioning the contemporary cityscape at the whim of, and in the image of, financial and political power. Whatever their popular, postmodern, post-postmodern pretensions and professions, the architect as celebrity has pandered to the vanity and vacuity of capital, competing abjectly and obediently for those ‘prestige projects’ which are ultimately nothing other than monuments to money and narcissism – the glass, steel and concrete dreamhouses of today: spectacular and securitized, privatized and policed, exclusive and excluding; edifices and urbanism conceived with all the arrogant ambition and risible self-deceit of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Theodor Adorno’s paradigmatic phantasmagoria.

Apparition: the city of spectres

Andreotti and Lahiji are less interested in the aesthetic excuses and evasions of the architectural profession than in the anaesthetics and alienation of the cityscapes they continue to fabricate and facilitate. Anaesthetics here refers to the loss of feeling, of human sensibilities and sensitivities, the depletion and diminution of the human sensorium and capacity for experience – alienation to the growing sense of displacement, exclusion, excision of the citizen from the structures and spaces of the city itself, to the subjection of the citizen to the enthroned commodity. Like their predecessors,

the dreamhouses of the twenty-first century are there to numb the senses and instantiate social and economic divisions. The spectacular city is one of stratification and segregation, subordination and scrutiny. And so what of its unwanted others, its outcasts and undesirables, those who should be neither seen nor heard? Here the notion of phantasmagoria takes on a second significance: it provides a rubric for envisioning the city as the site of the persistent presence of those who are absent, as a locus haunted by the ghosts of those who are simultaneously both unwillingly included in, and rigorously excluded from, this Neoliberal world. The city is an unhomely home to a host of such unwelcome uncanny others: the poor, the subaltern, minorities, refugees, (im)migrants, multitudes, the (neo-)proletariat, the precariat. They are the unexorcised, the not-quite-forgotten, the bad conscience of city-planners and developers. We are, perhaps, in an era of architectural amnesia, of a deep dream-sleep of designers. Andreotti and Lahiji, like Benjamin, demand an awakening and a remembering. One must raggpick and refunction the vestiges and traces, the leavings and leftovers of those that the capitalist metropolis seeks to render invisible and silent: the oppressed of the past, and the exploited of the present. How do we confront and contest the prospect of a city without memories? One must summon its shades, mobilize its shadows, mobilize *in* the shadows. Remember: with cunning and high spirits, just thirty individuals can win a slumbering city.

Apparitor: a city is summoned

In ancient Latin and ecclesiastical courts, the office of the apparitor involved a twofold duty: first, to summon witnesses to give their necessary testimony, to ensure that the truth gets told; and, second, to take possession of the property and assets of those who, duly called to give evidence, nevertheless chose to absent themselves, snubbing the authority and legitimacy of the proceedings. The role of the apparitor was to call others to account in a double sense: to require them, or enable them, to speak, and to hold them responsible. One might want to think of Andreotti and Lahiji as assuming the role of apparitors in their text. Indeed, they have called upon some of the most eminent critical thinkers of the last century to state their business here: from Benjamin via Debord to Derrida. And so, as you read these words, the very book you are holding is itself a phantasmagoria: it is a very select gathering of ghosts. They have been summoned here and now so that their thematic and conceptual repertoires from then and there may be subject to cross examination, so that the truth content of their works might be scrutinized, analyzed and made available to those present. Their writings are to be profaned – that is to say, pressed into service, made use of. The host of shades the reader will encounter in these pages share two things in particular: first, they are all themselves haunted by the ancestral spirits, the guiding

spirits, of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, and, second, as a consequence, they form a particular and distinguished intellectual lineage which here goes unnamed. I will name it. They are the heirs and exponents of a radical Surrealism, a movement that Benjamin understood in his own time as the last of the European intellectuals. As this book unwittingly demonstrates, they were not last, only maybe the last before the last. I think this is Andreotti and Lahiji's clandestine inheritance and purpose here: not just the explicit advocacy of a profane 'architecture of resistance' but moreover the redemption and reconfiguration of a politically charged Surrealism so as to take possession of, to repossess, the city.

Towards the end of the book, Andreotti and Lahiji cite Marx's famous account in the first chapter of *Capital* of the commodity as fetish. To be sure, a simple wooden table has a use-value; but as a commodity with an exchange value in the market place, the table metamorphoses into a fantastical being:

as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.

(*Capital*, Volume 1 pp. 163–4)

The wooden table is turned into a four legged creature that jumps and leaps about, prances and bucks. It becomes a wooden horse. In the hands of an expert bricoleur, one with a keen eye for the re-use value of such material, could such a thing be reworked, refashioned into a different kind of horse, one of which Epeius would be proud, a wooden horse to win a city? An enchanted structure in the service of disenchantment?

In Convolute K of the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin writes:

The imminent awakening is poised, like the wooden horse of the Greeks, in the Troy of the dream.

(K2, 4, AP: 392)

Graeme Gilloch
April 2016

Preface

There is a luster in the city today that Walter Benjamin described as phantasmagorical. Before ever becoming ‘a beautiful appearance,’ it is an emanation of commodity fetishism, which in the way Benjamin intended Marx’s famous opening chapter of *Capital*, is both *spectral* and, in a certain sense, ontological. For Benjamin the very existence of the city is generated through its own spectrality. The city is never *one* with itself; it is always in a state of *non-contemporaneity* with its own present, which is always haunted by ghosts.

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida used the term ‘specter’ to undermine the opposition between reality and illusion. In his newly designated *hauntology*, he sought to describe the productive *effects* of an *ontological* treatment of spectrality. Just as Derrida spoke in the plural of certain ‘*spirits of Marx*,’ there are spirits of Benjamin – some of them *themselves* haunted by Marx – that we try, in this book, to re-awaken. They are *apparitions* of phantasmagorias that are buried in the contemporary city. In an act of fidelity to both Marx and Benjamin, we attempt to unearth them and examine their implications for a *radical* critique of architecture and the city today.

Our name for this twenty-first century urban reality is the *hyper-mediated city*, a city transfigured by the specters of a tele-techno-media apparatus that is forever altering the temporal and spatial coordinates of human perception. To begin with, our *spectrographic* analysis of the city targets the optimistic liberal-capitalist presentations that systematically repress and dismiss everything in the city that is not empirically quantifiable. Against such readings, we invoke a long tradition of thinking that goes from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Spirit*, to the *Communist Manifesto*’s summoning of the specter haunting Europe, to Derrida’s own problematizing of Marx’s ontological discourse – a tradition that plays off against each other the ambiguities of spirit and specter in order to de-ontologize the absolute claims of empiricism. To this we add the more specific pedagogy of specters that Marx lays out in his analysis of the fetish character of the commodity, as developed in particular by Benjamin in his Arcades Project, as well as by Adorno in his brilliant study of Wagner’s phantasmagorias. In each case, the concept of phantasmagoria emerges as a powerful new category for the critique of the

contemporary city – a category whose particular strength derives from its historical determination and hence also its contingency.

As the first manifestation of phantasmagoria in modern history, according to Benjamin, the Second Empire transformed the city of Paris into the interior living space of the *flâneur* – a world he described in alternately heavenly or hellish terms. The driving force of this change was the world of Baron Haussmann. For us today, a new and even more relentless Global Empire has made the city into a new kind of World Interior – what Sloterdijk calls the World Interior of Capital. In both cases, the city is the scene in which Spectacles of Capitalism are staged. To the class of ‘professional conspirators’ who ruled under Napoleon III there corresponds today a new class of intellectuals and apologists of the Neoliberal State. But, while the Second Empire focused on Paris as the capital of the nineteenth century, the New Empire projects a generic model of a ‘global city’ on a world scale, in which the specter of Haussmann persists with more profound and unsettling effects. As Adorno put it in a letter to Benjamin, Haussmann is the name of a ‘dialectic’ expressing the fundamental inherent contradiction of the modern city.

In this book, we use the term phantasmagoria to describe the ideological function of contemporary architecture. To the extent that today the dominant fantasies of designers manifestly exclude any concern for the social responsibilities of the discipline, promoting a reified and fetishistic model of architecture in the service of the culture industry or, as the case may be, of its obverse in the institutions of ‘high’ art, we unequivocally condemn them; we single out critics and practicing architects who happily promote the privatization of the public good under the phantasmagoria of a post-fordist economy; and we show how the fantasy structure that rules over the aesthetic ideology of contemporary architecture, with its glorification of techno-capitalism, is no different from the ‘phantasmagoria of civilization’ Benjamin denounced as a compensation for the cultural deficit of an empire in need of legitimation.

This book contributes to the case made by scholars and critics in many fields today for the *actuality* of Benjamin for the project of radical critique in our time. We come to this project as historical materialists, against the ideological fantasy of an ‘End of History,’ and committed to a dialectical theory of the city founded on its real historical object.

Introduction

Specters of the city and the task of critique

In the time of modernity, there is no city that is not technologically mediated, no city that is not without its specters. Like modernity, the city is haunted and therefore in need of a 'spectrographic' analysis.¹ A *fantasy structure* governs the generation and circulation of specters. This fantasy structure has a name – phantasmagoria – and a history, which goes back three centuries to the use of the magic lantern for projecting phantasmatic-hallucinatory images. The specters of the city have never stopped haunting the moderns. They can be neither repressed nor conjured away.

We do not know if Marx and Engels, in speaking of 'specters' in the beginning of their *Communist Manifesto*, were aware of this artificial device, but we will begin our inquiry by outlining its political resonance. They wrote: 'a specter is haunting Europe – the specter of Communism. All the Powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter.'² This statement prompted Jacques Derrida to endorse the idea of spectrographic analysis but then to criticize Marx for having *himself* conjured away the specter of communism by 'ontologizing' it. This is, in essence, Derrida's criticism of Marx, a critique advanced even as he himself adopts spectrographic analysis as a new kind of 'hauntological' critique.³

Hauntology is a pretty good description of the approach to architectural criticism we take in this book. Almost a hundred years after Marx and Engels wrote about the phantasmagorias of commodity relations, Walter Benjamin invoked the same word in his influential analysis of the techno-mass-mediated city. To our knowledge, Benjamin is the only twentieth-century critic who did not conjure away – or 'ontologize' – the specters he saw haunting Europe and the technological societies of the West.

In this study we draw extensively on Benjamin for a critique of today's hyper-mediated city. We follow this approach even as we acknowledge that media technology has changed considerably since Benjamin's time. 'New' media and the *accelerated* flow of technological images have intensified and transformed the fantasy structure of the contemporary city, giving rise to genetically new phantasmagorias that demand a new interpretation.

To be clear: in the lapse of time (almost a century) since Benjamin's writings, a radically new configuration of the city has emerged. Its decentering/disconcerting effects are modifying the human sensorium in new ways and

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with deeply disturbing consequences. We call this new configuration *the hyper-mediated city* (HMC for short). The HMC is not an intensification of the technological metropolis of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is an ontologically new reality in which the totalization of earlier trends generates extreme and paradoxical levels of concentration, disintegration, dispersal – new kinds of sensory bombardment, and new forms of control that must be examined and theorized. In this context, the term Benjamin employed, empirically almost as a notional figure – phantasmagoria – takes on a new prominence as a defining principle of the HMC.

The main thesis of this book is that the mutations that have occurred in the last forty years in the mediatized-tele-technological environment of today force us to distinguish Benjamin's mediated city (roughly from the 1830s to the 1930s) from its present-day counterpart. The latter's hyper-mediated condition requires a new theorization, which current academic discourse – implicated as it is in the promotion of various technological novelties – has so far failed to develop.

The first step in any such a theorization is to subject the contemporary city to a *psychopathological* critique, based on a well-established body of work that has yet to inform even the most marginal area of academic urban studies. Unlike the vast majority of current work on the city in relation to media technology, we follow Benjamin by foregrounding the effects of 'new' technologies on the human sensorium. This means focusing on the political and aesthetic impact of massively *intensified* sense impressions on the structures of perception and experience. We understand aesthetics here like Benjamin and Jacques Rancière do – viz., in the original Greek sense of *aisthesis*, as the 'organization of feeling' or the 'sensory experience of perception.' Following Benjamin – as well as recent work by Susan Buck-Morss and others – we recast phantasmagoria in a psychoanalytical register. Our main device here is the seminal notion of *anaesthetics*. We argue that, as a result of specific *dispositifs*, a new subject typology has emerged, wandering like a lost soul through the labyrinths of the HMC. Its signal characteristic is an *anaesthetized* sense perception, inured to shock and unable to distinguish between friend and foe.

There is nothing *technological* today that is not, at one and the same time, *physiological* and *psychical*. Benjamin is the only twentieth-century thinker to develop this insight. His reflections deserve to be brought up to date in the present. Benjamin intuited that a correlation, actually an *intersection*, existed between technological reproducibility (enabled in his time by print, photography, and cinema) and the rise of psychoanalysis. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Benjamin already sensed that the *old* new technology was linked inextricably to the psychoses of the twentieth-century subject. Optimistically, he believed technology offered a way to immunize the subject from the effects it had itself generated. In the second version of the Artwork essay, he wrote:

If one considers the dangerous tension which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large – tendencies which at

*critical stages take on a psychotic character – one also has to recognize that this same technologization [Tecnisierung] has created the possibility of psychotic immunization against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced devolvement of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis.*⁴

(italics in original)

Whether one subscribes to this view of technology's potential for 'psychotic immunization' – clearly, in light of recent studies of violence and the media, this is, to say the least, a complex issue – few would deny Benjamin's warning of the 'dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences' continue to generate today.

This book is based on the assumption that any critique of contemporary architecture and the city must account for the psychic effects of the 'total' media environments it creates, especially when their source – as is often argued – is 'extra-architectural.' Whether loathed or loved by its critics and theorists, the HMC is far too often theorized in naively 'objective' terms that remain on a super-structural level, serving ultimately to reify their object. New concepts are needed to move beyond such explanations. The critique of the city, we believe, must engage *both* current media theory *and* a radical politico-aesthetic and socio-economic perspective.

Today, a particularly promising context for such a critique is constituted by a fringe of media criticism, where writers such as Norbert Bolz, in a sharp break with the apolitical McLuhan/Baudrillard consensus still dominating the field, have rediscovered Benjamin's 'actuality' as a media theorist. Like Guy Debord's perennially relevant *The Society of the Spectacle*, Boltz's politico-aesthetic approach offers a valid basis from which to model the HMC.

No serious study of the city and its architecture, however, is possible without a political analysis, and a thoroughgoing critique, of neoliberalism, a small but essential component of which is the infantile infatuation, within the field of architecture, with 'new' technologies. Following Alain Badiou, we argue that a critique of the HMC is, in fact, strictly *contemporary* with 1968 radicalism and must re-claim it as its legitimate reference. However naïve and imperfect, the long-repressed *social program* of architecture of the late 1960s and early 1970s remains, to this day, essential to any critical analysis of the architectural *totalities* through which capitalism – in its latest communicative guise – produces, consumes, disseminates, and distributes phantasmagorias as the principal means to insure its survival.

Hence the 'task of critique.' This book targets the role of 'criticism' in the academy, especially in schools of architecture today, where criticism within allowable limits effectively serves to reinforce and naturalize the managerial ideology of neoliberalism. Against this, we seek to reposition criticism within a radical Left tradition, rooted in the present and aware of the

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economic and ideological weapons ‘the New Spirit of Capitalism’ is able to wield, with ever-greater violence and dogmatism, around the world today.⁵

A *historical consciousness* must inform the understanding of the *contemporaneity* of the HMC, by which we mean the relation between history and temporality developed by Benjamin and summed up in the grammatical tense of *futur antérieur*. This tense has close affinities with the psychoanalytical notion of ‘deferred action,’ or *Nachträglichkeit*, in Freud, and with what Jacques Lacan called *après coup*. It is the idea that *time* (in the case of Freud, the psychic time of the subject) does not follow a linear development in which the present is heir to the past. Rather, since the subject reworks its past in response to its successive experiences of the present, the past figures as heir to the present. This, of course, does not mean that the past is merely a fabrication of the present. It is rather the *delayed time of retrospection* that Benjamin set against a naïve bourgeois notion of *progress*. Benjamin described such a tense, in which the past and present form a ‘constellation,’ as ‘dialectics at a standstill.’ As he noted in the Convoluted N of *The Arcades Project*:

Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability. [. . .] It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.⁶

Similarly, with Lacan’s *après coup*, we – the historical subjects – can recognize ourselves only in the messages we receive from the past. As recipients of such messages, we recognize ourselves as their addressees, and retrospectively *determine* them as having been sent to us: As Lacan said, ‘A letter always arrives at its destination.’

This responsibility to the past as first and foremost a commitment to the present is what underlies the constellation we construct in this book between Benjamin’s ‘mediated city’ and the contemporary HMC. It is also what drives our investigation of experience in the HMC, and of the media’s *subjectifying* apparatus – its phantasmagorias. Methodologically, we take as our starting point the opening lines of Benjamin’s 1939 exposé on ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century’:

Our investigation proposes to show how, as a consequence of this reifying representation of civilization, the new forms of behavior and the

new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria. These creations undergo this “illumination” not only in a theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition, but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence. They are manifest as phantasmagoria.⁷

In his previous exposé of 1935, adopting a quasi-Marxian vocabulary, Benjamin had already remarked on how ‘world exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which use value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted.’⁸ If the ‘world exhibition’ was the most potent scene of phantasmagoric display for Benjamin, if it marked the point at which ‘the phantasmagoria of capitalist culture attains its most radiant unfolding,’ the ‘world exhibition,’ today and for us, has become the ‘exhibition of the world,’ where phantasmagorias reign ‘like the sun that never sets on the empire of sleep.’

Notes

- 1 We borrow this term from the title of Jean-Michel Rababé’s book *La Pénultième est morte: Spectrographies de la modernité* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1993). See also his *The Ghosts of Modernity* (Gainesville: University Press of California, 1996).
- 2 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: complete with seven rarely published prefaces* (Lexington: SoHo Books, 2010), 15.
- 3 See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans., Peggy Kamuf, intro., Bernard Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).
- 4 Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, second version,’ in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 3, 1935–1938*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2002), 118.
- 5 We are referring to the title of the work by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).
- 6 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), [N3, 1], 462–463.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1939,’ in *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 14.
- 8 Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé 1935,’ in *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 7.



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Part I

Phantasmagoria, modernity, and the city



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1 Urban modernity and the politics of historical memory

The historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand [*einstecht*] and has come to a standstill. For this notion defines the very present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism offers the “eternal” image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called “Once upon a time” in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his powers – man enough to blast open the continuum of history.

Walter Benjamin, Thesis XVI, *On the Concept of History*

A theory of the city that abolishes its specters is an impoverished theory. The specters that have haunted historical modernity ineluctably return in the contemporary city and cannot be laid to rest. They are the historical specters of Napoleon III and the Second Empire that re-emerge in the New Empire today and that go under the term of Haussmannization. Haussmannization first manifests itself in the city of Paris, and later in the so-called ‘global cities’ – the former a product of a bourgeois capitalism in the age of Absolute Monarchy, the latter of present-day capitalism and its Neoliberal economic and political order. The contemporary global city is homogeneously scattered around the world – from New York to London, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, Beijing, Lagos, Tehran, Mumbai – all of them registering, in different ways, the pressure of *acceleration* of high-tech capitalism. This book is less about any particular instance of the global city than it is about the generic abstract idea of what we call the *mediatized* city, a city haunted by modernity in which the undead ghostly apparitions of the past return to stake their claim on the living. Modernity, in this sense, is permeated by specters of the past that contemporary models such as Habermas’s thesis of an ‘incomplete project’ fail to recognize, specters that are instead central to Benjamin’s theory of enlightenment’s unfulfilled utopian promise.

Our aim in this study, therefore, is to construct a theory of the city on the premise that its *reality* is intertwined with a *mythic* structure. This mythic

structure is not given to an immediate visibility but calls for a psychoanalytical and philosophical interpretation, recognizing that, contrary to naïve realism, *fantasy* is the ‘last support’ of reality.¹ Phantasmagoria is thus a *fantastic illusion*, but a necessary one, without which the texture of ‘reality’ would disintegrate. As a *social symptom*, phantasmagoria cannot be overcome but only *traversed* in a psychoanalytical sense.

With the atrophy of memory, contemporary culture fosters the delusion of pure presence through technological media. Against this notion of unmediated presence, the historical materialist, as Benjamin noted in the thesis above, is the one for whom history only exists in the ‘notion of a present.’ The theory of the mediated city we are advancing in this work is firmly grounded in Benjamin’s philosophical theory of history, which is contrary to the fashionable claim to an ‘end of history.’ In the same way, the logic of the city that we construct based on the notion of phantasmagoria is akin to Marx’s critique of Hegel’s notion of ‘rational totality’ – a critique that foregrounds the paradox inherent in the latter. As interpreted by Žižek, the Marxian critique argues that ‘as soon as we try to conceive the existing social order as a rational totality, we must include in it a paradoxical element which, without ceasing to be its internal constituent, functions as its symptom – subverts the very universal rational principle of this totality.’² Like the proletariat for Marx, phantasmagoria in the theory of the city represents the ‘unreason of reason,’ an ‘irrational’ element haunting it as its internal constituent. As its *symptom*, it subverts its rational totality. This study is an exploration of the encounter of reason with its own unreason.

Consistent with this approach, we propose a central thesis. In an analogy with Jacques Lacan’s theory that the ‘unconscious is structured like language,’ we propose that *the city is structured like phantasmagoria*. This means that, like the theory of the unconscious, it is structurally linked to a ‘fundamental fantasy’ that underlines both the *desiring* subject and the social totality. The ‘phantasmagoric city’ is the expression of this plural subject that must also be *collectively traversed*.

The phantasmagoric city must of course be demystified – the same way Benjamin unmasked nineteenth-century Paris. In this mythical city, as we will argue, the *subject* is *subjectivized* by the structure of phantasmagoria. The modern subject is, therefore, a *haunted* subject. Phantasmagorias originally were machines to produce illusions, fantasies, ghosts, and hallucinations in horror shows. In our time, they are exclusively a means to produce what is technically called *simulacra* by means of high-tech digital media. Oblivious to the specific philosophical meaning of ‘simulacrum’ from Plato to Deleuze, the term is often used in an affirmative way to invert the hierarchical order between the ‘original’ and the ‘copy,’ thus giving rise to the fantasy that images are more real than reality itself. The ensuing ‘hyper-reality’ – as presented by its chief theorist Jean Baudrillard – has been legitimized by followers in many fields. In it, two opposites strangely coincide:

a ‘hypertrophy of memory,’ on the one hand, and radical amnesia on the other. Both are in some way constitutive of the contemporary city and call for the most careful critical scrutiny.

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The term ‘metropolis’ (meaning the ‘mother city,’ from the Greek *mētēr*, ‘mother,’ and *pólis*, ‘city’) denotes the ‘big city’ as an economic, political, and geographical entity. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin’s mentor Georg Simmel – along with Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, and Siegfried Kracauer – explored the psychological makeup of the metropolitan subject, including what they termed the ‘mental life’ and the typically ‘blasé attitude’ of big-city dwellers. While for Simmel the metropolis was the ‘seat of a money economy,’³ for Benjamin, as Christina Britzolakis notes, it was more ‘a theater for [the] operation of dream, fantasy and memory’⁴ – in other words, in terms of the urban spectrography we are advancing in this book, it was a theater of phantasmagorias that are always already ‘mediated,’ while exceeding a strictly technological description, much like Baudelaire, according to Benjamin, saw the city of Paris through the veil of the crowd. Media here in both cases, media is first and foremost a term for a properly philosophical understanding of *mediation*.

Mediation, as we understand it, is a *dialectical* term in Hegelian philosophy, developed in particular in his *Science of Logic* in the context of his difficult notion of *Aufhebung* – which in English is rendered inadequately as ‘sublation.’ Hegel declared *Aufhebung* to be ‘one of the most important concepts in philosophy.’ He writes: ‘Nothing is *immediate*; what is sublated, on the other hand, is the result of *mediation*; it is a non-being but as a *result* which had its origin in a being. It still has, therefore, *in itself*, the *determinateness from which it originated*.’⁵ It is this sense of mediation that we bring to our theory of the city, a notion of sublation according to which *the city is never a determinate being*. To say that the city is a determinate being is to mistake its being as *immediacy*. The city is, rather, as Hegel would say, always on the way of *becoming*, located at the vanishing point between being and non-being. This means that the city is an *impure* being, at the core of which is a *speculative* theorization of the city, based on a principle of *indeterminateness*, according to which ‘becoming is the process of “sublating” pure being and nothing – the movement of their *Aufhebung* – whereas determinate being is the resulting state of their being, or having been, sublated.’⁶ For Hegel, ‘when something is *aufgehoben*, or sublated, it is negated, but it is not annihilated altogether. Rather, it is deprived of its independence and brought into a “unity with its opposite.” What is sublated thus continues to *be* but at the same time loses its immediacy and so no longer remains purely itself.’⁷ In the same way, the city is always something more, and less, than the pure technological determination that presumes to define it.

Thus the term ‘media,’ in the phrase ‘the mediated city,’ must not be taken simply in its most common and hackneyed technological sense. Rather, as

we will argue, within Benjamin's *definitive* theory of media, it must be subordinated to a properly dialectical determination of *mediation*. The same holds, in the last chapter of this book, for the particular configuration we call the hyper-mediated city, in relation to a critique of *acceleration* in what should be described, following Bernard Stiegler, the *hyper-industrial* (rather than post-industrial) age.⁸ The characteristic features of the latter, according to Stiegler, are best summed up in Gilles Deleuze's predictions in 'The Societies of Control,'⁹ but in our view are even more precisely described in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*.



This study is aligned with the *emancipatory* project of Critical Theory from Hegel and Marx, to the Frankfurt School, to contemporary radical philosophy. Two fundamental conceptual terms underpin our analysis, both deriving from this long and rich tradition: *disenchantment* and *profanation*. The notion of *disenchantment* is historically related to the project of the Enlightenment and the critique of capitalism. Max Weber in an essay entitled 'Science as a Vocation' – first delivered as a lecture in 1917 – saw it as the essence of modernity: 'the fate of our times,' he wrote, 'is characterized by rationalization and, above all, by the "disenchantment of the world." Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mythic life or into the borderlines of direct and personal human relations.'¹⁰

As we know, Benjamin adopted but also altered this notion in his own dialectical principle of '*re-enchantment*,' which – in contrast to the way Simmel and Lukács, Adorno and Horkheimer directly borrowed Weber's theories – posited disenchantment as, at the same time, inherently bound up with a process of re-enchantment. For Adorno and Horkheimer, *reason and myth* changed places – with myth itself residing at the core of enlightenment reason.¹¹ Their analysis was based on Weber's account of how 'in the course of western history, reason, as it secularizes, frees itself from its more mythic and religious sources and becomes ever more purposive, more oriented to means to the exclusion of ends.'¹² In this 'purposive rational action' (*Zweckrationalität*),¹³ for Weber, reason surrenders its redemptive and conciliatory possibilities in favor of pure calculation. Weber used the metaphor of an 'iron cage' to designate the dead-end of modern reason.¹⁴ Horkheimer would take this idea to its more forceful conclusion in the notion of 'instrumental reason.' As David Rasmussen explains, 'implied in this usage is the overwhelming force of reason for purposes of social control. The combined forces of media, bureaucracy, economy and cultural life would bear down the modern individual with an accumulated force which could only be described as instrumental.'¹⁵ It is significant, however, that from Hegel's power of 'reconciliatory Reason' to Marx's transformative social action, the emancipatory project did not disappear.¹⁶ For our part, we identify the *crisis of reason* in the project of the Enlightenment and its

refutation of the ‘specters’ of animistic, magical, and mythological modes of thought.¹⁷ At the same time, however, we endorse Ray Brassier’s statement that ‘the disenchantment of the world understood as a consequence of the process whereby the Enlightenment shattered “the great chain of being” and defaced the “book of world” is a necessary consequence of the coruscating potency of reason, and hence an invigorating vector of intellectual discovery, rather than a calamitous diminishment.’¹⁸ Modernity, in this view, inevitably generates its own phantasmagoria that must be overcome. But, as Brassier tells us, the same rationality that engenders fantasy is also the means for overcoming it. Hence the apparent deadlock of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critique of the Enlightenment is, at the same time, the contradiction of capitalist society itself. For this reason it has an enduring legacy for us.¹⁹

Our second operative term is *profanation*. Here we are already within the discourse of a contemporary radical theory that has more affinities with Marx than Weber. In his seminal ‘In the Praise of Profanation,’ Giorgio Agamben offers a novel analysis of the relation between religion, the sacred, and profanation that adds force to his and Benjamin’s critique of contemporary capitalism. Agamben cites the Roman jurist Trebatius as having said: ‘In the strict sense, profane is the term for something that was once Sacred or religious and is returned to the use and property of man.’²⁰ Hence, for Agamben religion or the sacred are based on ‘separation.’ Religion removes ‘things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere.’²¹ The apparatus that enacts this separation, for Agamben, is sacrifice.²²

Agamben remarks that ‘the thing that is returned to the common use of men is pure, profane, free of sacred names’ and goes on to say that ‘use’ does not appear as something natural, but one has to arrive at it by profanation. He clarifies the peculiar relation between ‘using’ and ‘profaning’: ‘There is a profane contagion, a touch that disenchant and returns to use what the sacred had separated and petrified.’²³ With the term ‘use,’ Agamben takes up Benjamin’s posthumous fragment titled ‘Capitalism as Religion.’ He points out that for Benjamin, capitalism was not a secularization of the Protestant faith, as it was for Weber, but a religious phenomenon in its own right, ‘precisely because it strives with all its might not toward redemption but toward guilt, not toward hope but toward despair, capitalism as religion does not aim at the transformation of the world but at its destruction.’²⁴ For Agamben, the religion of capitalism ‘realizes the pure form of separation’ and pushes it to ‘the point that there is nothing left to separate. [. . .] In the commodity, separation inheres in the very form of the object, which splits into use-value and exchange-value and is transformed into an ungraspable fetish.’²⁵ Further, in a nod to Debord’s notion of ‘spectacle,’ Agamben makes the following astute observation:

If, as has been suggested, we use the term “spectacle” for the extreme phase of capitalism in which we are now living, in which everything is

exhibited in its separation from itself, then spectacle and consumption are the two sides of a single impossibility of using. What cannot be used is, as such, given over to consumption or to spectacular exhibition. This means that it has become impossible to profane (or at least that it requires special procedures). If to profane means to return to common use, that which has been removed to the sphere of the sacred, the capitalist religion in its extreme phase aims at creating something absolutely unprofaneable.²⁶

Agamben advances the thesis that the impossibility of using ‘has its emblematic place in the Museum,’ and that ‘the museification of the world is today an accomplished fact,’²⁷ whereupon he makes the suggestive remark – on which we will expand later – that the *Museum coincides with an entire city*. ‘But more generally,’ he adds, ‘everything today can become a museum, because this term simply designates the exhibition of an impossibility of using, of dwelling, of experiencing.’²⁸ He claims that in the Museum, ‘the analogy between capitalism and religion becomes clear. The Museum occupies exactly the space and function once reserved for the Temple as the place of sacrifice.’²⁹

Towards the end of his essay, Agamben brings up Benjamin’s notion of ‘exhibition-value’ as the transformation that the work of art undergoes in the epoch of technological reproducibility. ‘Exhibition value,’ for Agamben, is the new condition of the object in the era of ‘fulfilled capitalism.’ In the Marxian opposition between use-value and exchange-value, ‘exhibition-value introduces a third term, which cannot be reduced to the first two.’³⁰ This is because ‘it is not use-value, because what is exhibited is, as such, removed from the sphere of use; it is not exchange-value, because it in no way measures any labor power.’³¹ In line with Agamben and Benjamin, we will argue that in its pure exteriority, the mediated city is the exemplar of exhibition-value in the era of ‘fulfilled capitalism.’ Moreover, as Agamben suggests, if one must wrest from the apparatus ‘the possibility of use’ that it has removed, ‘the profanation of the unprofaneable’ is the necessary ‘political task of the coming generation.’³²

Going back to the problematic of the Enlightenment we raised above, and anticipating the notion of ‘specters’ we will advance later, we must here point out that Agamben’s idea of profanation might seem to have certain family resemblances with Benjamin’s idea of ‘profane illumination’ that he adopted from Surrealism. Margaret Cohen, in particular, discusses the so-called ‘Gothic Marxism’ with which Benjamin is sometimes associated.³³ For Cohen, Gothic Marxism is an obscure current in mainstream Marxism. The latter was constructed on a narrow interpretation of Enlightenment rationality – an interpretation continuously haunted by Gothic ghosts and specters. ‘Profane illumination,’ according to Cohen, was Benjamin’s reformulation of this Surrealist Marxism in his important essay on Surrealism, where he wrote that ‘the true, creative overcoming of religious

illumination . . . resides in *profane illumination*, a materialist, anthropological inspiration.³⁴ Referring to the Arcades Project, Cohen claims that Benjamin 'set out to capture the psychological, sensual, irrational, and often seemingly trivial aspects of life during the expansion of industrial capitalism,' in order to emphasize what 'such monolithic Marxist categories of base and superstructure tend to obscure.'³⁵ Benjamin, of course, contested this mechanical interpretation, which might not have been stated as such by Marx himself. As we will see, this distinction is critical to understanding phantasmagoria in relation to Benjamin's notion of 'experience.'

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Benjamin was the first to use the term 'phantasmagoria' as a critical category to portray the scene of urban modernity in his 1939 exposé, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century.' In reference to Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, Benjamin coined the phrase 'phantasmagoria of civilization.' In his words, 'as for the phantasmagoria of civilization itself, it found its champion in Haussmann and its manifest expression in his transformation of Paris.'³⁶ The term was subsequently revived in the critical literature on the city and on Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*. Notable among this literature are two important contributions: Graeme Gilloch's *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*,³⁷ and a more recent essay, *The Manhattan Project, A Theory of A City*, by David Kishik, who, blending history and fiction, imagines what Benjamin would have written about New York city as 'the capital of the twentieth century.'³⁸ Aside from these two works, most writers and critics on the modern city have used the term 'phantasmagoria,' if at all, sporadically. For example, T.J. Clark in *The Painting of Modern Life*, first published in 1984,³⁹ devotes an interesting chapter to the Haussmannization of Paris in which he links 'fantasy' and 'wish fulfillment' to the 'wish to visualize' Paris. Clark evokes the term 'phantasmagoria' only once when he writes: 'Paris was *parade*, phantasmagoria, dream, dumbshow mirage, masquerade. Traditional ironies at the expense of metropolis mingled with new metaphors of specifically visual untruth.'⁴⁰ The phrase is instructive and can serve as a *generic* description of the visual regime of urban modernity in the era of high capitalism. It is significant that in our time, unlike Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century, there has yet to appear a 'painter of modernity' like Eduard Manet who with his followers depicted the scenes of everyday life in the city.

Clark's work is significant as being among the first and very few texts to have brought up the notion of 'spectacle.' He remarks, 'The concept of spectacle is thus an attempt – a partial and unfinished one – to bring into theoretical order a diverse set of symptoms which are normally treated, by bourgeois sociology or conventional Leftism, as anecdotal trappings, affixed somewhat lightly to the old economic order: "consumerism," for instance, or "the society of leisure"; the rise of mass media, the expansion of advertising, the hypertrophy of official diversions.'⁴¹ He points out that the concept

of spectacle developed by Debord was in fact an attempt to ‘revise the theory of capitalism from a largely Marxist point of view,’ and he goes on to mention the much celebrated statement by Debord, who in his *Society of the Spectacle* wrote, ‘The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to such a degree that it becomes an image.’⁴² Clark nevertheless expresses his concern as to when one can exactly say the spectacular society begins.⁴³ In later chapters we will come back to this.



In the 1939 exposé, Benjamin noted that ‘the pomp and the splendor with which commodity-producing society surrounds itself, as well as its illusory sense of security are not immune to danger; the collapse of the Second Empire and the Commune of Paris remind it of that.’⁴⁴ Bearing in mind the new rage of Haussmannization in the global cities in the New Empire today, our point of departure is the same as the one expressed by Gilloch in his work cited above, where in discussing ‘the pathos’ of Benjamin’s Arcades Project, he finds ‘every city beautiful, from outside its borders’⁴⁵ yet filled by an ambivalence as to whether to call it Heaven or Hell. Under the Empire of the Neoliberal State, one might be reluctant to find ‘every city beautiful,’ and not only ‘from outside of its borders,’ but also from the *inside*. One might be inclined to find it more like Hell than Heaven, inviting more revulsion than exhilaration. As Gilloch notes:

What is remarkable about this [Benjamin’s] candid statement is its location in a vast study dedicated to the critical revaluation of the modern metropolis as the phantasmagoric site of mythic domination, to the representation of the city as the essential locus of modern capitalism and its attendant evils of exploitation, injustice, alienation and the diminution of human experience. [. . .] For Benjamin, the great cities of modern European culture were both beautiful and bestial, a source of exhilaration and hope on the one hand and revulsion and despair on the other.⁴⁶

We ask: are we to find the contemporary city a ‘hyper-real Hell,’ as Jean Baudrillard sees Los Angeles, for example, in his *America*? Gilloch alerts us to Benjamin’s conditional understanding of ‘beauty,’ which, as we shall see, is central to any portrayal of the contemporary city in aesthetic terms, as is – following Adorno – the rehabilitation of the category of the *aesthetic* linked to the *political*.

Toward the end of his study, Gilloch makes a programmatic statement which is instructive for our own approach when we come to criticism of the contemporary city. He remarks: ‘The city is a monad, a fragment within which the totality of modern life may be discerned. While the phantasmagoria of modernity finds its utmost palpable expression in the architecture of the city, the individual and collective experiences of the metropolis are also imbued with mythic forms. The experience of the urban environment, which

for Benjamin constitutes the definitive modern experience, is characterized by particular mythic consciousness and activity.⁴⁷

Winfried Menninghaus, who has written a most perceptive piece on Benjamin's conception of myth, makes an astute observation about architecture, and its 'palpable expression' as Gilloch terms it, when he remarks on the 'correspondences between technical world and the archaic symbol world' in Benjamin. Menninghaus writes that the 'more precise formulation [of such correspondences] resulted from the obviously predominant role architecture plays for the "sensual-supersensual" image of social life.'⁴⁸ He goes on to cite Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*: 'Architecture is the most important witness of latent mythology. And the most significant architecture of the nineteenth century is the arcades.'⁴⁹ Menninghaus notes Benjamin's interest in buildings that are the 'prime *content* of modern mythology,' and writes that he reactivated one element of myth as *form*: 'the construction of a significant arrangement of space.'⁵⁰ He points out that the arcades for Benjamin are the 'science of thresholds,' the '*Passagen* myth' that for the French 'were the rites of crossing over the thresholds, "rites de passage."⁵¹ Menninghaus further comments, 'The arcade is a threshold, which – as a transitional *zone* between the street and the individual shops – displays a "phantasmagoria" of goods, not via theoretical ideology but in their "immediate presence."⁵²

In this book, we examine architecture in the hyper-mediated city as the 'most palpable expression' of its phantasmagoria, a phantasmagoria that is valorized by a digital capitalism bent on extracting an extra surplus-value through the institutions of high culture. As we will discuss, the category of 'culture industry' has not lost its analytical power to explain the cultural imperatives that have brought architecture to the forefront of aesthetics ideology in contemporary culture.



We said above that there is a historical hidden link between phantasmagoria and urban modernity. Any analysis of this connection requires certain clarifications on historical method and on the theory of memory and temporality we adopt in the face of fashionable claims of the 'end of history.' This also prompts us to discuss the nature of contemporary society in which we are confronted with a different urban polity requiring a new set of categories for its analysis. The myth that the liberal-democratic-high-tech capitalist society presents as a 'paradise,' as Žižek notes, does not come without its 'trouble.'⁵³ Is the contemporary hyper-mediated city the product of historical progress; is it the final stage of history? We are back to the question of Benjamin's philosophy of history and to what he aptly called, in thesis XVI of his *On Concepts of History*, 'historicism's bordello' – that is to say, to the problematic of historical amnesia and its dialectical opposite, the excess of memory that Paolo Virno in his compelling study, *Dèjà Vu and the End of History*, has called the 'hypertrophy of memory.'⁵⁴ Virno's aim is to construct a theory of historical temporality starting from the same thesis with which

Benjamin stated, 'The historical materialist cannot do without the concept of a present.' Virno takes up the work of Henri Bergson (whose *Memory and Matter* Benjamin had particularly admired) as his point of departure. He writes, 'The typical symptom of *déjà vu* – namely, the re-evocation of what is happening right now – is also the condition of possibility of memory in general.'⁵⁵ He claims that memory is only the memory of the present and makes a distinction between 'memory' and 'perception.' According to Virno, 'the memory of the present is juxtaposed to the perception of the present. It is precisely in their simultaneous, co-extensive reference to the same object that memory and perception demonstrate their heterogeneity.'⁵⁶ Virno engages Bergson's complex notions of 'actual' and 'virtual' to highlight the problem of 'false recognition' in relation to 'historicity of experience' and of 'anachronism' as the agent of *dehistoricization*. It is the latter, according to Virno, that 'induces the state of mind based on which people are led to conclude that history is now exhausted, that "there is never anything new . . . each moment is a repetition of the past."⁵⁷ Thus: 'History stops because memory becomes hypertrophic; the hypertrophy of memory, which prevents history from acting, consists of *déjà vu*.'⁵⁸ Virno finds confirmation of his thesis in Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation*, where he wrote about the excess of memory, and where he famously complained about the consuming historical obsession of an *antiquarian* view of the past that, in its archival and monumental history, 'has forgotten to forget.' Nietzsche's attack against the suffocating historicism of his time returns, today, in the postmodern ideology of anti-history. It prompts Virno to ask: 'how has the *déjà vu* attained the rank of a collective phenomenon, such that the customs and mentality of the so-called "post-modern" epoch bear its imprint?'⁵⁹

For Virno, 'faced with the hyper-historicity of experience, postmodern ideology hurries to play the broken record of the *déjà vu*, simultaneously both the sweet and gloomy. Everything has already been; history has fallen "into the order of the recyclable."⁶⁰ Quoting Baudrillard from his *The illusion of the End*, he asks by what mechanism we are 'destined, for better or for worse,' to "the massive recall, at every moment, of all the mannerisms or quotations."⁶⁰

For Virno, 'learning to experience the memory of the present means to attain the possibility of a *fully historical existence*.' He goes on to compare the Antiquarian conception of history with what he calls 'the Modernariat' today, and he makes interesting remarks on the notion of the spectacle:

The antiquarian history of the present, or modernariat, is wholly at one with the *Society of the Spectacle*. In turn we could say that the society of the spectacle is the modernariat raised to the *n*th degree. This "blind mania to collect" of our time understands the present day as a sort of "world's fair." An Exhibition, that is, where the same individual attends both as an actor ("playing a role – for most people, many roles, thus playing them all superficially and badly) and as a spectator "wandering

in search of pleasure.” That is, they are their own spectators; or rather, though it is the same thing, they *collect their own life* while in passing, rather than living it.⁶¹

He poses this question: ‘Why is the present incessantly duplicated as the spectacle of the present? Why does it take on the aspect of a “world fair”?’ ‘The present is duplicated’ – he says – ‘because of the *déjà vu*.’ ‘The spectacle is the form that *déjà vu* takes, as soon as this becomes an exterior, public form beyond one’s own person. The society of spectacle offers people the “world fair” of their own capacity to do, to speak and to be – but reduced to already-performed actions, already-spoken phrases and already-complete events.’⁶²

The fatal amnesia caused by digital technology, coupled with its contrary, the ‘archival fever’ – the storage and retrieval of infinite digital data – are both constitutive features of the architecture of the hyper-mediated city that violate the fundamental principles of historical ‘experience.’ It is the conformism of a historicist critic that takes the ‘new architecture’ as a new phase – or even style – that makes a final pact with the ‘progress’ of technology. Against such a pseudo-objective approach of the conformist, the historical materialist, as Löwy puts it, ‘recovers the hidden explosive energies that are to be found in a precise moment of history. The energies, which are those of the *Jetztzeit*, are like the sparks produced by a short circuit, enabling the continuum of history to be “blasted apart.”’⁶³

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Benjamin was the first to attribute an *aesthetic* dimension to phantasmagoria, consistent with his understanding of experience. In our own time, Jacques Rancière has identified phantasmagoria as a component part of what he terms ‘the Aesthetic Unconscious,’ which he traces back, beyond Freud’s discovery of the unconscious in *Interpretation of Dreams*, to the eighteenth-century revolution begun by Kant and Schiller, which he terms the ‘aesthetic regime of art.’ Reflecting on the element of unconscious rationality in the mythology of modernity and the physiological signs encrypted on the visible appearance of things, Rancière is able to argue that it is the same hermeneutic inquiry of the unconscious that Freud performs in his *Interpretation of Dreams*. Rancière writes:

But he [Freud] also poses the paradoxical condition of this hermeneutics: in order for the banal to reveal its secret, it must first be mythologized. The house and sewer speak, they bear the trace of truth – as will the dream or the parapraxis, and the Marxian commodity – *insofar as they are first transformed into elements of a mythology or phantasmagoria*.⁶⁴

Rancière’s insight can be taken methodologically. In the culture of ‘*commodity aesthetics*,’ the most banal things, in fact everything, must first be mythologized in order to pass through critical reason and the unconscious

of aesthetics. Of course, the first to pose the question of a mythological rationality was Marx when he wrote about the *secret* behind the commodity. It follows almost axiomatically that in the epoch of modernity, everything bears the stamp of phantasmagorias.

We approach the 'aesthetics' of phantasmagoria in the precise meaning that Benjamin intended when he traced it to the original Greek sense of the word *aisthesis*. Rancière has elaborated on the latter, in what may be regarded as the most significant contribution to aesthetics since Adorno.⁶⁵

For Adorno, phantasmagoria is linked to the 'total work of art' and to the blurring of boundaries between disparate spheres and disciplines – a point we take up in a later chapter. We can variously speak of the 'phantasmagoria of commodity,' 'political phantasmagoria,' 'cultural phantasmagoria,' 'technological phantasmagoria,' 'phantasmagoric city,' and specifically, in our case, of 'architectural phantasmagoria.' In the twentieth century, as noted, it was Benjamin who investigated the nexus between modernity and phantasmagoria – taking a certain distance from Enlightenment rationality – in what he himself called the 'pre-history' of modernity, in Baudelaire's poetry, the city, and its architecture. Insofar as the conception of phantasmagoria as 'unconscious reason' underpins Rancière's 'aesthetic unconscious,' we owe its originality to Benjamin.

When we say that phantasmagoria must be interpreted as another name for 'unconscious reason,' we must first be clear on what exactly we mean by 'unconscious.' The unconscious for us is *not* the 'irrational hallucinatory of the psychic 'inner life,' 'the confused and incoherent flow of ideas, passion, affects – in short, the psychological unconscious of the absolute immanence of psychic life that is, as such, de facto indistinguishable from the stream of consciousness itself.'⁶⁶ Rather, like Lacan, returning to Freud and his meta-psychology, we locate the unconscious in the 'symbolic structure' that comes from the outside: in other words, 'the unconscious is structured like language.' Against the standard view that considers the unconscious as belonging to the 'domain of irrational drives, something opposed to the rational conscious life' that Lacan considered to belong to romantic *lebensphilosophie*, the Freudian unconscious 'obeys its own grammar and logic – the unconscious talks and thinks.'⁶⁷ As Žižek has noted, 'the unconscious is not a reservoir of wild drives that has to be conquered by the ego, but the site from which a traumatic truth speaks.'⁶⁸ And, therefore, 'unconscious Reason is . . . not the coherent structures of conscious thought processes, but a complex network of particular links organized along the lines of condensation, displacement, etc., full of pragmatics and opportunistic compromises – something is rejected, but not quite, since it returns in an encrypted mode, it is rationally accepted, but isolated or neutralized in its full symbolic weight.'⁶⁹ It is in this sense that we must understand the configuration of the phantasmagoric unconscious reason as mythological illusion in all its registers – economic, technological, political, cultural, and aesthetic. Phantasmagoria, to put it in Hegelian terms, is its own 'negative determination,' an auto-critique of its own being.

In this study, we endeavor to advance a critique of phantasmagoria grounded in the dialectics of Disenchantment in the tradition of the Enlightenment. This tradition and its legacy have come into a crisis in our time. Contemporary postmodern 'cynical reason' has emptied modernity of its *historicity* by imposing a linear anti-historical narrative of the Enlightenment. As such, it has obfuscated the dialectic of Reason in favor of a mythological and *reactive*, if not reactionary, *enchantment* of the world. Contemporary postmodern culture is the culture of *total* phantasmagoria. But the disenchantment of the world, as Ray Brassier reminds us, is not to be mourned. Rather, it is 'to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectually maturity, not bewailed as a debilitating impoverishment.'⁷⁰

Thus, to reiterate, against the postmodern negation of historical experience, we take Marx's thesis in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* as our point of departure. Marx wrote:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in bringing about what never was before, at such very epochs of revolutionary crisis do they anxiously conjure up into their service the spirits of the past, their names, their battle cries, their costumes to enact a new historic scene in such time-honored disguise and with such borrowed language.⁷¹

Our time is a time of *restoration* when, like in the Second Empire's Haussmannization of Paris, *spectral apparitions* from the past two hundred years haunt the contemporary city. In this book, we subject historical specters to demystification and unmask the ideological fantasies underlying them.

Notes

- 1 For more see Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1995). We will expand on this notion in pages that follow.
- 2 Ibid., 23. Žižek points out that for Marx, the 'irrational' element was of course the 'proletariat': '“The unreason of reason itself” (Marx), the point at which the Reason embodied in the existing social order encounters its own unreason,' *ibid.*
- 3 See Georg Simmel, 'Metropolis and the Mental Life,' in *Simmel on Culture*, eds., David Frisby and M. Featherstone (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 174–186. Also see Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, ed., David Frisby, trans., Tom Bottomore and David Frisby, second enlarged edition (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 4 Cristina Britzolakis, 'Phantasmagoria: Walter Benjamin and the Poetics of Urban Modernism,' in *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, eds., Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (Leuven: MacMillan Press, 1999), 73.
- 5 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Science of Logic*, trans., A.V. Miller (Amherst: Humanities Books, 1969), 107 (*italics in original*).

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- 6 For more on this see Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's Logic* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006), 301.
- 7 Ibid. Houlgate further explains that '*Aufhebung*, for Hegel, is precisely this process whereby being and nothing lose their purity and thereby *change* into more complex determinations. [. . .] Hegelian *Aufhebung* is both the process of mutation *and* the process of becoming a moment undergone by being and nothing,' *ibid.*, 301–302 (italics in original). Still further: 'The first thing to be said about *Aufhebung*, then, is that it is a process of negation *and* preservation at one and the same time. The second thing to be noted is that it is nothing beyond the process *self*-impurification that is initiated and undergone by the categories and form of being concerned. [. . .] *Aufhebung*, for Hegel, is simply the process whereby purity slips away into, and is lost in, impurity – impurity that consists in not just being what one is but being inextricably bound to another. It is the process whereby initially independent, self-sufficient immediacies constitute a unity that was never there before by collapsing into inseparability' *ibid.*, 302–303 (italics in original).
- 8 See Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, vol. 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014). Stiegler correctly discards the terms 'post-modernity' and 'post-industrial society', at the same time that he acknowledges the contribution of François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* to the debate on modernity. By *modernity*, Stiegler means '*industrial society*': 'Which is why, if ever it were necessary to speak of *hyper-modernity* (which would, however, require a minute and scrupulous critique of the concept of post-modernity, where everything need not be discarded), this could be in the same sense as we speak of that which characterizes *hyper-industrial society* – the very opposite of what we have thought it possible to refer to as a "post-industrial" society, which has never been anything but a chimera,' *ibid.*, 46. He goes on then to define the hyper-industrial age '*as an extension of calculation beyond the sphere of production along with a correlative extension of industrial domains*,' *ibid.*, 47 (italics in original). He characterizes the hyper-industrial age as the time of the total loss of *individuation* in that condition he has theorized as general *grammatization*.
- 9 See Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control,' in *October* 59 (Winter 1992a), 3–7.
- 10 See Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation,' in *Max Weber's 'Science as a Vocation'*, ed., Peter Lassmann and Irving Velody, trans., Michael John (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 16.
- 11 For a useful introduction to Critical Theory see David Rasmussen's 'Critical Theory and Philosophy,' in *The Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed. David M. Rasmussen (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 11–38. For various critiques of Adorno and Horkheimer see the collection titled *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, eds., Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).
- 12 Rasmussen, *op cit.*, 22.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid. Rasmussen adds that instrumental reason would represent the ever-expanding ability of those who were in positions of power in the modern world to dominate and to control society for their own calculating purpose. So conceived, the kind of analysis which began with great optimism inaugurated by the German enlightenment (which sustained the belief that reason could come to comprehend the developing principal of history and therefore society) would end with the pessimistic realization that reason functions for social control, not in the name of enlightenment or emancipation,' *ibid.*, 22–23.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 See Britzolkais, *op.cit.*

- 18 See Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), XI.
- 19 See especially the collection cited above, *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, *ibid.*
- 20 See Giorgio Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation,' in *Profanations*, trans., Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 73.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 22 It is noteworthy to mention that this notion of 'sacrifice' is entirely different from its concept use by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For a complex analysis of the notion of 'sacrifice' in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see Brassier, *op. cit.*
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 81.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 33 See Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
- 34 Quoted in *ibid.*, 3 (*italics in original*). Also see, Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism,' in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986).
- 35 Cohen, *op. cit.*, 4.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 14–15.
- 37 See Graeme Gilloch, *Myth & Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (London: Polity, 1997).
- 38 See David Kishik, *The Manhattan Project: A Theory of a City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).
- 39 T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and Its Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- 40 *Ibid.*, 66 (*italics in original*). Clark does not get into the specific visual technologies related to phantasmagoria that propagate the 'visual untruth' of the city in the nineteenth century.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 42 Quoted in *ibid.* (*italics in original*).
- 43 Clark tries to provide an answer by remarking that one obviously is not describing a 'neat temporality' but rather a 'shift – to some extent an oscillation – from one kind of capitalist production to another.' Further he says, 'But certainly the Paris that Meyer Schapiro was celebrating, in which commercialized forms of life and leisure were so insistently replacing those "privately improvised," does seem to fit the preceding description quite well,' *ibid.* For Clark, the shift reflected an 'all-embracing economic change': 'a move to the *grands boulevards* and '*grands magasins* and their accompanying industries of tourism, recreation, fashion, and display – industries which helped alter the relations of production in Paris as a whole,' *ibid.*, 10–11.
- 44 Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1939,' in *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 15.
- 45 Benjamin made this statement in a wider context in 'Convolute N1, 6,' in *The Arcades Project* where he said: 'The pathos of this work: there are no periods of decline. Attempt to see the nineteenth century just as positively as I tried to

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see the seventeenth century, in the work of *Trauerspiel*. No belief in periods of decline. By the same token, every city is beautiful to me (from outside its borders), just as all talk of particular languages' having greater or lesser value is to me unacceptable,' *ibid.*, 458.

46 Gilloch, *op. cit.*, 1.

47 *Ibid.*, 171.

48 See Winfried Menninghaus, 'Walter Benjamin's Theory of Myth,' in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed., Gary Smith (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 304.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.* Menninghaus further comments that according to Cassirer, 'the mythical space is "as closely related to the perceptual space as, on the other side of geometry." Objects inform their location in space with a meaningful "accent," and conversely, the spatial arrangement influences the apprehension of the things it contains. In his *Elective Affinity* essay, Benjamin had already reconstructed such mythical topography, not only of nature, but also of building and the cultural "landscape." This becomes programmatic in his *Passengen-Werk*: "Kinship of myth and topography. Aragon and Pausanias,"' Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, *op.cit.*

51 Menninghaus, *op. cit.*, 308.

52 *Ibid.*

53 Slavoj Žižek in his recent book entitled *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* explains, 'The "paradise" in the title of this book refers to the paradise of the End of History (as elaborated by Francis Fukuyama: liberal-democratic capitalism as the finally found best possible social order), and the "trouble" is, of course, the ongoing crisis that compelled even Fukuyama himself to drop his idea of the End of History. Our premise is that what Alain Badiou calls the "communist hypothesis" is the only appropriate frame with which to diagnose this crisis,' 7.

54 See Paolo Virno, *Dèjà Vu and the End of History* (London and New York: Verso, 2015).

55 *Ibid.*, 12.

56 *Ibid.*, 13.

57 *Ibid.*, 31.

58 *Ibid.*, 46.

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*, 50.

61 *Ibid.*, 54–55 (*italics in original*).

62 *Ibid.*, 55.

63 *Ibid.*

64 See Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 37 (*emphasis added*).

65 See Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

66 See Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), 162.

67 *Ibid.*, 163.

68 *Ibid.*

69 *Ibid.*

70 Brassier, *op. cit.*, xi.

71 In Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed., Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 188.

2 Specters and fetishism

In *Capital*, Marx sought to conjure up and then ‘lay to rest’ the fetish character of the commodity. As he put it in Volume III, he saw his task as dispelling ‘an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things.’¹ The same couple, we might say, is comfortably strolling the enchanted capitalist world of the city today.

In the theory of commodity as Marx defined it, there is a nexus between ‘fetishism’ and ‘specter.’ Commodity as fetish is ghostly. In the famous fourth section of Chapter 1, in *Capital*, Marx discusses the mysterious character of the commodity-form, in which social relations between producers appear as social relations between things. A *substitution* is taking place here. For Marx, ‘[t]hrough this substitution, the products of labor become commodities, *sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social*.’² The latter phrase has been understood alternatively to mean ‘sensuous super-sensuous’ or ‘perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.’³ We return to this later. In the same section, Marx used the word ‘phantasmagoria’ (*‘die phantasmagorische Form’* in the original German that in English has been rendered as ‘fantastic form’) to bring out the ‘mysteries’ of commodity fetishism as analogous, for him, to ‘the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world.’ Marx here used a visual metaphor:

In the same way, the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye. In the act of seeing, of course, light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relation between physical things. As against this, commodity-form, and value-relation of the products of labor within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but a definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form [phantasmagoria] of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take a flight into the misty realm of religion.⁴

We return to this visual metaphor later. Here we simply point out that this same interrelation between the fetish and the specter is central to the mediated city as we defined it – that is, as structured like a phantasmagoria. Consequently, the *social being* of the mediated city manifests itself in ways that are the same as those of the commodity fetish – that is, as ‘sensuous supersensuous things,’ or in a visibility that remains invisible.

A great deal of the contemporary literature on the city and media, in our opinion, fails to bring out this logic of the fetish as ‘the sensuous of the supersensuous’ or as the ‘imperceptible of the perceptible’ thing.⁵ It either takes the city as ‘the thing itself,’ meaning the materiality of its economic base, or infrastructure, to the exclusion of its *substitute* phantasmagoria, behind which the thing itself is hidden, or it focuses exclusively on the ‘substitute,’ or ‘superstructure,’ without reference to the thing itself that it veils. In either case, what is missing is precisely the dialectic in the general structure of fetishism that, as Berns explains, ‘determines the relation between the thing itself and its substitute in such a way that this substitute, behind which the thing itself lies hidden, ultimately disappears in favor of the thing itself. Both terms of the relation can be distinguished in a decidable manner, for the substitute refers to a thing that, in its turn, cannot be a substitute, and thus *as such* must be able to exist and enter into presence.’⁶

The value of Benjamin’s city texts is that he did not confuse the dialectics underlying the relation between *the thing itself* and its *substitute*. This is clear when Benjamin, in the beginning of the 1939 exposé, spelled out the *method* of his investigation for the Arcades Project: ‘Our investigation proposes to show how, as a consequences of this reifying representation of civilization [i.e., *fetishistic*] the new forms of behavior and new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria. These creations undergo this “illumination” not only in a theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition, but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence. They are manifest as phantasmagorias.’⁷ By ‘economic and technological’ elements Benjamin would have understood *the thing itself* – that is, the bourgeois mode of production and its social relations at the time of the Second Empire. At the same time, he would have unveiled its *mythic substitute* in the technology of iron construction, the brute materiality of the arcades architecture, and its fantastic iconography.

In this chapter, we briefly retrace the concepts of fetish and specter in a technological, economic, and ideological register. For the fetish, we go back to its religious origin and to Marx’s analysis of the commodity form and its variant in Freud’s psychoanalytical theory as later reformulated by Lacan. For the specter, we retrace its technological beginnings and its meaning in Marx. Finally, we consider Žižek’s theorization of fetishism as ‘ideological fantasy.’ Our aim is to demonstrate that both terms, fetish and specter, are the irreducibly ‘irrational’ elements of phantasmagoria in the configuration of the mediated city. They are the elements of ‘unreason’ in the reason of

the city. We begin first by recalling the technological-illusionistic origins of phantasmagoria.

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It is the decade of the 1790s in Paris. Addressing an anxious and curious audience that had gathered in the abandoned Gothic convent in the *Cour des Capucines* for a séance of his magic lantern show, Etienne-Gaspard Robertson announced: 'Citizens and gentlemen. . . . It is . . . a useful spectacle for a man to discover the bizarre effects of the imagination when it combines force and disorder; I wish to speak of the terror which shadows, symbols, spells, the occult works of magic inspire.'⁸ The Gothic moving-picture show the audience was about to witness was called a '*Phantasmagorie*,' a word which, as Maria Warner notes, derived from the Greek root of *Phantasmagoria*, literally an 'assembly of phantasms.'⁹ Dispensing with the conventional theater stage, Robertson used a projector, or Fantascoper. His technological device used 'lighting sources and effects in the projector itself by placing it behind a large flat screen like a theatrical scrim.'¹⁰ The projector derived from the *camera obscura* and is the forerunner of the devices which came later in the form of slide projector and the cinema. Robertson's Gothic horror spectacular, in the words of Warner, 'turned any spectator from a cool observer into a willing, excitable victim.' Further, '[w]hereas the dioramas and panoramas concentrated on battles, modern cityscapes, or exotic scenery, customs, and people – they are forerunners of the wide-screen epic film – the phantasmagoria shadows forth great silent movies like F.W. Murnau's vampire movie *Nosferatu* (1922), and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920).'¹¹

As Martin Quigley notes, in his classic *Magic Shadow*, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, magic lantern shows had become a popular form of entertainment in Paris and London.¹² Quigley surmises that in the late 1790s the popularity of such shows, in which illusion is 'associated with making phantasm appear before an audience,' was also a psychological reflection to the 'horrors' of the French Revolution, when people had seen death, were obsessed with ghosts, and sought relief in spectacles that created an illusion of motion through the moving of a projector.¹³

Warner points out that Robertson reached for sources in 'pagan and heterodox mythologies of metamorphosis and metempsychosis, as well as contemporary sublime Gothic motifs.'¹⁴ Phantasmagoria, she argues, occupies a transitional zone 'between the sublime and the Gothic, between the solemn and the comic, between seriously intended fears and sly mockery of such beliefs.'¹⁵ Following Robertson, other 'lanternists' used new technical devices to attract a pleasure-seeking public at a time of increasing appetite for amusement and enchantment. This was the era of 'expanding urban pleasure, when waxworks were also transferred from religious to the secular realm, and dioramas opened in Paris, the panorama was invented in Edinburgh.'¹⁶ Even before the magic lantern, the *camera obscura* had been

used to produce illusionistic images that were transformed into spectacles. Most notable, perhaps, is what we might call the first case of a *mediatized city*, when in mid-nineteenth-century Edinburgh, Maria Short erected a celebrated *camera obscura* on Castle Hill, capturing ‘moving scenes of the streets below, projected by light rays on a convex dish, and miniaturized. There the buildings materialize in every detail; tiny figures scurry, tiny buses grind silently over the cobbles.’¹⁷ In Warner’s words, Robertson and his peers ‘were exploring shadow play to delight the audiences with thrills and terrors. But the feelings that shadow play could prompt were also melancholy and reflective, and it happened that, at the same time as showmen were expanding their ingenuity in devising new illusions, artists were turning to shadow as a prime vehicle of ideas for absence, loss, and memory.’¹⁸

We cited above Marx’s passage in which he used a visual metaphor to drive home his points about the ‘fantastic’ in commodity fetishism. In a similar way, in *The German Ideology* we find him using the *camera obscura* – invented before the magic lantern – as a metaphor for his theory of ideology as *inversion*.¹⁹ This comes in the section on Feuerbach and the ‘Opposition between Materialist and Idealist Outlooks,’ where Marx states that ideas, conceptions, and consciousness are ‘directly interwoven’ with the material conditions of men and their actual life-processes. The same applies to mental productions expressed variously in legal, political, religious, and metaphysical forms. According to Marx, ‘if in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical-life process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.’²⁰

In her *Camera Obscura of Ideology*, Sarah Kofman argues convincingly that the *camera obscura* analogy is used here to stress the two components of this device. ‘In ideology,’ she remarks, ‘ideas are put under lock and key in a room, cut off from the real material base which alone can confer upon them light and truth. The dark chamber “is a place where light can only enter through a hole an inch in diameter to which one applies a glass which, letting the rays from external objects pass onto the opposite wall, or onto a curtain held there, allows what is outside to be seen inside.”’²¹ Moreover, for Kofman, the *camera obscura* presents a model of vision that does away with the Euclidian conception ‘according to which it is from the eye that emanates the luminous ray, and that the model of the camera obscura ‘implies the existing of a “given” which would offer itself as already inverted.’²² For Kofman, ‘Marx draws attention to the privileged status of religious ideology as exemplary, even constitutive, of ideology as such. He notes, as well, that the ideological inversion is a hierarchical inversion which substitutes, for a real foundation, an imaginary one. The inversion of the inversion involves departing from “real premises,” founded on real bases, the empirically observable “material bases,” and deriving, from these, those phantasmagorias which are ideological formations.’²³

In Kofman's analysis, Marx even dreams of passing from *camera obscura* to *camera lucida*. For him, science is not speculative, but, rather, it is only through a practical transformation, after a long and painful development, that we can achieve a rational transparent view of things. This means, as Kofman puts it, that '[s]cientific or theoretical progress cannot dissipate ideological phantasmagoria. [. . .] Clear meaning thus does not pre-exist ideological obscurity, and there is no "truth" without labour of transformation. Clarity comes only in the moment of the after-effect [*après-coup*] and is attained, not through the resolution of theoretical contradictions, but through a practical revolution. The camera obscura is never set right by a camera lucida.'²⁴



'What does the fantastical word *phantasmagoria* really mean?' asks Terry Castle, reflecting on the spectral technology of this device.²⁵ Various etymologies have been proposed for it. The term derives from the Greek *phantasma* (phantom, ghost) and *agoreuein* (to speak in public), which is based on the word 'allegory.' However, according to *Le Robert* French dictionary, phantasmagoria is composed of *phantasma* and *gourere* (to deceive, to fool).²⁶ The latter etymology is probably closer to Robertson's intended meaning when he invented the term. Yet Robertson himself would have drawn heavily from Athanasius Kirchner, the famous seventeenth-century German Jesuit polymath who invented the magic lantern as a 'catotrophic lamp' to project images on the wall of a darkened room. From this device, as Castle writes, 'all our modern instruments for slide and cinematic projection derive,' including, as we mentioned, the *camera obscura*.²⁷

The first etymology is closer to Benjamin's notion of *allegory* and of 'profane illumination.' We know that Benjamin associated the Arcades Project to his earlier work, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, in which he developed the 'metaconcept' of '*allegory* as the origin of modernity in the historical Baroque.'²⁸ 'Allegory' relates to 'speaking other,' *allos*, within the *agora*, the public square. In the final section of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, well before the exposé of 1935, Benjamin relates phantasmagoria to allegory when he describes the latter as a vision of ruin and destruction, in which:

everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret, privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of dead objects, the supposed infinity of the world without hope [. . .] vanishes with this *one* about-turn, in which the immersion of allegory has to clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own device, rediscover itself, not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven.²⁹

Cohen points to the link in Benjamin between the 'fallen' allegory and phantasmagoria and remarks: 'Allegory's etymology implies the possibility of

redemption and as such contrasts with the etymology of the phantasmagoria, which substitutes ghosts for the *allos* that signifies allegory's transcendence. Appearing as allegory's demonic *Doppelgänger*, the phantasmagoria remains firmly rooted in the haunted realm of commercial exchange. Its etymology thus well expresses Benjamin's conclusion about the commodity origin of the 19th-century Parisian hell and about the inescapability of this hell.³⁰ We recall that Benjamin in the 1939 exposé explicitly related the nineteenth-century phantasmagorical to the World Exhibitions's glorification of exchange value: 'They create a framework in which its use values becomes secondary. They are a school in which the masses, forcibly excluded from consumption, are imbued with the exchange value of commodities to the point of identifying with it: "Do not touch the items on display."³¹

In Convolute Q of *The Arcades Project* on 'Panorama,' Benjamin enumerates the technological apparatuses of the nineteenth century in relation to phantasmagoria: 'There were panoramas, dioramas, consomoramas, diaphanoramas, navaloramas, pleoramas (*pleo*, "I sail," "I go by water"), fanstacope(s), fantasma-parastases, phantasmagorical and fantasmaparastatic *expériences*, picturesque journeys in a room, georamas; optical pictureques, cinéoramas, phanoramas, stereoramas, cycloramas, *panorama dramatique*. "In our time so rich in pano-, cosmo-, neo-, myrio-, and dio-ramas."³² To this Benjamin added: 'It remains to be discovered what is meant when, in the diorama, the variations in lighting which the passing day brings to a landscape take place in fifteen or thirty minutes. Here is something like a sportive precursor of fast-motion cinematography.'³³ Benjamin further remarked:

There is an abundant literature whose stylistic character forms an exact counterpart to the diorama, panoramas, and so forth. I refer to the feuilletonist miscellanies and series of sketches from midcentury. [. . .] In a certain sense, they are moral dioramas – not only related to the others in their unscrupulous multiplicity, but technically constructed just like them. To the plastically worked, more or less detailed foreground of the diorama corresponds the sharply profiled feuilletonistic venturing of the social study, which latter supplies an extended background analogous to the landscape in the diorama.³⁴

As Castle notes, we must keep in mind two interrelated aspects in the concept of *phantasmagoria*, the technological on the one hand, and the epistemological on the other. Both aspects have spectral effects, and both are related to post-Enlightenment rationality. As Castle makes clear, at the technological level, from the late eighteenth-century's ghost-shows and illusionistic public entertainments, to the early nineteenth-century magic lantern parades of ghosts on screens, up to the visual technological devices mentioned by Benjamin, the goal was always to produce specters and optical illusions. Castle remarks, however, that 'from an initial connection with something external and public (an artificially produced "spectral" illusion),

the word [phantasmagoria] has now come to refer to something wholly internal or subjective: the phantasmic imagery of the mind.³⁵ Castle calls this imagery of mind a 'spectralization or "ghostifying" of mental space.'³⁶ By 'spectralization' she means simply the way thought absorbs ghosts. Moreover, 'we have also come increasingly to believe, as if through a kind of epistemological recoil, in the spectral nature of our own thoughts – to figure imaginative activity itself, paradoxically as a kind of ghost-seeing.'³⁷ In other words, we are haunted. But haunted by what? She emphasizes that such beliefs are not only 'rational,' but also they lay conceptual foundations for the rationalist point of view: 'The rationalist attitude, it might be argued, inevitably depends on this primal internalization of the spectral.'³⁸ Here we are led back to our opening discussion on Marx and Derrida on specters in relation to fetishism and the theory of ideology. Important as Castle's observations on the epistemology of phantasmagoria are, she does not engage the psychoanalytical theory of specters, which places the notion of *fantasy* not only in relation to the mind but also in relation to 'reality,' at the center of the concept of phantasmagoria. Only in this way can we understand Arthur Rimbaud when, in his *A Season in Hell*, he wrote: '*Je suis maître en fantasmagories*'.³⁹



'What is a specter?' Derrida asks in his *Specters of Marx*. '[A]s Marx himself spelled out and we will get to this, the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappears right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter.'⁴⁰

Halfway through the book, Derrida returns to the question of how to define the specter:

The specter, as its name indicates, is the *frequency* of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible. And visibility, by its essence is not seen, which is why it remains *epekeina tes ousia*, beyond the phenomenon or beyond being. The specter is also, among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects – on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see. Not even the screens sometimes, and a screen always has, at bottom, in the bottom or background that it is, a structure of disappearing apparition. [. . .] The specter *appears* to present itself during a visitation. One represents it to oneself, but it is not present, itself, in flesh and blood.⁴¹

For Derrida, this 'non-presence of specters' always demands that we take into consideration their time and historicity. He refers to Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* where they said: 'a specter is haunting Europe – the

specter of Communism. All the Powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter.' Marx, 'for his part,' says Derrida, 'announces and calls for a presence to come. He seems to predict and prescribe: What for the moment figures only as a specter in the ideological representation of old Europe must come, in the future, a present reality, that is a living reality.'⁴²

Derrida here intervenes in Marx's critique of Max Stirner in *The German Ideology*. Both are *chasing* specters, he says, but one in order to conjure it up, the other to exorcise it. According to Derrida, Marx is in effect saying to 'Saint Max': 'I know my way around specters better than you; the ghost is my affair [is looking at me: *ça me regarde*], if you want to save life and conjure away the living-dead, you must not go at it immediately, abstractly, egologically, fantasmatically, with the word, with the language act of a *phantasmagoreuien*; you must pass through the laborious ordeal of the detour, you must traverse and *work on* the *practical* structures, the solid mediations of real, "empirical" actuality, and so forth.'⁴³ It is only after these reflections on *The German Ideology* that Derrida comes to *Capital's* discussion of the problem of fetishism. He mentions that Marx, in his use of the term 'phantomatic' in *The German Ideology*, confirms the absolute priority of religion as ideology, as well as – consequently – of ideology as religion or theology, which is at the base of his general theory of ideology. As we know, Marx, when he came later to write *Capital*, never used the word 'ideology.' He replaced it with the word 'fetish,' behind which he discovered – as he had done with ideology – a religious secret. For Derrida, 'the mystical character of the fetish, in the mark it leaves on the experience of the religious, is first of all a ghostly character.'⁴⁴ Behind the commodity, as Marx said, lie 'meta-physical subtleties' and 'theological niceties.'

Derrida asks that we situate ourselves in the place where 'the values of *value* (between use-value and the exchange-value), *secrets*, *mystique*, *fetish*, and the *ideological* form a chain in Marx's text, singularly in *Capital*,⁴⁵ where the *spectral* movement of this chain is located. According to Derrida, Marx in the beginning of *Capital* wants to show that use-value has nothing to do with the mystical character of the commodity. But the commodity, the thing in question, Derrida reminds us, Marx says *is not so simple*. Only imbeciles would believe in what they see as it is seen, in everything that is seen. As Derrida puts it, 'the commodity is a "thing" without phenomenon, a thing in flight that surpasses the senses (it is invisible, intangible, inaudible, and odorless); but this transcendence is not altogether spiritual, it retains the bodiless body which we have recognized as making the difference between specter and spirit.'⁴⁶ Derrida pointedly reminds us that Marx does not say 'sensuous *and* non-sensuous, or sensuous *but* non-sensuous; he says: sensuous non-sensuous, sensuously supersensible. Transcendence, the movement of *super-*, the step beyond (*über*, *spekeina*), is made sensuous in that very excess. It renders the non-sensuous sensuous.'⁴⁷ Hence, 'the commodity haunts the thing, its specter is at work in use-value.'⁴⁸

The socialization of the commodity – of labor as *commodity*, abstract human labor, and its *socius*, which give rise to the ‘mystical character’ of the commodity, the relation between *things* – passes through spectralization. Specters are therefore *social*. The phantasmagoria that Marx describes, that opens up the question of fetishism and the religious, ‘is the very element of this social *and* spectral becoming.’⁴⁹ The premise of the discourse on fetishism, therefore, is constituted by phantasmagoria. Phantasmagoria comes into being with exchange-value and the commodity-form – as Marx noted, in the famous example of the wooden table. ‘The Commodity-form, to be sure, *is not* use-value. [. . .] But if the commodity-form is *not, presently*, use-value, and even if it is not *actually present*, it affects *in advance* the use-value of the wooden table. It affects and bereaves it in advance, like the ghost it will become, but this is precisely where haunting begins.’⁵⁰ From this premise, Derrida deduces his theory of ‘*hauntology*,’ as opposed to ontology. Indeed, ‘[o]ntology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.’⁵¹ Ontology is another name for exorcising the religion in fetishism. This is what Derrida names as ‘Marx’s spectrology,’ contending, controversially we might add, that the driving force of Marx’s thinking was an urge to dispel and chase away ghosts and specters, through a critique of *hauntology* from the viewpoint of ontology.⁵²

With a specific reference to Freud, Derrida in an earlier text, *Glas*, had already reflected on a general theory of fetish as *substitute* – as touched upon above.⁵³ In establishing the relation between fetish *and* specter, and the political implications of the ‘specters’ of Marx, from the problem of justice, to the non-identity of presence with itself, and hence the notion – in *Hamlet* – that ‘time is out of joint,’ Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* strikes us as an important contribution to an understanding of fetishism, notwithstanding the critiques advanced by theorists with a different reading of Marx.⁵⁴ For example, Žižek, within psychoanalytical theory, although sympathetic to certain of Derrida’s arguments, has sharply questioned his notion of *hauntology*. Žižek asks: ‘*where does the imminent, incessant, danger of the “ontologization” of the spectral promise-idea come from?*’ The only logical answer, he says, is ‘from the fact that there is also no specter without the ontological, without *le peu de réel* of some inert-opaque stain whose presence sustains the very specter in its opposition to the ontological. Or – to put it in Hegelese – *no spirit without a bone*.’⁵⁵ He nevertheless affirms that Derrida’s notion of specter ‘perfectly’ conforms to the psychoanalytical notion of *fantasy* ‘whose emergence, by definition, bears witness to an unsettled symbolic debt.’⁵⁶ This provides a matrix, in the section that follows, for an analysis of fetish in relation to ‘ideological fantasy,’ and hence to phantasmagoria.



The Benjaminian (techno-economic) analysis of phantasmagoria elaborated above, which locates it at the nexus between ‘fetishism’ and ‘specter,’

would be incomplete without the enormous contribution of psychoanalytical theory to both concepts as articulated by Žižek under the term *ideological fantasy*. As mentioned, Marx never used the word ‘ideology’ in his discussion of commodity fetishism. For him, religion is *par excellence* a form of ideology. But, as the structure of an ideological fantasy tied to the concept of fetishism, phantasmagoria must also be related to the psychic structure of the Subject. The key word here is the term ‘symptom’ that according to Lacan was invented by Marx before Freud. As we know, Louis Althusser also employed the term in his influential ‘Ideology and ideological State Apparatus.’ But it is Žižek who has since elaborated it more fully, through Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, to generate a fresh reading of Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism and ‘its secret.’ Before we consider Žižek’s argument, we should mention that Lacan’s algebraic neologism *objet petit a* provides the key concept in this analysis. Henry Krips, in his excellent *Fetish: An Erotic of Culture*, writes:

Lacan argues that a certain lack of ontological consistency is essential to an object’s role as *objet a*. Like the mother’s breast the object must be haunted by a specter, a phantasmagoric reminder of the originary lack from which the concept of *objet a* distracts the subject, and for which it functions as tangible monument: “an ungraspable organ. This organ that we can only circumvent, in short this false organ.” This Phantasmatic underside of the *object a* does not echo a missing object in the way that a photo echoes things past. Instead the phantasm is a reification created by the simultaneous concealment and resurgence, in short repression, of the subject’s originary lack.⁵⁷

Krips adds that in this respect, ‘the *objet a* bears a structural similarity to the “commodity”: it is not only a concrete object but also a ghostly value, a false essence carried by the concrete object and constituted through the process of exchange. In sum, from a tropological perspective the *object a* is not a metaphor, that is, a substitute for a specific object.’⁵⁸ It is a ‘catachresis’ that substitutes for a specific object retrospectively giving the false impression that there was something. The same logic is present in the libidinal economy of the subject as in the economics of a society. For money in capitalist society becomes the fetish, ‘the *Ersatz* that obscures its function as *Ersatz* and becomes *Ding-an-sich* [the thing itself], animated with a mysterious life of its own as interest-bearing money-capital.’⁵⁹ It is useful to remember, at this point, that in simple terms, fetish is an object or an idea that ‘for no apparent reason, receives an excessive amount of attention if not devotion.’⁶⁰ But in any case, as Gernerchak puts it succinctly, ‘at the heart of fetishism, both on the side of the fetish object and fetishistic subject, there is an internal contradiction between brute materiality and evanescent dissimulation, essence and appearance, which makes it flow.’⁶¹ Yet, in the core of the ambiguous object called ‘commodity,’ as Marx says in *Capital*, ‘value

converts every product into a social hieroglyphic' that has to be deciphered, if we are to get behind 'the secret of our own social product.'⁶²

It is not that we have to find the 'true' secret (labor) behind the false form, meaning the exchange value of the commodity that, as Gernerchak points out, thereby merely confirms 'the separation of essence/signified and appearance/signifier, with the latter obscuring the former.'⁶³ Rather, this 'secret' to which Marx refers is not hidden but, as Žižek puts it, is *the 'secret' of this form itself*.⁶⁴ Based on this notion of form, Žižek elaborates on the similarity between the notion of dream in Freud and the Marxian analysis of capitalism, from which derives the idea that Marx is the inventor of the symptom before Freud. 'There is a fundamental homology,' Žižek argues, 'between the interpretative procedure of Marx and Freud – more precisely, between their analysis of commodity and dream. In both cases the point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the "content" supposedly hidden behind the form: the "secret" to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form (the form of commodities, the form of dreams) but, on the contrary, *the "secret" of this form itself*.'⁶⁵ Žižek further explains:

The theoretical intelligence of the form of dreams does not consist in penetrating from the manifest content to its "hidden kernel," to the latent dream-thoughts; it consists in the answer to the question: why have the latent dream-thoughts assumed such form, why were they transposed into the form of a dream? It is the same with commodities: the real problem is not to penetrate to the "hidden kernel" of the commodity – the determination of its value by the quantity of the work consumed in its production – but to explain why work assumed the form of the value of a commodity, why it can affirm its social character only in the commodity-form of its product.⁶⁶

Žižek's subsequent discussion of the 'unconscious of the commodity-form,' of 'commodity fetishism,' and of the 'social symptom' need not detain us. More relevant to our purpose is the notion of 'Ideological Fantasy,' which is directly related to the theory of phantasmagoria. Žižek works out this notion by way of an extended analysis of 'ideology critique' in what he describes as the most potent form of ideology in our time, cynicism. For Žižek, if we want to grasp the meaning of fantasy as a form of ideology, we need to look to the unconscious, as suggested for example in Marx's formula 'they do not know it, but they are doing it.' In other words, the place of ideological illusion, as Žižek says, must be in *'doing'* and not in *'knowing'*.⁶⁷ The fact that people commonly acknowledge commodity fetishism, that 'money' is a commodity, and even the effects of 'reification,' or the fact that they can easily detect the social relations behind the 'relations between things,' does not in itself dispel ideological illusion. As Žižek says, the illusion operates less at the level of knowledge than in social reality itself, at the level of what we are *doing* at the same time that we *think* that we *know* what we are doing.

In this process we are fetishists in practice and not in theory. It is in this way that the Marxian speculative inversion of the Universal and the Particular takes place: 'The Universal is just a property of particular objects which really exists, but when we are victims of commodity fetishism it appears as if the content of a commodity (its use-value) is an expression of its abstract universality (its exchange-value) – the abstract Universal, the Value, appears as a real Substance which successively incarnates itself in a series of concrete objects.'⁶⁸

It is only because 'social reality' itself is guided by an illusion, by a 'fetishistic inversion,' that people, as Žižek famously puts it, 'know very well know how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this *overlooked, unconscious illusion* [our emphasis] is what may be called *ideological fantasy*.'⁶⁹

If this were not the case, according to Žižek, then today's society could very well be described as 'post-ideological,' as argued by the prevailing ideology of cynicism.

The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep and ironical distance, *we are still doing them*.⁷⁰

We will explore the considerable implications of this argument when we come to analyze the ideology behind the social space of the mediated city, its public space (or *res publica*), and the architectural ideology governing it.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Egidius Berns, 'Fetishism and Ghosts: Marx and Derrida,' in *Everyday Extraordinary: Encountering Fetishism with Marx, Freud and Lacan*, ed., Christopher M. Germerchak (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004), 117–134. Also see Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. III: *The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole*, ed., Frederick Engels (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), 830. For our discussion in this section, we rely heavily on excellent essays in the collection above.
- 2 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 165 (emphasis added).
- 3 See Berns, op. cit.
- 4 Marx, op. cit.
- 5 Notable among them are Myria Georgiou's *Media and the City* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013) and Scott McQuire's *The Media City: Media, Architecture and Urban Space* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008).
- 6 In Berns, op. cit., 128.

- 7 Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1939,' in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 14.
- 8 Quoted in Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media Into the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 149. This text is one the most comprehensive treatments of phantasmagoria from its origin in the eighteenth century to the present transformation of media.
- 9 Ibid., 147. Robertson was born in 1783 in Liege, Belgium. Warner recounts that he 'became a keen balloonist as well as pioneering impresario. He refined many features of the popular magic lantern show when he used an Agrand oil lamp for the first time; being so much lighter than candles, it allowed him to put on public shows to a crowded hall; in this way, he shifted the shared passion for religious festivals towards mass entertainment, and demonstrated the huge power of such spectacle and illusions over crowds,' *ibid.*, 148.
- 10 Ibid., 147.
- 11 Ibid., 147–148.
- 12 See Martin Quigley, *Magic Shadows: The Story of the Origin of Motion Pictures* (New York: Quigley Publishing, 1960), 75.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Warner, *op. cit.*, 149.
- 15 Ibid., 153.
- 16 Ibid., 150.
- 17 Ibid., 151.
- 18 Ibid., 156.
- 19 Leonardo Da Vinci is credited for being the first to have recorded the principles of the *camera obscura*, a 'dark room,' the visual instrument at the basis of photography; see Quigley, *ibid.* But Roger Bacon is said to be the 'inventor' of the apparatus. However, the device was never actually 'invented' as Quigley points out. In its simplest form, *camera obscura* is a dark room with a very small hole in one wall in which '[t]he phenomenon of an image of what was on the outside appearing upside down in a dark room was surely a natural discovery first observed in the remote past,' *ibid.*, 26. In principle the 'dark room can be considered to be a 'giant box camera with the spectator inside the box. An inverted image of the scene outside appears on the wall or floor with the light coming through a small circular opening as in a "pin-hole" camera,' *ibid.* Significantly, it was Leon Battista Alberti who invented the *camera lucida*, which was an apparatus for the play of light and shadow aiding painters in 'reflecting images and scenes to be painted or drawn,' *ibid.*, 30. It was a device for duplicating a design: 'After Alberti had made his original drawings, an assistant, with the aid of the device, could rapidly copy them and give duplicates too the builders for use on the construction job,' *ibid.*
- 20 In Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998), 42.
- 21 Sarah Kofman, *Camera Obscura of Ideology*, trans., Will Straw (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 13.
- 22 Ibid., 3.
- 23 Ibid., 2.
- 24 Ibid., 18–19. As Kofman further explains: 'Still, to characterize ideology as a dark chamber suggests nostalgia for a clear, transparent, luminous knowledge and implies that this is primary; even if science is no longer specular, speculative, a repetition, reflection or echo, its ideal remains that of a perfect eye, a pure retina. Nevertheless, the recognition that every eye has its camera obscura does not disqualify the eye as a model of knowledge. In fact, that model is never really

questioned by Marx. If every eye has a camera obscura, this should lead, it seems, to the generalization of the ideological and to the rendering as non-pertinent of the distinction between ideology and science. However, Marx maintains this distinction, even if, *at one and the same time*, he shows that ideology may never be set right by science; even if, for him, science has no eye,' *ibid.*, 19 (*italics in original*).

- 25 See Terry Castle, 'Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphoric of Modern Reverie,' in *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Autumn 1988), 26–61.
- 26 See *ibid.*; see also Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
- 27 In Castle, *op. cit.*, 31. As Castle explains the device: 'A tube with a convex lens at each end was fitted into an opening in the side of the lantern, while a groove in the middle of the tube held a small image painted on glass. When candlelight was reflected by the concave mirror onto the first lens, the lens concentrated the light on the image on the glass slide. The second lens in turn magnified the illuminated image and projected it onto a wall or gauze screen. In darkness, with the screen itself invisible, images could be made to appear like fantastic luminous shapes, floating inexplicably in the air,' *ibid.*, 33.
- 28 In this respect he wrote to his friend Gershon Scholem: 'When I have finished the work with which I am now occupied, carefully, provisionally . . . the production cycle of *One-Way Street* will be closed for me in the same way that the tragic drama book closed the German one. The profane motifs of *One-Way Street* will parade by in hellish intensification.' Quoted in Margaret Cohen, 'Benjamin's Phantasmagoria,' in *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 96.
- 29 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, intro., George Steiner (London and New York: Verso, 1977), 232.
- 30 Cohen, 'Benjamin's Phantasmagoria,' 96.
- 31 Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,' 18.
- 32 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), [Q1,1], 527.
- 33 Benjamin, *op. cit.*, [Q1a, 4], 529.
- 34 *Ibid.*, [Q2, 6], 531.
- 35 Castle, *op. cit.*, 29.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Castle quotes Rimbaud and notes that 'By the end of the nineteenth century, ghosts had disappeared from everyday life, but as the poets intimated, human experience had become more ghost-ridden than ever. Through a strange process of rhetorical displacement, thought itself had become phantasmagorical,' *ibid.*, 30–31.
- 40 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans., Peggy Kamuf, intro., Bernard Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).
- 41 *Ibid.*, 100–101 (*italics in original*).
- 42 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 141–142 (*italics in original*).
- 44 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 *Ibid.*, 150–151.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 151 (*italics in original*).
- 48 *Ibid.*

- 49 Ibid., 156 (italics in original).
- 50 Ibid., 160–161.
- 51 Ibid., 161.
- 52 See Ernesto Laclau, ‘The Time Is Out of Joint,’ in *Emancipations* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 66–83.
- 53 See Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans., John P. Leavy, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986). Derrida wrote: ‘Despite all the variations to which it can be submitted, the concept fetish includes an invariant predicate: it is a substitute – for the thing itself as center and source of being, the origin of presence, the thing itself par excellence, God or the principle, the archon, what occupies the center function in a system, for example the phallus in a certain Phantasmatic organization. If the fetish substitutes itself for the thing itself in its manifest presence, in its truth, there should no longer be any fetish as soon as there is truth, the presentation of the thing itself in its essence. [. . .] This space of truth, the opposition of *Ersatz* to non *Ersatz*, the space of good sense, of sense itself, apparently constrains all the traits of fetishism,’ *ibid.*, 209.
- 54 See Laclau, *op. cit.* Also see the volume, *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed., Michael Sprinker (London and New York: Verso 1999). This volume includes Derrida’s response to his critics.
- 55 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 197 (italics in original).
- 56 Ibid., 199.
- 57 Henry Krips, *Fetish: An Erotic of Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 21.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 See Christopher Gernerchack, ‘Fetishism, Desire and Finitude: The Artful Dodge,’ in *Everyday Extraordinary: Encountering Fetishism with Marx, Freud and Lacan*, ed., Christopher M. Gernerchack (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004), 30.
- 60 Ibid., 13 (italics in original).
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 See Marx, *op. cit.*, 167.
- 63 Ibid., 31–32.
- 64 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), in chapter 1: ‘How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?’.
- 65 Ibid., 11 (italics in original).
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Ibid., 30.
- 68 Ibid., 31.
- 69 Ibid., 32–33.
- 70 Ibid (italics in original).

3 Phantasmagoria and *Gesamtkunstwerk*

It was Theodore Adorno who first established the link between the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (or ‘total work of art’) and phantasmagoria in his seminal critique of Richard Wagner. In anticipation of the analysis we will develop in the later chapters devoted to a thorough criticism of contemporary architecture, in this chapter we discuss theoretical concepts underpinning the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. More specifically, we apply Adorno’s critique of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to the fetish character of contemporary architecture.¹

As we shall see, Adorno opens up many as yet unresolved questions regarding phantasmagoria’s relation to aesthetic practices and to modernity itself, especially the question of the supposed ‘total integration’ of high art and pop culture. In this regard, we consider contemporary architecture to represent a retreat from the political modernity that was vital to the discourse of architecture and culture in the twentieth-century metropolis. This argument is also based on three prominent views of Wagner articulated more recently by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek² – each of them proposing original readings of Adorno as well as Nietzsche, whose *The Case of Wagner* (written after his disenchantment with his former idol) was one of Adorno’s main references.³

In a letter of 10 November 1938, responding critically to Benjamin’s draft on ‘The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,’ Adorno reported on the progress of his manuscript on Wagner. In his strong critique of Benjamin’s essay on Baudelaire, he noted: ‘No one is more aware of the problems involved here than I am; the phantasmagoria chapter of my book on Wagner has certainly not succeeded in resolving them yet.’ According to Adorno, Benjamin’s *Arcades* study, ‘in its defensive form,’ would not be able to ‘avoid the same obligation.’⁴ In the completed book published first in 1952, entitled *Versuch über Wagner*, translated as *In Search of Wagner*, chapter 6 is specifically titled ‘Phantasmagoria.’⁵ Before we discuss Adorno’s argument in this chapter, we need to reflect on the meaning of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.



One is either an admirer or a detractor of Wagner. Baudelaire was among the former. In his exposé of 1935, in the section ‘Baudelaire, or the Street

of Paris,' Benjamin makes an acute comment about the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which originates, in his view, from the spirit of *l'art pour l'art* that has capitulated to commodification. For Benjamin, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* represents 'art at war with its own commodity character.' This comment about Baudelaire who 'succumbs to the rage for Wagner' appears in the context of Benjamin's discussion of fashion and novelty in *magazines de nouveautés* as dialectical images. In Benjamin's words:

Nonconformists rebel against consigning art to the marketplace. They rally round the banner *l'art pour l'art*. From this watchword derives the conception of the "total work of art" – *Gesamtkunstwerk* – which would seal art off from the development of technology. The solemn rite with which it is celebrated is the pendant to the distraction that transfigures the commodity. Both abstract from the social existence of human beings. Baudelaire succumbs to the rage of Wagner.⁶

It is notable that Benjamin here sees 'the total work of art' as an attempt to seal art off from 'the development of technology' – even though Wagner's art is commonly seen as exploiting the latest possibilities of technology. But Benjamin's comments get to the heart of the Wagnerian enterprise that is centered on the relation between *modernity* and *myth*.

Lacoue-Labarthe in his *Musica Ficta* analyzes the letter of admiration Baudelaire wrote to Wagner after having seen three performances at the Théâtre des Italiens in 1860. Baudelaire pronounces his music to be 'sublime.'⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe considers such a judgment in light of the difference between the language of poetry, *literature*, and the art of drama, or between music and poetry, suggesting that the crux of the whole Wagnerian project, of opera as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, is related to the '*aestheticization of politics*.'⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophical and political analysis casts Wagner in negative terms, in contrast with other interpenetrations of Wagner's theory of art and drama. Before we consider this analysis, it is important to quote Wagner's own words about the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* in *The Art-Work of the Future*:

The great *Gesamtkunstwerk* must contain all branches of art in order, as it were, to use up, to destroy them for the benefit of attaining their common purpose – namely, the absolute, unconditional portrayal of perfect human nature; he [the artist] conceives of this great *Gesamtkunstwerk* not as the act of an individual will [. . .] but rather as the necessary collective work of humans of the future.⁹

Nowhere in the history of the nineteenth-century art has a definition of 'totalization' been better expressed than in this passage by Wagner. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, however, 'the totalizing gesture is a gesture of closure.'¹⁰ The 'dialectical confrontation of the individual arts' in the 'total

work of art' is 'consequently a means of containing excess and safeguarding meaning.'¹¹ In contrast to Hegel's established hierarchical system of arts in his *Lecture on Aesthetics* or to Nietzsche's in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Wagner puts drama ahead of poetry. Thus, 'what is already beginning to be translated as "total work of art" – *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which is the Work in absolute terms, the absolute *organon* of Schelling, or as Nietzsche will say, the *opus metaphysicum* – posits itself as the very end of art in the form of the unification and synthesis (this is the word Wagner uses) of all the individual arts.'¹² This is the reason why, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, 'this synthesis is given the right, in its modern translation, to be made into *musical* sublation of all the arts . . . and above all, of the signifying art *par excellence*.'¹³ Parenthetically, Alain Badiou has recently questioned this reading, wondering whether 'the total work of art' was no more than a slogan for Wagner, and if an artistic work can be reduced so easily to the stated intention of the artist.¹⁴

In any event, Lacoue-Labarthe argues that Wagner's aesthetic politics – unlike Baudelaire's non-political *aesthete politics* – lead directly to fascism's aestheticization of politics.¹⁵ He further suggests that this follows from a certain German tradition that comes from idealism and romanticism that makes of art 'not just *a* political stake, but *the* political stake itself.'¹⁶ 'Wagner belongs by right to this tradition'; he 'is even its most important – let's say "fin-de-siècle" – representative, and it is he who, by this title, authorizes the ideological argument of the "imperial" and "revolutionary-conservative style."¹⁷ This assumption of the political, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, is entangled with myth in Wagner's works. Art 'recovers its mythic capacity; what it recovers is its agogic capacity. Myth, defined as "the primitive and anonymous poem of the people" – it is a topos of middle romanticism – is thought of in the modern age (that is to say the age of de-Christianization) as the only *means of identification* that authorizes the fitting recognition of a nation experiencing birth pains such as those of the improbable Germany.'¹⁸ Thus, '[t]he German political question that had not ceased, since the French Revolution and Napoleon (that is, let us say, since Fichte), to burden European politics is the question of national identity or, to use speculative terms, of the constitution of a people-subject.'¹⁹

This politics manifests itself in Bayreuth through the very architectural form of Wagner's theater.²⁰ As Lacoue-Labarthe puts it, 'The Wagnerian project – it will soon be Bayreuth – is indissociable from this politics. Baudelaire probably does not guess this (whereas Mallarmé, after 1870, will be very conscious of it); nevertheless it is to this that he feels obligated to respond.'²¹ As Badiou comments, the aestheticization of politics in Lacoue-Labarthe is all about 'the transformation of music into the ideological operator which, in art, always involves constituting a people; that is, figuring or configuring a politics.'²² He points out that what is involved in this is a vision of Wagner 'as a proto-fascist (I'm using the expression in its descriptive sense) inasmuch as he allegedly invented an aspect of opera's closure by assigning

to opera the task of configuring a national identity or ethos and in this way ended up staging the ultimately political function of aesthetics itself.²³

Badiou agrees with Lacoue-Labarthe that Wagner accomplished this goal by crucially 'restoring high art.' He points out that similar reflections can also be found in Adorno's argument that it is no longer 'possible to create art under the banner of high art, and that, at bottom, the major imperative of contemporary art lies in sobriety as its key normative value, in the modesty of its ambition.'²⁴ Yet significantly, and even ironically, Wagner's concern with technology in his music also places his art in relation to 'mass art.' As we will see, this is not without relevance when we consider the quite similar aspirations to 'high art' in contemporary architecture.



According to Lacoue-Labarthe, Adorno was not able to entirely liberate himself from Wagner. Yet his critique of the composer is trenchant and severe. With *In Search of Wagner*, as Huyssen says in his excellent 'Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner,' Adorno entered into a critique of mass culture in relation to 'high art,' commodification, and reification, which he would later develop comprehensively in his *Aesthetic Theory*.²⁵ He wrote the book on Wagner in New York in 1938 and 1939, while already observing American mass culture in Hollywood. It is at this time that Adorno also critically engaged Benjamin's 1935 exposé of the Arcades Project, adopting the term 'phantasmagoria' that Benjamin had already employed in his discussion of various aspects of culture and everyday life in Paris. It is well known, of course, that Adorno was a theorist of modernism who challenged the avant-garde's failed attempt to integrate art into life. As Huyssen perceptively remarks, his stance could not have been unrelated to the times, for '[i]n a sense never intended by the avant-garde, life had indeed become art – in the fascist aestheticization of politics as mass spectacle as well as in the fictionalization of reality dictated by the social realism of Zhdanov and by the dream world of capitalist realism promoted by Hollywood.'²⁶ This point is directly relevant to Lacoue-Labarthe's argument regarding Wagner's politics of aestheticization, and to Wagnerianism more generally. Although Adorno sees Wagner as a 'precursor' of Schoenberg and the birth of modernism in music, as Huyssen notes, his book on Wagner can be read 'not only as an account of the birth of fascism out of the spirit of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but also as an account of the birth of the culture industry in the most ambitious high art of the nineteenth century.'²⁷

It is in the chapter on 'Phantasmagoria' that Adorno discusses Wagner's affinity with the culture industry in relation to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. After explicating the origin of the term 'phantasmagoria' in Marx's theory of the commodity form and later in Benjamin, the exploration of this relation in Adorno is the third part of our *spectrography* of phantasmagoria. In it, Adorno discusses the varied manifestations of phantasmagoria in Wagner's operas, from *Lohengrin* to the *Venusberg* scene in *Tannhäuser*, to

the *Flying Dutchman* and *Parsifal*. What successors of Wagner have termed the ‘magic’ quality of these key moments in Wagner’s production express, according to Adorno, ‘the authentic sense of *theatrical illusion*’ inherent in the commodity form.²⁸ But for Adorno the Wagnerian phantasmagoria can only be ‘discovered’ once it is separated from ‘the magic music of Romanticism.’²⁹ Adorno cites Paul Bekker as having said that Wagner, ‘by locating the miraculous in the human soul,’ endows it ‘with truth in the artistic sense and intensifies the world of saga and fairy-tale into the illusion of the absolute reality of the unreal.’³⁰ Adorno believed that once the notion of ‘truth in the artistic sense’ in Bekker is put aside, the concept of ‘illusion’ taken as ‘the absolute reality of the unreal’³¹ attains its full importance. In Adorno’s words, ‘[i]t sums up the *unromantic side* of phantasmagoria: phantasmagoria as the point at which aesthetic appearance becomes a function of the character of the *commodity*.’³² And since commodity is a vehicle of purveying illusion, ‘[t]he absolute reality of the unreal is nothing but the reality of a phenomenon that not only strives unceasingly to spirit away its own origins in human labor, but also, inseparably from the process and in thrall to exchange value, assiduously emphasizes its use value, stressing that this is its authentic reality, that it is “no imitation” – and all this in order to further the case of exchange value.’³³ A similar point is made later on when Adorno writes: ‘In Wagner’s day the consumer goods on display turned their phenomenal side seductively towards the mass of customers while diverting attention from their merely phenomenal character, from the fact that they were beyond reach. Similarly, in the phantasmagoria, Wagner’s operas tend to become commodities. Their Tableaux assumes the character of wares on display.’³⁴

In Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism, all traces of labor that have gone into production are veiled, hence its phantasmatic effect. Adorno constructed his critique of Wagner directly on Marx’s analysis of the commodity in *Capital*. In the phantasmatic structure of phantasmagoria, moreover, lies an element of dream and Benjaminian ‘wish fulfillment.’ Adorno hints at it when he writes, ‘The phantasmagoria tends towards dream not merely as a deluded wish-fulfillment of would-be buyers, but chiefly to conceal the labour that has gone into making it. It mirrors subjectivity by confronting the subject with the product of its own labour, but in such a way that the labour that has gone into it is no longer identifiable. [. . .] Governed by the logic of dreams, the phantasmagoria succumbs to its own particular dialectic.’³⁵

Adorno shows concretely the nature of this logic at work in his masterful analysis of *Tannhäuser*. In the expression ‘Too much, too much! Oh that I now might make!’ in act 1, scene 2 of this opera, Adorno detects the conversion of ‘pleasure into sickness’ that is what he calls the ‘denunciatory task of phantasmagoria.’³⁶ In psychoanalytical terms, he shows how ‘the socially determined experience of pleasure as unfreedom transforms libido into sickness and so we see how, with the cry of “Too much!” Tannhäuser becomes

conscious of his own enjoyment as a weakness while he is still in the kingdom of Venus.³⁷ As Adorno makes clear, 'the experience of pleasure as sickness permeates Wagner's entire oeuvre.'³⁸ In 'anathematizing of the very pleasure it puts on display,' phantasmagoria 'is infected from the outset with the seeds of its own destruction. *Inside the illusion dwells disillusionment*.'³⁹ Benjamin might have called this 'disenchantment as *re-enchantment*,' while also stressing the dialectic of modernity and primitivism that underlies such reversals. As Adorno puts it, in effect, 'phantasmagoria comes into being when, under the constraints of its own limitations, modernity's latest product comes close to the archaic.'⁴⁰ It is through such earth-bound appeals to the primitive that 'the impoverished imaginative world of the bourgeois produces an image of itself in the phantasmagoric, and Wagner's work serves this image as it serves the bourgeois.'⁴¹

For Adorno, 'the celebration of a phantasmagoria would by no means exhaust Wagner's aesthetic repertoire,' since 'the overarching structure that results is the *Gesamtkunstwerk*' – the 'drama of the future' in which poetry, music, and theatre would be united. Yet even though Wagner's intention was to obliterate the frontiers separating the individual arts in the name of an 'all-pervasive infinity' and even though the experience of synesthesia is one of the corner-stones of Romanticism, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is actually, according to Adorno, unrelated to the Romantic theories of fifty years earlier.⁴² Rather, it expresses a deeper process of rationalization. Wagner himself became aware of the 'element of concealment in the phantasmagoria' in his conception of the unified nature of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. As a result, his intention to integrate the individual arts into the *Gesamtkunstwerk* 'ends up achieving a division of labour unprecedented in the history of music.'⁴³ Adorno cites here what he calls 'the motto of Wagner's mode of composition' – *Parsifal*'s famous words: 'The wound is healed only by the spear that caused it' – adding that '[i]t is precisely the religious *Parsifal* that makes use of the filmlike technique of scene-transformation that marks the climax of this dialectic: the magic work of art dreams its complete antithesis, the mechanical work of art.'⁴⁴

According to Adorno, the rationalization of technique to which Wagner aspired is inherently irrational inasmuch as 'a valid *Gesamtkunstwerk*, purged of its false identity, would have required a collective of specialist planners.'⁴⁵ Adorno contends that there is ultimately a price the music drama has to pay for its 'renunciation of a purely musical logic based on the structuring of internal time. It succumbs to rationalism for irrational reasons. By driving a wedge between reflection and immediacy, the music drama carries out judgment on itself.'⁴⁶ Similarly, Wagner's theory of poetry as the concern of reason and music as the concern of feeling, to be reunited in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, is a 'distinction that subjects the arts to a cliché in order harmonize them easily.'⁴⁷ In the end, both the theory and the practice of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* are inherently contradictory – as Wagner himself admitted when he noted that the drama of the future depended on

'conditions which do not lie within the will, nay, not even within the capability of the single individual' but 'only in community, and in a mutual co-operation made possible thereby: whereas, at the present time, what prevails is the direct antithesis of both these factors.'⁴⁸

Huyssen notes that 'Adorno's characterization of Wagner's opera as phantasmagoria is an attempt to analyze what happens to aesthetic appearance (*ästhetischer Schein*) in the age of the commodity and as such it is an attempt to come to terms with the pressure commodity fetishism puts on works of art.'⁴⁹ Adorno claimed that in fact Wagner succumbed to this pressure. His age – the same one that Benjamin so insightfully analyzed in Second Empire Paris – was when commodity culture began to exert its force. Huyssen remarks:

Blocking out traces of production in the work of art is of course one of the major tenets of an earlier idealist aesthetic and as such nothing new in Wagner. But that is precisely the problem. As the commodity form begins to invade all aspects of modern life, all aesthetic appearance is in danger of being transformed into phantasmagoria, into the "illusion of the absolute reality of the unreal."⁵⁰

To pause here, it is perhaps not inappropriate to note that the locus *par excellence* of commodity culture's invasion of all aspects of life is nothing other than the city. The contemporary city is the place where the 'illusion of the absolute reality of the unreal' is more than ever acutely on display. The effects of this reality on the subject, the subject as the city dweller, call for the closest critical scrutiny.

However, we still have to reflect on the dimension of *myth* as the embodiment of illusion in the notion of phantasmagoria that shows itself in all of Wagner's operas. At its core, this question is a political problem. We note first of all that 'totalization' – i.e., 'the total work of art' – is not totalitarian in itself, but only and until it is claimed as such by fascism. In the chapter on 'Myth,' Adorno claims that 'the rapture of phantasmagoria expels any concern with politics from opera,' and he goes on to state that 'there can be no doubt that the elimination of the political from Wagner's own work was, in part at least, the result of the disillusionment of the bourgeoisie after 1848, a disappointment outspokenly reflected in his correspondence.'⁵¹ He then says that 'mythical music drama is *secular and magical* at one and at the same time. This is how it solves the riddle of phantasmagoria.'⁵²

As Huyssen writes, myth as the embodiment of illusion and regression to pre-history enters the scene in light of the fact that, as Adorno stated, '[p]phantasmagoria comes into being when, under the constraints of its own limitations, modernity's latest products come close to the archaic. Every step forward is at the same time a step into the remote past. As bourgeois society advances it finds that it needs its own camouflage of illusion simply in order to subsist.'⁵³ From this Huyssen deduces that, 'as phantasmagoria, Wagner's

opera reproduces the dream world of the commodity in the form of myth.⁵⁴ Hence, 'myth becomes the problematic solution to Wagner's struggle against the genre music of the Biedermeier period, and his gods and heroes are to guarantee the success of his simultaneous flight from banality of the commodity age.'⁵⁵ But, adds Huyssen, 'as the present and the mythical merge in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Wagner's divine realm of ideas, god is nothing but a deluded transcription of the banal world of the present.'⁵⁶

Adorno echoes similar feelings in a key passage in the same chapter on myth, when he writes:

It is impossible to overlook the relationship between Wagnerian mythology and the iconic world of Empire, with its eclectic architecture, fake Gothic castles, and the aggressive dream symbols of the Neo-German boom, ranging from the Bavarian castles of Ludwig to the Berlin restaurant that called itself "Rheingold." But the question of authenticity is as fruitless here as elsewhere.⁵⁷

Just as the overwhelming power of high capitalism generates myths that tower above the collective conscious, so the mythic region in which the modern consciousness seeks refuge 'bears the marks of that capitalism: what subjectively was the dream of dreams is objectively a nightmare.'⁵⁸ Indeed, it is precisely the inauthentic aspect of that iconic world of myths distorted by later generations who discover themselves and mirror themselves in them – that is also its truth. 'Confronted with an exorbitant unapproachable world of things that casts its alien shadow over him, the individual feels an affinity with the world of myth.'⁵⁹

One can trace in the above passage the force of Adorno's critical observations on Benjamin's Arcades Project. But what is important to notice in this passage is that the 'drama of the future,' what Wagner calls *Gesamtkunstwerk*, is a regression to an archaic past that 'completes its trajectory in fascism. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is intended as a powerful protest against the fragmentation and atomization of art and life in capitalist society. But since it chooses the wrong means it can only end in failure.'⁶⁰ Thus, like Lacoue-Labarthe, for Huyssen the mythic dimension in Wagner's opera conjures up the specters of fascism and anticipates the *aestheticization of politics* half a century later. It is no accident that the term Adorno used for the essential features of Hollywood film, the 'culture industry,' was also the operative term for the totalization of art in fascism. But myth tends to disintegrate from within. The totality of Wagner's music drama, Huyssen says, is a false totality, and that disintegration led to Schoenberg's modernism. It is important that modernism be defended, because as Huyssen remarks, 'where the high art itself is sucked into the maelstrom of commodification, modernism is born as a reaction and a defense.'⁶¹ In later chapters we will reflect on the necessity of defending this modernity.

In the forgoing sections we have been concerned with establishing the relationship that exists between phantasmagoria and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The problematic of Wagnerianism itself is a more complicated question that we cannot and need not get into. However, we must mention that while philosophers from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Lacoue-Labarthe have taken on Wagner in negative terms, in contrast with this tradition, Badiou and Žižek have recently challenged these interpretations. The question is important, since Wagnerianism is about the fundamental problematic of *political modernity*. We already mentioned, in passing, what Huysen said about the necessity of returning to a certain conception of modernity, insofar as the problem of ‘mass culture’ and ‘high art’ are concerned. We agree with Huysen about the necessity of a return to the brilliant analysis Adorno advanced, and to a *correct* understanding of his notion of the ‘culture industry.’ For us, however, the question of modernity is linked to the notions of *disenchantment* and *profanation* – a point we will be stressing repeatedly in the chapters that follow. It is in this sense that we are concerned with Wagner *philosophically*, and not just art historically. We are, in fact, equally sympathetic to Adorno’s and Lacoue-Labarthe’s negative construction of the figure of Wagner as we are to the analysis advanced recently by Badiou and Žižek.

Badiou remarks that there is in fact a necessary stand to be taken vis-à-vis what he calls ‘the kitsch of waning empires’: ‘Without a doubt, every empire nearing its end puts forth its own Kitsch, something I would define as a correlation between noise and nihilism, or noisy nihilism.’⁶² He gives the example of Hollywood movies today, compared to which ‘Wagner is small potatoes indeed.’⁶³ So the position that has been ascribed to Wagner, Badiou remarks, ‘as someone who brings the history of opera to a close is very clear.’⁶⁴ He writes:

What has been completed can no longer be pursued; therefore, Wagnerism is an integral part of this history just as he is also the first great artist of kitsch of waning empires, and it is in this sense, moreover, that he is a proto-fascist. Thus, he simultaneously closes and opens up. In that he ushers in the future of mass art. He lays the foundations for the latter even as he brings to a close a tradition that included Mozart, Beethoven, et al.⁶⁵

Badiou cites Adorno, in *In Search of Wagner*, on how ‘Wagner is typical of a certain kind of petit bourgeois bombast, of something that actually no longer has what’s needed for its purpose and is forced to resort to using an excess of expressive techniques because real historical content is lacking.’⁶⁶ According to Badiou, the same thing can be said about ‘the kitschy art of waning empires: the creative content of the historical epic is lacking, so you fake it by using historical bombast. As a matter of fact, at a time when nothing really matters anymore except the next election, you can also make *The Lord of the Rings*, or something else of that sort.’⁶⁷

Žižek, in a 'foreword' to the new edition of *In Search of Wagner*, titled 'Why Is Wagner Worth Saving?', attempts to construct a different philosophical figure of Wagner. According to Žižek, Adorno, for the first time, masterfully combined a Marxist reading of the musical work of art as 'a cipher of social antagonisms' with the highest musicological analysis. He also reminds the reader that in the 1950s and 1960s, Adorno came to take a more positive position on the composer. Žižek mentions Wagner's anti-Semitism and puts it in the wider context of modernity by pointing out that 'Wagner's attitude towards modernity is not simply negative but much more ambiguous: he wants to enjoy its fruits, while avoiding its disintegrative effects – in short, Wagner wants to have his cake and eat it.'⁶⁸ Žižek claims, 'For that reason, he needs a Jew: so that, first, modernity – this abstract, impersonal process – is given a human face, is identified with a concrete, palpable feature; then, in a second move, by rejecting the Jew which gives body to all that is disintegrated in modernity, we can retain its advantages.'⁶⁹ 'In short,' he adds, 'anti-Semitism does not stand for anti-modernism as such, but for an attempt at combining modernity with social corporatism which is characteristic of conservative-revolutionaries.'⁷⁰

In his analysis of the figure of Wotan in Wagner's *Ring*, Žižek significantly evokes the ideological-political crisis in the late nineteenth century as a malfunctioning of 'investiture' – the fallen 'paternal mandate of symbolic authority' – that permanently affects the Subject. He brings up the fate of Daniel Paul Schreber, the exemplary psychotic subject whose memoirs were analyzed by Freud, which, by the way, Benjamin was well aware of. Schreber, Žižek says, 'fell into psychotic delirium at the very moment when he was to assume the position of a judge, that is, a function of public symbolic authority: he was not able to come to terms with this stain of obscenity as the integral part of the functioning of symbolic authority.'⁷¹ The crisis breaks out, Žižek argues, 'when the obscene joyful underside of the paternal authority becomes visible.'⁷² As we will suggest, this case also fully applies to the crisis in the symbolic order of paternal authority that gives rise to the psychotic subject in our time.

Žižek attempts to read Wagner's operas from the present point of view and our specific condition today. He asks: 'Why, then, should we not read *Parsifal* from today's perspective: the kingdom of Klingsor in Act II is a domain of digital phantasmagoria, of virtual amusement.' And further: 'When we pass from Act II to ACT III, do we not effectively pass from virtual reality to the "desert of the real," the "wasteland" in the aftermath of ecological catastrophe which derails the "normal" functioning of nature?'⁷³ We return to Žižek's instructive notion of 'digital phantasmagoria,' along with the problem of virtual reality, in later chapters. In the conclusion to his 'foreword,' Žižek says that it is 'only through such a betrayal of the explicit theses of Adorno's Wagner study that, today, one can remain faithful to its emancipatory impulse.'⁷⁴ The 'battle for Wagner is not over yet,' he argues: 'Today, after the exhaustion of the critical-historicist and aestheticist paradigms, it is entering its decisive phase.'⁷⁵

Notes

- 1 We take issue with the positive evaluation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* by Juliet Koss in her *Modernism after Wagner* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2010), which otherwise is an informed and comprehensive art historical inquiry into the subject. We do not endorse her statement: 'But for all its affiliations with right-wing spectacle culture in 1930s Germany and beyond, this book argues, the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* maintains the radical, emancipatory potential of its revolutionary origins: the aspiration to merge art and life, spectator and audience, the aesthetic and political, in order to create a utopian total work of art of the future,' *ibid.*, xxix. This sounds to us a characteristic example of the *historicism* that often times art historians fall into. We also do not agree with her negative judgment of Adorno's critique of Wagner in the last chapter of her book.
- 2 See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta (Figures of Wagner)*, trans., Felicia McCarren (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, with an afterword by Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2010); among Žižek's numerous analyses of Wagner's work see specially his *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), and Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).
- 3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans., Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).
- 4 In Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 283. This letter has been reprinted in *Walter Benjamin: Selected writings: volumes 4, 1938–1940*, ed., Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003). In this letter Adorno writes: 'Unless I am very much mistaken, your dialectic is lacking in one thing: mediation,' *The Complete Correspondence*, *ibid.*, 282, and further, 'The "mediation" which I miss and find obscured by materialistic–historiographical evocation, is simply the theory which your study has omitted,' *ibid.*, 283.
- 5 See Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans., Rodney Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 2005), with an excellent forward by Žižek titled: 'Why Is Wagner Worth Saving?'
- 6 Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé 1935,' in *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 11. This paragraph was deleted in the 'Exposé 1939' after substantial criticism by Adorno to the previous version.
- 7 See Lacoue-Labarthe, *op. cit.*, chapter 1. The excerpts of operas performed there were from *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tanhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, and *Tristan*.
- 8 In this regard, Alain Badiou, who is critical of Lacoue-Labarthe's 'harsh' stand against Wagner, nevertheless acknowledges the relevance of connecting Wagner's enterprise to the notion of 'aestheticization of politics.' He notes the political aspect and points out: 'In Lacoue-Labarthe's opinion, it is the Wagnerian apparatus as a vehicle for the aestheticization of politics; it is Wagner as the transformation of music into an ideological operator which, in art, always involves constituting a people; that is, figuring or configuring a politics,' in Badiou, *ibid.*, 9. He further adds: 'What is being elaborated here is a vision of Wagner as a proto-fascist (I'm using the expression in its descriptive sense) inasmuch as he allegedly invented an aspect of opera's closure by assigning to opera the task of configuring a national destiny or ethos and in this way ended up staging the ultimately political function of aesthetics itself,' *ibid.*
- 9 Quoted in Koss, *op. cit.*, 1.

- 10 Lacoue-Labarthe, op. cit., 12.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 7.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 See Badiou, op. cit., 15.
- 15 Lacoue-Labarthe, op. cit., 17.
- 16 Ibid. (*italics in original*).
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 18.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 For more on the role of Bayreuth, see Koss, op. cit.
- 21 Lacoue-Labarthe, op. cit., 18.
- 22 Badiou, op. cit., 9.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 See Andreas Huyssen, 'Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner,' in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, eds., Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 29–56. We refer to this very informative analytical essay for our reflections on Adorno's critique of Wagner.
- 26 Ibid., 42.
- 27 Ibid., 43. Huyssen continues, 'On the face of it such an account would seem patently absurd since it appears to ignore the existence of a well-developed industrial mass culture in Wagner's own time. But then Adorno's essay does not claim to give us a comprehensive historical description of the origins of mass culture as such, nor does he suggest that the place to develop a theory of the culture industry is high art alone. What he does suggest, however, is something largely lost in the dominant accounts of modernism which emphasizes the triumphal march of abstraction and surface in painting, textual self-referentiality in literature, atonality in music, and irreconcilable hostility to mass culture and Kitsch in all forms of modernist art,' *ibid.* As Huyssen further points out, the ideology of autonomy of the artwork is undermined by the claim that 'no work of art is ever untouched by the social.' But Adorno 'makes the even stronger claim that in capitalist society high art is always already permeated by the textures of that mass culture from which it seeks autonomy,' *ibid.*
- 28 Adorno, op. cit., 78 (*emphasis added*).
- 29 Ibid., 79.
- 30 Quoted in *ibid.*
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid (*italics in original*).
- 33 Ibid., 79.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid., 80.
- 36 Ibid., 82.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid., 83 (*emphasis added*).
- 40 Ibid., 84.
- 41 Ibid., 84–85.
- 42 Ibid., 86.
- 43 Ibid., 98.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid., 100.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid., 101.

52 *Phantasmagoria, modernity, and the city*

48 Ibid., 101–102.

49 Huyssen, op. cit., 47.

50 Ibid.

51 Adorno, op.cit., 103

52 Ibid., 104 (*italics in original*).

53 Quoted in Huyssen, op. cit. 47.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., 48.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., 112.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 48.

61 Ibid., 49.

62 Badiou, op. cit., 23.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 24.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 See Slavoj Žižek, ‘Foreword: Why Is Wagner Worth Saving?’ in Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans., Rodney Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 2005), x–xi.

69 Ibid., xi.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., xxiv.

74 Ibid., xxvii.

75 Ibid.

Excursus I

The specters of Baron Haussmann

Having, as they do, the appearance of walling—in a massive eternity, Haussmann’s urban works are a wholly appropriate representation of the absolute governing principles of the Empire: repression of every individual formation, every organic self-development, “fundamental hatred of all individuality.”

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Convolute E
[Haussmannization, Barricade Fighting]

The name of Baron George-Eugène Haussmann, the Prefect of Paris, is connected to every authoritarian regime in modern times, from the Second Empire to the New Empire. The more his name is conjured away, the more his ghost is exorcised, the more we are haunted by his specter. He is the *revenant* of every big city in the era of neoliberal capitalism. His name, as Adorno told Benjamin, is of a ‘dialectic,’ at the center of which is the problem of *mediation*. This means that both camps, the one that loathes him and the one that admires him, have got the name of Baron Haussmann wrong. His name represents a contradiction of opposites that is ‘sublated’ in class struggle, both in the bourgeois order of the Second Empire *and* in late capitalism today. Both conflicts are staged in the scene of the big city, where technology plays an essential mediating role. There can be no critique of technology without a critique of political economy. This is what we mean by the ‘mediated city.’ The historical materialist critique of it requires that the mediation of the city by technology pass through a critique of political economy, and the name of this mediation is Haussmann.

Monsieur Haussmann had a nickname: ‘Pasha Osman’! For he wanted to provide the city with spring water: ‘I must build myself an aqueduct,’ he said.¹ He also bragged, ‘I have been named artist-demolitionist.’² With what tools did he accomplish this demolition? In *Urbanisme* (1925), Le Corbusier, among his admirers, reproduced an anonymous artist’s rendering of the simple, rudimentary tools used by Haussmann.³ The plate is now included in the Belknap/Harvard edition of *The Arcades Project*,⁴ in which Le Corbusier is quoted as saying: ‘Haussmann cut immense gaps right through Paris, and carried out the most startling operations. It seemed as if Paris

would never endure surgical experiments. And yet, today, does it not *exist* merely as a consequence of his daring and courage? His equipment was meager: the shovel, the pick, the wagon, the trowel, the wheelbarrow – the simple tools of every race . . . before the machine age. His achievement was truly admirable.’⁵

Friedrich Engels in ‘On the Housing Question’ of 1872 summarized the phenomenon of Haussmannization as follows:

By the term “Husmann,” I do not mean merely the specifically Bonapartist manner of the Parisian Husmann – cutting long, straight, broad streets right through closely built working-class neighborhoods and lining them on both sides with big luxurious buildings, the intention having been, apart from the strategic aim of making barricade fighting more difficult, to develop a specifically Bonapartist building-trades proletariat dependent on the government, and turn the city into a luxury city pure and simple. By “Haussmann” I mean the practice, which has now become general, of making breaches in the working-class neighborhoods of our big cities, particularly in those which are centrally situated. . . . The result is everywhere the same: the most scandalous alleys . . . disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-glorification by the bourgeoisie.⁶

Benjamin cites from the work of two historians, Lucien Dubech and Pierre D’Espanzel, who in their *Histoire de Paris* in 1926 wrote: ‘If we had to define, in a word, the new spirit that was coming to preside over the transformation of Paris, we would have to call it megalomania. The emperor and his prefect aim to make Paris the capital not only of France but of the world. . . . Cosmopolitan Paris will be the result.’⁷ He also cites Gisela Freund: ‘Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte felt his vocation to be the securing of the “bourgeois order.” . . . Industry and trade, the affair of the bourgeoisie, were to prosper. An immense number of concessions were given out to the railroads; public subventions were granted; credits were organized. The wealth and luxury of the bourgeois world increased. The 1895s saw the . . . beginning of the Parisian department store: Au Bon Marche, Au Louvre, La Belle Jardinière.’⁸ For Benjamin, Haussmann championed a ‘phantasmagoria of civilization,’ which manifested itself in the transformations of Paris. In his 1939 exposé he wrote: ‘With the Haussmannization of Paris, the phantasmagoria was rendered in stone.’⁹

In our time, with the Haussmannization of the city, the phantasmagoria is rendered mostly in steel and glass, but the effect is the same. Yet, there is a difference. The ‘phantasmagoria of space’ of which Benjamin spoke in his 1935 exposé was a space to which the *flâneur* devoted himself. Such space is no longer available to the idler, the intellectual, the poet, or the prostitute. Haussmann’s time was the incipient era of a capitalist culture of phantasmagoria in which these characters felt at home. Haussmann made

sure to destroy these spaces. His work of destruction continued until the Commune, when Paris was set on fire. As Benjamin noted: 'The burning of Paris is the worthy conclusion to Haussmann's work of destruction.'¹⁰ A century later, Haussmann's specters float over an even more brutal destruction of the city.

In the final section of the 1935 exposé – 'Haussmann, or the Barricades' – Benjamin reflected on the notion of 'perspective' in Haussmann's ideal of city planning, which he says corresponds to the tendency of the nineteenth century toward 'ennobling technological necessities through artistic ends.'¹¹ But, the boulevards opened in the tight city fabric by Haussmann, as Howard Caygill reminds us, 'did not owe their existence solely to the technical but also to political exigencies, namely the securing of the city from insurrection through the eviction of the proletarian population of the inner city *quartiers* and the attempt to render impossible the building of the barricades.'¹² The Commune as the end of Haussmann's work of destruction was also the end of his 'reshaping of the city' into 'an alienated *Gesamtkunstwerk*,' as Caygill puts it in an apt phrase.¹³ Yet the figure of the city as a total work of art lived on, long after Haussmann. Later we will come back to discuss this alienation more fully. Here we must hunt down Haussman's specters further.



David Kishik – who, as we mentioned before, imaginatively transports Benjamin to New York City in his *Manhattan Project* – traces the figure of Paris to its twentieth century doppelgänger in the United States. The specters of Baron Haussmann come to haunt the city through Robert Moses. Kishik characterizes Moses as someone who tried to change the city instead of understanding it, notably through superimposing highways on what he considered to be dilapidated neighborhoods.¹⁴ Kishik writes: 'Like Haussmann, Moses was faced with a metropolis that appeared to be ungovernable. Both Paris and New York were perceived as labyrinths that only the most experienced local residents knew how to navigate. Instead of adding new structures to the urban cacophony, the two men preferred to engage in constructive destruction, seeing themselves as "demolition artists."¹⁵ Moses was behind a huge number of construction projects, from public housing complexes to bridges and dams, from the UN headquarters to Lincoln Center.¹⁶

As Kishik remarks, both men shared a 'secret agenda': to reconfigure the city in its radical political nature so that it would no longer pose any threat to the political domination of the state. Alongside this was an economic agenda that sought to untangle the urban economy for a more effective and exploitative circulation of capital. Kishik notes: 'Just as Haussmann's expansive boulevards were designed to be barricade-proof in an age scarred by revolution and civil wars, Moses's plethora of projects, constructed during the age of suburban sprawl and large-scale industrial expansion, were

devised to control or simply disperse the urban crowd, which would otherwise clutter the inefficiently chaotic city.’¹⁷ Hence ‘the two men reconfigured the modern city as a streamlined space geared towards luxury living, conspicuous consumption, and international trade, all of which stand at the center of the urban experience as we know it today.’¹⁸ Thus, the Haussmannization of Paris and Moesization of New York are two sides of the same coin with similar consequences on the physiognomy of the city. For Kishik, ‘they became a part of the somewhat artificial and inhuman modern metropolis, where it is much more difficult to feel at home.’¹⁹ Kishik cites a poem that Benjamin quoted in *The Arcades Project* from a book of *Lamentations* against Hussmann and says that it could very well be used against Moses:

You will live to see the city gown desolate and bleak. / Your glory will be great in the eyes of future archeologists, but your last days will be sad and bitter. / . . . / And the heart of the city will slowly freeze. / . . . / Lizards, stray dogs, and rats will rule over this magnificence. The injuries inflicted by time accumulate on the gold of the balconies, and on the painted murals. / . . . / And loneliness, the tedious goddess of deserts, will come and settle upon this new empire you will have made for her by so formidable a labor.²⁰

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‘So let it be said to Baron Haussmann’s eternal credit,’ Moses wrote in 1942, ‘that he grasped problem of step-by-step large-scale modernization.’ With this quotation, New York’s quintessential intellectual, Marshal Berman, begins his discussion of the destructive effects of Moses’s work on New York City in his classic study, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*.²¹ Here Berman describes the essence of Haussmann’s demolition work in Paris in terms of a ‘primal scene’ that, from Baudelaire to Freud, cannot be idyllic because at the climax of the scene, ‘a repressed reality creaks through, a revelation or discovery takes place: “a new boulevard, still littered with rubble . . . displayed its unfinished splendors.” Alongside the glitter, the rubble: the ruins of a dozen inner-city neighborhoods – the city’s oldest, darkest, most wretched and most frightening neighborhoods, home to tens of thousands of Parisians – razed to the ground.’²² Berman is precise and insightful:

Haussmann, in tearing down the old mediaeval slums, inadvertently broke down the self-enclosed and hermetically sealed world of traditional urban poverty. The boulevards, blasting great holes through the poorest neighborhoods, enabled the poor to walk through the holes and out of their ravaged neighborhoods, to discover for the first time what the rest of their city and the rest of life is like. And as they see, they are seen: the vision, the epiphany, flows both ways. In the midst of the great

spaces, under the bright lights, there is no way to look away. The glitter lights up the rubble, and illuminates the dark lives of people at whose expense the bright light shines.²³

Berman was a great admirer of Baudelaire's description of modern experience: 'Baudelaire shows us something that no other writer sees so well: how the modernization of the city at once inspires and enforces the modernization of its citizen's soul.'²⁴ Berman argues that Baudelaire's modernism remains fresh and contemporary for the twentieth century because the conflicts that gave *Paris Spleen* its energy – class and ideological conflicts, social and spiritual conflicts – have remained the same, although our epoch finds new ways to mask and mystify them. In the section titled 'The Twentieth Century: The Halo and the Highway,' Berman writes: 'One of the great differences between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is that our century has created a network of new haloes to replace the ones that Baudelaire's and Marx's century stripped away.'²⁵ And he sees this most clearly developed in the real of urban space, or what we should call the 'phantasmagoria of space.' 'This is no accident,' he says: 'in fact, for most of our century, urban spaces have been systematically designed and organized to ensure that collisions and confrontations will not take place here.'²⁶

Berman perceives that what 'Boulevards' were to the nineteenth century (Haussmannization), 'Highways' are to the twentieth century (Moesization). He sees a dialectic at work here – the same dialectic that Adorno claimed was named by Haussmann. For Berman it is a 'strange dialectic' indeed, in which, as he puts it, one form of modernism energizes and then exhausts itself trying to annihilate other forms of modernism. This is a great insight, as valid for our time as it was for Berman when he published his book in 1982. As noted earlier, the problem of modernity cannot be dissociated from the larger context of the project of the Enlightenment. In line with Berman's insight, Žižek writes:

Therein resides the lesson of Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*: enlightenment always already "contaminates" the mythical naïve immediacy; enlightenment itself is mythical, i.e., its own grounding gesture repeats the mythical operation. And what is "post-modernism" if not the ultimate *defeat* of the Enlightenment in its very triumph: when the dialectic of enlightenment reaches its apogee, rootless postindustrial society *directly generates its own myth*. The technological reductionism of the cognitive partisans of Artificial Intelligence and the pagan mythic imaginary of sorcery, of mysterious magic powers, etc., are strictly two sides of the same phenomenon: the defeat of modernity in its very triumph.²⁷

This fundamental contradiction in the project of modernity is the phantasmagoria that most clearly manifests itself in modern urban society. In

Berman's words, 'The tragic irony of modernist urbanism is that its triumph has helped to destroy the very urban life it hoped to set free.'²⁸

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Today, after both modernism and post-modernism, Haussmann's phantasmagoria is as omni-present as ever. In his recent *Rebel Cities*, David Harvey addresses Henri Lefebvre's 'Right to the City' and the persistence of Haussmann's ghosts. Without mentioning Berman, he makes reference to Robert Moses's analysis.²⁹ Harvey is particularly concerned with the economic-political – rather than cultural – impact of Haussmannization. His main thesis is that Haussmann's mission, and the mission of the whole process of urbanization he set in motion, was to resolve the economic crisis generated by 'surplus capital and the unemployment problem.'³⁰ Harvey cites the story of the architect Jacques Ignace Hittorf who worked for Haussmann and showed a plan for a new Boulevard, to which the Prefect replied: 'not wide enough . . . you have it 40 meters wide and I want it 120.'³¹ Harvey argues that in changing the scale of urban change, Haussmann made use of 'new financial institutions and debt instruments constructed on Saint-Simonian lines (the *Crédit Mobilier* and *Immobilier*). What he did, in effect, was to help resolve the capital surplus problem by setting up a Keynesian system of debt-financed infrastructural urban improvements.'³² But, of course, by 1868 the credit structure, as Harvey points out, had collapsed, and Haussmann was forced to resign. War was another means by which Louis-Napoleon would subsequently attempt to continue his system of rule. The Commune, as we know, completed the destructive work of Haussmann, as Benjamin had noted, unleashing the dispute between Marxists and anarchists that divides the left opposition to this day.

Harvey cites the article that appeared in an architectural journal (*Architectural Forum*) that Robert Moses wrote in evaluation of Haussmann's project. Moses's objective was a very similar one, according to Harvey: 'through the system of (debt-financed) highways and infrastructural transformations, through suburbanization, and through the total re-engineering not just of the city but of the whole metropolitan region – he defined a way to absorb the surplus product and thereby resolve the capital surplus absorption problem.'³³ Harvey points out further that suburbanization in the United States had more than simply an infrastructural function. Like the Second Empire, it was also a matter of radically transforming the lifestyle of a new generation of consumers. The crucial point – for Harvey – is that suburbanization destroyed the sustainable economic base of urban life. This ended up 'producing the so-called "urban crisis" of the 1960s, defined by the revolts of impacted minorities (chiefly African-American) in the inner cities, who were denied access to the new prosperity.'³⁴ Harvey further points to how opponents of Moses's particularly brutal brand of modernism, gathered around Jane Jacobs, the author of *The Death and Life of Great American*

Cities, sought a different urban aesthetic that focused on the fabric of local neighborhoods in the city. Harvey's strong point is:

If the Haussmannization of Paris had a role in explaining the dynamics of the Paris Commune, so the soulless qualities of suburban living played a critical role in the dynamic movements of 1968 in the United States, as discontented white middle-class students went into a phase of revolt, seeking alliances with other marginalized groups and rallying against US imperialism to create a movement to build another world.³⁵

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'Haussmann's urban reality is romantic and magical; private joys spring from wide-open public spaces. One can henceforth be private in the crowd, alone yet amidst people. [. . .] There are walls *and* there is transparency. There is social enclosure *and* physical openness,' writes Andy Merrifield in his *The New Urban Question*.³⁶ The 'and' in these sentences, he says, expresses the contradictory realities we have inherited from Haussmannization. Merrifield recalls that Benjamin's label for Baron Haussmann's work was 'strategic embellishment.' Besides the fact that, as Benjamin said, 'the new streets were to provide the shortest route between the barracks and the working-class areas,' the resulting urban space 'was concurrently profitable and pragmatic, aesthetically edifying yet militarily convenient.'³⁷ Benjamin's term of 'strategic embellishment' is therefore apt, and of continuing relevance to understand the evolution of Haussmannization, 'by twists and turns,' in the city today. The latter reflects 'the scale of this dialectic, the depth and breadth of the twin forces of strategic embellishment and insurrection.' According to Merrifield, 'this dialectic is *immanent* in our current urban-global condition.'³⁸

Berman in his reflections on Baudelaire's 'Eye of the Poor' evokes a 'primal scene "that reveals some of the deepest ironies and contradictions" of modern capitalist urbanization.'³⁹ 'Twenty-first century neo-Haussmannization,' Merrifield argues, 'not only upgrades and intensifies the contradiction of nineteenth-century Haussmannization, it equally, and ironically, upgrades and intensifies the possibilities for expanding the citizen's agora.'⁴⁰ What we call 'specters of Haussmann,' Merrifield calls 'neo-Haussmannization.'

Haussmannization and neo-Haussmannization, he says, share a 'historical and geographical lineage,' reflected in the family resemblance between boulevards and highways. The '[t]wenty-first-century grand boulevards,' he writes, 'now flow with energy and finance, with information and communication, and they're frequently fiber-optic and digitalized, ripping through cyberspace as well as physical space.'⁴¹ In short, '[n]eo-Haussmannization is a global-urban strategy that has peripheralized millions of people everywhere to the extent that it makes no sense anymore to talk about these

people being peripheral. As cities have exploded into mega-cities, and as urban centers – even in the poorest countries – have gotten de-centered, glitzy and internationalized, “Bonapartism” projects its urban tradition onto a planetary space.’⁴²

This process of neo-Haussmannization today affects millions of neighborhoods in cities all over the world. ‘Now, the Baudelairean “family eyes,” has gone truly global,’ says Merrifield.⁴³ These global eyes are ‘media eyes’: ‘People can now see the global aristocratic elite along this planetary information and communication boulevard, see them through the windowpanes of Neoliberal global-urban life.’⁴⁴ Haussmann’s specter is more alive than ever.

Notes

- 1 In Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Convolute E, [E3, 6], trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 128–129.
- 2 Ibid., 219.
- 3 Le Corbusier’s 1925 *Urbanisme* was translated into English as *The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning* (New York: Dover Publications, 1987). The image of Haussmann’s equipment is reproduced on page 155 of this edition.
- 4 See Benjamin, op. cit., 134.
- 5 In Convolute E, [E5a, 6], *ibid.*, 133 (italics in original).
- 6 Quoted by Benjamin, op. cit., [12, 1], 145.
- 7 Ibid., 133.
- 8 Ibid., 131.
- 9 Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé 1939,’ in *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 24.
- 10 Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé 1935,’ in *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 13.
- 11 Ibid., 11.
- 12 Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 147.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 See David Kishik, *The Manhattan Project: A Theory of a City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 150.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Cited in *ibid.*
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid., 151.
- 20 Quoted in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [E4, 2], op. cit., 129. Also see Kishik, op. cit., 151.
- 21 See Marshal Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 150.
- 22 Ibid., 152–153.
- 23 Ibid., 153.
- 24 Ibid., 147.
- 25 Ibid., 164.

- 26 Ibid., 165.
- 27 Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 11–12 (italics in original).
- 28 Berman, op. cit., 169. Berman has some very insightful observations about Le Corbusier's modernism in relation to Baudelaire's modernism that we cannot discuss here. He develops a critique of the killing of the idea of street in Le Corbusier in reference to the work of Jane Jacobs that is equally perceptive, and which would require an extended discussion.
- 29 See David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London and New York: Verso, 2012).
- 30 Ibid., 7.
- 31 Quoted in *ibid.*
- 32 Ibid., 8.
- 33 Ibid., 9.
- 34 Ibid., 9–10.
- 35 Ibid., 10.
- 36 See Any Merrifield, *The New Urban Question* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 87 (italics in original).
- 37 Ibid., 37.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid., 86.
- 41 Ibid., 29.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid., 88.
- 44 Ibid.



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Part II

Media, technology, and modern experience



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4 Walter Benjamin and media theory

In the annals of the twentieth century, two seminal essays stand out, written by two very different thinkers: one is Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in Its Age of Technological Reproducibility'; the other is Jacques Lacan's 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytical Experience.' Aside from the fact that they were both written around 1936, what do the two texts have in common? Virtually nothing *except* that they both are, in essence, anti-Fascist treatises – hence their enduring relevance, particularly at this historical juncture.

Friedrich Kittler begins his book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* with a curt statement: 'Media determine our situation, which – in spite or because of it – deserves a description.'¹ So-called 'media theory,' as many commentators tell us, first emerged in 1960s. This is correct insofar as one understands media, as Kittler does, as ways of recording, storing, and retrieving information, and media theory as a theory of communication, especially in its digital turn. Of course, writers on media are wont to remind us of the historical shifts of 'media' from orality to print to mechanical reproduction to digital simulation. For us, however, media theory as such was laid down in 1936, when Benjamin penned his essay.



Benjamin's theory was not about the technology of media as recording, storing, and retrieving information. The latter is a particularly *apolitical* and *ahistorical* definition of media, whether mechanical or digital, that has become current today. This definition of media that digital capitalism promotes should be rejected. Benjamin's theory, instead, was about historical memory. From this standpoint, one could say that media theory today is haunted by the specter of Benjamin. The unbridled *historicism* that underpins contemporary media theory, including the current technologically deterministic tele-techno-digital 'simulacrum' (a term to which we return), conjures away the specters of the past that are at the very core of Benjamin's media theory. These specters are captured in the word *Eingedenken*, which cannot be simply translated as 'reminiscence' or 'remembrance,' since it carries a 'theological' meaning.² In *Eingedenken*, Benjamin wrote, 'we make an

experience which forbids us to conceive history in a fundamentally atheological way.³ For Benjamin, 'the past and the future are always connected through a series of spectral relays because the "dead become ghosts."⁴ Before we unpack this notion, it is worth emphasizing how a structure of spectrality is encoded in all of Benjamin's writings, and especially on technological media. Thus, as Gerhard Richter remarks, in his ghostly *The Arcades Project* Benjamin very deliberately picked up on the literary tradition that conceived Paris as a city haunted by ghosts.⁵ Whether it was through the everyday experience of Paris, or through the medium of photography, it is in the 'haunted nature of technological innovation such as the telephone, street lighting, and railway travel, or the cultural anachronism of Baudelaire's flâneur and his metropolitan habitats, [that] Benjamin's texts are populated by ghosts and phantoms.'⁶

But this is still not the main reason why Benjamin's specter can be said to haunt media theory today. Benjamin's *actuality* lies rather in his complex interweaving of a philosophy of history, an aesthetic theory, and a theory of perception, all within a *theological* conception of history. Such a stance stands in sharp contrast with those of Marshal McLuhan or Jean Baudrillard, to take two common examples. It also contrasts with the recent wave of digital euphoria with which architects are so familiar. It is not just that McLuhan was apolitical – if not reactionary – or that Baudrillard was cynical toward capitalism. It is not even that their present-day followers have become naïve apologists of digital postmodern capitalism (as is the case, sadly, with so much digitally obsessed theorists populating the field of architecture). That so many among the latter would rely on a misnomer like 'virtual reality' that empties the philosophical notion of the virtual and replaces it with a naïve empiricist understanding of 'reality' as something that was always there to be all of a sudden rendered 'virtual' by the triumphant arrival of the digital is a symptom of a deeper problem. The real failure of media theory today is that it has no theory of the subject, no significant theory of perception, and no discernible theory of aesthetics. It is to never have taken seriously the notion, which was the hallmark of Benjamin's understanding of his age, that the time of modern technology is also the time of psychoanalysis – that in the epoch of technology, nothing is *technological* that is not also a *psychic*, *spectral*, and therefore also *phantasmagorical* reality.



There are, of course, notable exceptions to our characterization. Media theorist Norbert Bolz, for example, attempts to ground the 'actuality' of Benjamin in what he terms a 'theory of modern media.'⁷ He argues that Benjamin's writings on aesthetics and art must be viewed as more than simply a 'theory of the beautiful in art' but rather as an 'archeology of modernity,' made up of 'dream-consciousness, phantasmagoria, fashion, and advertisement' – to which we would of course add architecture.

Based on Benjamin's account (especially in the 1936 version of the Art-work essay) of how machine technology transforms the world into a 'second

nature' that elicits *interplay* with, rather than domination by, the subject, and processes that make 'the tremendous technical apparatus of our time into an object of human *innervation*,' Bolz develops a theory of art as 'the training of perception in a mechanized world.'⁸ In Benjamin's time, film was the primary medium for this, which is why cinema occupies such a central place in his thought, as a vehicle for changing the human sensorium in parallel with aesthetic experience. Indeed, the notion of the mediated city, as we shall see, cannot be dissociated from cinema and what Bolz describes as the modern problem of Form inherent in the technical aspects of film.

In Convolute K of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin noted: 'Film: unfolding <result?> of all the form of perception, the tempo and rhythms, which lies preformed in today's machines, such that all problems of contemporary art find their definitive formulation only in the context of film.'⁹ In this definition, as Bolz points out, the words 'perception' (or 'forms of visualization') and 'performance' that find their 'formulation' are references to an 'objective relationship with a technical standard. A change of perception, and a theory of media: as is readily visible from the words themselves, this is a relationship of form.'¹⁰ 'Benjamin viewed his own moment of time as determined by forms imposed on his existence by the operation of mechanical and technical apparatuses.'¹¹ 'Modernity,' in this view, 'shifts the natural process of "relating to the world" from humans to their machines and to their technologies of media.'¹² According to Bolz, Benjamin adapted a radical perspective by reframing the 'operative distinction' in play between first and second nature, and between first and second technology, conceiving a new relationship between the individual and the collective. Bolz claims that Benjamin ascribes to humanity 'the concrete, self-organizing task of innervating technology, and suggests that for individuals this will remain an abstract, utopian goal.'¹³ In Benjamin's words, 'the technical apparatus of our time is second nature for the individual; to make it a first to the collective, is the historical task of film.'¹⁴ Bolz addresses the 'individual/collective' distinction and points out that from Benjamin's perspective the concept of media 'develops a clear contour as the historical-technical a priori that organizes the collective's perception.'¹⁵ This means 'that a genuinely Benjaminian aesthetic theory is, by definition, a lesson in perception and ought not to be concerned with the "artistic value" of the artwork: post-Hegelian aesthetics tend to be oriented toward construction of forms rather than styles.'¹⁶

Elsewhere, in a more systematic fashion, Bolz stresses the complexity of Benjamin's theory, in which the articulation between the elements of the philosophy of history, aesthetics, and theology come to light in a manner that, as he puts it, is a 'deconstruction' rather than a 'constriction' of theory. His basic thesis is that 'Benjamin's aesthetics break down into a theory of media and a philosophical history of the aesthetic.'¹⁷ Benjamin's aesthetic categories, he claims, are 'dissolved into political and historico-theological concepts.' In Benjamin's words, 'Perfected critique breaks the space of aesthetics.'¹⁸ Bolz goes on to reiterate his thesis that in Benjamin's work, the aesthetic is transformed into a 'theory of perception in the age of apparatus.'¹⁹

More specifically: 'Time and again Benjamin emphasizes the position of the human being "in front of the apparatus." The latter possesses such a transformative power that we can speak of a new way for the human to become human.'²⁰ Indeed, 'only when they are eye-to-eye with the new media technologies do humans become human.'²¹ Hence, as Boltz perceptively notes, 'what the golden age of Marxism liked to evoke as self-alienation is recognized as a productive power – as a chance for emancipation from the "old Adam."²²

Bolz notes further that apparati are capable of liberating because 'humans themselves operate in an appartuslike fashion.'²³ He reminds us that Benjamin's 'refunctionalization of the human apparatus of apperception' figured human perception as also an apparatus. This is the crux of Benjamin's media theory that rarely registers in the contemporary discourse of digital tele-techno-media theorists. The concept of *apparatus* has direct and productive implications for media and communication technologies. We will explore this, and specifically its implications for the 'architectural apparatus,' in later chapters. Boltz claims that Benjamin has an 'organic concept of technology' in which matter is replaced with a so-called 'collective body.' 'Thus a mysticism of the moving collective body,' Boltz asserts, 'whose organ is technology results. [. . .] This very mysticism is for Benjamin the key to the most burning actual relevance. In order to perceive the reality of the masses, and the masslike, natural optics must be transcended: apparati penetrate perception.'²⁴

From Benjamin's claim that 'history breaks down into images, not into stories,'²⁵ Boltz deduces that everything in Benjamin's philosophy of history pushes toward theology. As he says, we know only history when we 'interrupt its unfolding' through a political act that interrupts 'the flow of history while giving it form.'²⁶ Such an act is what is achieved, for example, 'through citation and montage. History is construction and not contemplation.'²⁷ 'To actualize means to render history a scandal for the present. The most decided antithesis to this is the historicist position. The historicist is "caught in images," which for Benjamin means mythical self-consciousness. Thus, the sense of historical construction is the transformation of history into scandal.'²⁸ Benjamin reconfigured aesthetic and historical concepts in political-theological terms, in order to 'link revolutionary destruction with the idea of redemption.'²⁹ We might recall here how Benjamin praised the 'poverty of experience' for its constructive power to unleash 'the destructive power which lies in the idea of redemption.'³⁰

There is an element of 'religion' in all of this that Boltz brings out quite clearly. Benjamin's great disappointment, according to Boltz, was 'the decline of the medium of *experience*.'³¹ To this he opposed the twin forces of, first, a 'desperately offensive theory of the poverty of experience,' based in part on Brecht, and, second, an 'intricate rescue mission for the ugly dwarf called theology.'³² Boltz explicitly links Benjamin's theology to Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, in which the philosopher invokes the 'formality of a structural

messianism without religion.' Bolz has his own position in this: 'Certainly, humans can make do without religion, but society cannot. Religion is a symptom of the fact that one cannot reduce society to humans. This is why theology survives as a descriptive or, as Benjamin says, as a "basic science."' ³³

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In one of the most sustained analyses of Benjamin's *Artwork* essay to date, still much misunderstood, Howard Caygill in his *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* brings out the salient features of the notion of technology in Benjamin.³⁴ Caygill's point-by-point commentary of Benjamin's text yields a definition of technology in relation to media theory that must be understood as the most perceptive and *correct* definition ever offered in the twentieth century, in contradistinction with that of Martin Heidegger and, with the possible exception of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, all other definitions current today.³⁵ In this regard, as Jacques Derrida has shown, Benjamin's essay and Barthes's last book 'could very well be the two most significant texts on the so-called question of the Referent in the modern technological age.'³⁶ Notably, both Benjamin and Barthes recognized the 'point of intersection between the era of psychoanalysis and that of technical reproduction, in cinematography, photography.'³⁷

We contend that Benjamin's definition is valid to explain the state of 'new' technology today, against those who claim that a 'new' current of digital-tele-techno-media, with its cult of 'virtuality' (a misconstrued term), is a radical departure that requires a new definition. We must make it clear, first of all, that Benjamin's definition of technology and its relation to the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility – as well as digital reproducibility or simulation – must be understood in the context of his theories of perception and experience, and above all in light of his original notion of *aisthesis*. The merit of Caygill's commentary, written with great clarity, is that he puts Benjamin's *Artwork* essays in relation to all of these.

Unfortunately, however, theories of media technology today are radically shut off from both contingency and the future. Their historicist conception of history, furthermore, precludes any opening to a political-historical determination. When Benjamin first advanced his notion of 'aura' in his 'Little History of Photography,' he saw it as historically produced. As Caygill writes, 'at the very moment that technology in the guise of photography challenged the limits of art, it was also used to re-create the experience of aura.' But more importantly, Benjamin saw the possibility of openness to the future when he evoked the notion of an 'optical unconscious,' in which 'a space informed by human consciousness gives way to space informed by the unconscious.'³⁸ Caygill comments, 'A space free of consciousness is charged with contingency if it is open to the future to becoming other than itself.'³⁹ This summarizes Benjamin's concept of experience, 'where the future subsists in the present as a contingency which, if realized, will retrospectively change the present. [. . .] The vulnerability of the present may be affirmed as

fragility, or denied in the attempt to transform contingency into the auratic, monumental present.⁴⁰

We should not fail to note that *all experience for Benjamin is technological*, since, as Caygill points out, ‘the term technology designates the artificial organization of perception; as such, experience changes with the development of technology.’⁴¹ With regard to the notion of the ‘optical unconscious,’ according to Benjamin in the early twentieth century, *the reality revealed by media technology* – that is, the camera – is ‘beyond the normal spectrum of sense impressions.’ In the second version of ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility,’ based on his reading of Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Benjamin suggested that the camera exposed for the first time an ‘optical unconscious’ in the same way that psychoanalysis discovered the ‘instinctual unconscious.’⁴² The two types of unconscious are ‘intimately linked’ because, as he put it, ‘many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. Thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception.’⁴³

The *locus classicus* of this ‘collective perception’ and its corollary psychosis, we will argue, is the mediated city, where ‘the technological destruction of experience raises the prospect of a “different nature” [second technological nature, or ‘technological *physis*’] in which “an unconsciously penetrated space is replaced by a space consciously explored by humanity.”’⁴⁴ As we will see in a later chapter, the best part of Caygill’s commentary on the *Art-work* essay, missing in commentaries by other critics, is his discussion on the section XV of the second version of the essay where Benjamin comes to the analogy of film with architecture, considering architecture to be an art that most effectively responds to the technological changes in the structure of experience, and thus qualifiable as a *medium* in its own right.



How does the ‘new’ digital media technology and telecommunication industry change the organization of human experience? How does this mode of technology reorganize the political experience and the cultural system of contemporary postmodern capitalism that has given rise to it in the first place? Has not this technology, through an obsessive concern with ‘uniqueness’ and ‘monumentality,’ returned ‘aura’ back to the work of art and architecture, emptying them of their critical-political capacity? Recall that, according to Benjamin, there are progressive and regressive uses of technology in each of its developmental stages. In each stage, in its regressive mode, it can restore uniqueness, distance, and permanence – in short, monumentality. The regressive attitude in the Benjaminian sense would lead to the reversal of the ‘total function of art,’ which in progressive uses would base the practice of art and its technological organization of human experience ‘on another practice – politics.’ Has not the new media technology reversed

this process, bringing it back to the practice of 'magic' and 'ritual,' to the *fantasy structure* of a new phantasmagoria?

Two key terms permeate the discourse on digital media technology today: 'virtual' and 'simulacrum.' Much has been written, sometimes of dubious value, on these two terms, which emptied of their philosophical meanings have often been reduced to purely utilitarian phrases, well suited to a culture of *technocracy*. The first is quickly disposed of: without going into Gilles Deleuze's extended discussion of it,⁴⁵ it is sufficient to mention how the term 'virtual,' transposed into the technological term 'virtual reality,' almost always degenerates into the rather 'miserable term' Žižek refers to when he asks, rhetorically, if anything can attain 'reality' *without* being *always already* virtual. The second term descends chiefly from the more sophisticated but also more cynical discourse of Baudrillard, who popularized the terms 'simulation' and 'simulacrum' in a series of writings starting from 'Requiem for the Media' in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of Sign* to his later *Simulation and Simulacrum*.⁴⁶ There is a long trajectory from Marshal McLuhan's media theory as encapsulated in 'the medium is the message,' to Baudrillard's theory of simulation.⁴⁷ Huyssen in 'In the Shadow of McLuhan' explores these affinities – notwithstanding the critique of the former by the latter – perceptively criticizing both on social and political grounds.⁴⁸ As Huyssen points out, the theory of 'simulation,' or what in French is named *télématique* (a neologism combining *télévision* and *informatique* [data processing]), is essentially a media theory.⁴⁹ The history of this theory in the aftermath of the 1960s is basically the history of the apparatus of image production and its dissemination. Simulation, on this view, may simply be understood to be 'the ideology of the end of ideology': 'After all, Huyssen asks, how are we to read Baudrillard's texts if not as demystifications of Marxian and psychoanalysis, as a debunking of cherished concepts such as labor and use value, desire and the unconscious, the real and the imaginary, the social, the political, communications, information, and so on.'⁵⁰ According to Huyssen, faced with the emergence of consumerism and media culture in the 1960s, Baudrillard attacked the discourse of 'Western Marxism, up to and including Guy Debord's situationism, with the help of structuralist linguistics and theories of signification.'⁵¹ Moreover, he read history in terms of 'successive stages of the simulacrum, just as McLuhan read history as a function of changes in media technology.'⁵² As Huyssen notes, it is significant that categories of political economy, even the political economy of signs, vanished from Baudrillard's later theory, and most notably in 'The Precession of Simulacra.' Here the concept of simulation basically unchains the referent from reality. The result is a melancholy fixation on the loss of the real which, according to Huyssen, 'flips over into the desire to get beyond the real, beyond the body, beyond history. It is a religious desire, a desire for ultimate transcendence, achieved in Baudrillard, as in McLuhan, through the media.'⁵³ The consequence of such a stance is predicable. Huyssen asks: 'So what are we to find at the end of implosion, inside

the black hole about which Baudrillard keeps fantasizing?’ The answer is unfathomable: ‘Perhaps a postmodern potlatch in a global village. But we will never know, since the black hole will have absorbed all light, all images, all simulation. Iconoclasm writ large will have won the day, or rather: the night when television has finally gone off the air.’⁵⁴



After Baudrillard left, his Simulacrum stayed. It continues its life, if we can call it that, in digital capitalism. Its echo can be heard in the claims by post-modernist theorists of cyberspace that there is no firm reality. In the notion of Simulacrum – understood not in the philosophical manner of Plato or Deleuze but in its strict technological determinism – the copy has replaced the original; the image is more real than reality itself. As Žižek remarks in a chapter of his book *On Belief*, entitled ‘Against the Digital Heresy’: ‘no wonder that Leibniz is one of the predominant philosophical references of the cyberspace theorists. What reverberates today is not his dream of a universal computing machine, but the uncanny resemblance between his ontological vision of monadology and today’s emerging cyberspace community in which global harmony and solipsism strangely co-exists.’⁵⁵ He rhetorically asks: ‘does our immersion into cyberspace not go hand in hand with our reduction to a Leibnizean monad which, although “without window” that would directly open up to external reality, mirrors in itself the entire universe?’⁵⁶

Žižek further poses the question: ‘Are we not more and more monads with no direct windows onto reality, interacting alone with the PC screen, encountering only the virtual simulacra, and yet immersed more than ever in the global network, synchronically communicating with the entire globe?’⁵⁷ It is the ‘spectral simulacra’ behind the screen, acting as prosthetic extension that connect us to the ‘real world’ out there. As we will see later, theorists of digital media in architecture who adopt Leibniz and its monadic universe from the philosophical discourse of Deleuze literally *apply* it to design. This *technologicalistic* adaptation of the philosophical monad, a ‘room with no window,’ has become a mainstay in the total mediatic turn that architecture takes after 1980.

As Žižek warns us, media constantly exhorts us to abandon ‘old paradigms,’ from the notion of Self and identity to the very idea of society, etc. It tells us that we are now in a ‘post-human’ era, in a ‘postmodern’ political world, in a ‘post-industrial’ society in which ‘old’ categories of labor, value, class, etc. are no longer valid in the current dynamics of technological modernization. Similarly, cyberspace ideologists promote the notion that the Self is liberated from the body, ‘a virtual entity floating from one to another contingent and temporary embodiment,’ and that presents itself ‘as the final scientific-technological realization of the Gnostic dream of the self getting rid of the decay and inertia of material reality.’⁵⁸ In the Virtual Reality of cyberspace, the old Gnostic dream of the immaterial body comes into

its own. Its utopia promises to deliver us from our bodily inertia. Žižek usefully outlines the theoretical components of cyberspace, from its 'purely technological celebration of supercomputers,' to the New Age ideology of Gnosticism, to 'the historicist-socio-critical "deconstructionist" deployment of the liberating potential,' which blurs the limits of the Cartesian ego that 'allows us to pass from the male-Cartesian-liberal-identitarian subject' to the cyborg post-human form of subjectivity, to a digitally reinterpreted Heideggerian notion of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world.⁵⁹ Regarding the latter, Žižek notes that 'the advent of genome and the technological perspective of the "uploading" of the human mind onto a computer provides the clearest vision of what Heidegger had in mind when he spoke of the "danger" of planetary technology.'⁶⁰

Žižek is particularly harsh on the attempts to 'humanize' the passage to the 'post-human.' He specifically cites Katherine Hayles, who in her *How We Became Posthuman* writes, 'If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life as embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival.'⁶¹ For Žižek, however, Hayles has a crude view of the 'opposition between the liberal self-identical autonomous *human* subject of the Enlightenment and the *posthuman* body in which the frontier that separates my autonomous Self from its mechanical prostheses is constantly permeated, and in which the Self in itself explodes into the famous "society of minds."⁶² Žižek notes perceptively that the Enlightenment had a deeply ambiguous attitude toward the mechanical aspect of human beings, in the eighteenth-century notion of *l'homme machine*. He reminds us that the Cartesian subject of the Enlightenment, in its German idealist version, was already 'post-human.' 'The Kantian subject of transcendental apperception is a pure void of the negative self-relationship which emerges through the violent gesture of abstracting from all "pathological" content which makes up the wealth of a "human personality."⁶³

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Today, immersed in a total data stream of digital utopian euphoria, an apolitical and anti-historical digital capitalism is haunted by the specter of Walter Benjamin. Technologists of digital media of all stripes conjure away any *political* media theory that might be grounded, as a theory, a philosophy, and a doctrine of *experience*, in a *politics of aesthetics* and a conception of technology as the mode of organization of perception. Let us be clear: media theory must be reconfigured for the cause of the political Left. It is in this sense that we are the inheritors of Benjamin. His media theory is the metonymy of his entire oeuvre. But we must ask: how might Benjamin's

theses find an application, and how might they ‘perform’ in a digital environment that he could not have anticipated? Richard Shiff, in ‘Digitized Analogies,’ a contribution to a recent collection entitled *Mapping Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, makes a convincing case for the sustained relevance of Benjamin.⁶⁴ He emphasizes the ‘abrupt analogies’ in the Artwork essay, the phenomena of technological fragmentation and recombination, and the speed with which Benjamin’s essay suggests images travel and are reproduced in the modern industrial economy. He writes: ‘Despite the shift to a postindustrial economy, Benjamin’s concern for the rate and quality of change seems particularly relevant to problems currently raised by digital photography and other forms of electronic imagery and recording.’⁶⁵ He argues that Benjamin’s theses also speak to the interactive environment of simulation known as virtual reality and ‘its remarkable capacity for countering a viewer’s resistance to illusion.’⁶⁶ He further asserts that ‘abrupt analogies’ in Benjamin ‘quite effectively identify the implication of recent technological change and only now reveal the greater historical significance of his argument. Just as photography’s potential for speed conceals film within, so film’s potential for unlimited cutting and pasting conceals digitization within itself.’⁶⁷ He remarks, ‘Computer technology, for better or worse, allows the testing of images to proceed at such a pace that there may be no time to contemplate their selection. As Benjamin said of the movies, “No sooner has [the] eye grasped a scene than it has already changed.”’⁶⁸

We must return to the thinkers who are not in the business of hunting down or denouncing as ‘scandalous’ the specters of historical memory. Benjamin’s thoughts continued to live in Roland Barthes’s speculations in his *Camera Lucida*, especially in the singular notional pair, *studium/punctum*, through which the memory of his deceased mother pervades the text. We never see the picture of the Winter Garden, yet its specter is present on every page. It is appropriate to note here the affinities between Barthes’s idea of *punctum* and Benjamin’s notion of ‘aura.’ The latter, in turn, is close to Lacan’s notion of the ‘Gaze.’ The thoughts of Benjamin-Barthes give rise to Derrida’s notion of Specters that he extensively theorized in his *Specters of Marx*, and also to the writings of his interlocutor Bernard Stiegler. We thus obtain a thought of media in continuity with Benjamin’s theses that is anathema to digital ideologists, whose obsessive fantasy of cyberspace and ‘virtual reality’ we will characterize as a ‘phantasmagoria of the simulacrum.’

Hence the *actuality* of Benjamin. In a dialogue between Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler in a book entitled *Echographies of Television*, we can recognize traces of Benjamin through the notion of inheritance, without his name being evoked.⁶⁹ Derrida and Stiegler discuss contemporary everyday media, newspapers, radio, television, etc. They critique a teletechnology that is, they argue, ‘confusedly called information or communication,’ along with the media’s ‘idolatry of “immediate” presence’ and ‘inflation of simulacrum.’ For Derrida, ‘[e]verything is constructed, fictionalized, constituted by and for the apparatus of media.’⁷⁰ In the section titled ‘Spectrographies,’ Stiegler

cites Derrida as having said: 'To be haunted by a ghost is to remember what one has never lived in the present, to remember what, in essence, has never had the form of presence.'⁷¹ For Derrida, 'Film is "phantomachia." Let the ghosts come back. Film plus psychoanalysis equals a science of ghosts. Modern technology, contrary to appearances, although it is scientific, increase tenfold the power of ghosts, the future belongs to ghosts.'⁷² Derrida makes a distinction between Specter and Ghost: 'In the series of more or less equivalent words that accurately designates haunting, *specter*, as distinct from *ghost* [revenant], speaks of the spectacle. The specter is first and foremost something visible. It is of the visible, but of the invisible visible, it is the visibility of a body which is present in flesh and blood.'⁷³

When Derrida passionately discusses the inheritance of Marx and the 'visor effect,' he says, 'The specter is not simply someone we see coming back, it is something by whom we feel ourselves watched, observed, surveyed, as if by the law: we are "before the law," without any possible symmetry, without reciprocity, insofar as the other is watching only us, concerns only us . . . without even being able to meet its gaze.'⁷⁴ Further: 'This is why I am in heteronomy. This does not mean that I am not free; on the contrary, it is a *condition of freedom* so to speak: my freedom springs from the condition of this responsibility which is born of heteronomy in the eyes of other, in the other's sight. This gaze is spectrality itself.'⁷⁵ According to Derrida, not only Benjamin but also Marx understood the essence of technics, or 'the irreducibility of the technical, in science, in language, in politics, and even the irreducibility of media.'⁷⁶ Marx also paid attention to spectrality: 'Why would we have to let the dead bury their dead, as Marx says in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, in the biblical tradition? Why would we have to analyze phantomality to the point of making it disappear?'⁷⁷ Consistent with his view of Marx noted above, Derrida described how Marx's critiqued phantomality tends to make it disappear, 'just as fetishism can be critiqued, to the point of making them [along with phantoms] *effectively disappear* (the question of fetishism, like that of ideology, is at the center of this debate about spectrality).'⁷⁸

Insofar as more technology brings about more and more spectrality, and insofar as we are watched by invisible visible specters that the technological reductionism of digital fetishists want to conjure away, we remain under the spell of Benjamin's political theory of media that continues to haunt us today.

Notes

- 1 See Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. with intro., Geoffrey Winter-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), xxxix. Also see his previous influential book *Discourse Networks 1880/1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
- 2 For more explanation see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), chapter 4.

- 3 Quoted in *ibid.*, 137.
- 4 See Gerhard Richter's 'Introduction: Benjamin's Ghosts,' in *Benjamin's Ghosts*, ed., Gerhard Richter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.
- 5 See *ibid.*, 4.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 See Norbert Bolz, 'Aesthetics of Medias: What Is the Cost of Keeping Benjamin Current,' in *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, eds., Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 24–29.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 26 (emphasis added).
- 9 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, in *Convolute K* [K3,3], trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 394.
- 10 Bolz, *op. cit.*, 27.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Quoted in *ibid.*, 28–29.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 See Norbert Bolz, 'Aesthetics? Philosophy of History? Theology?' in *Benjamin's Ghosts*, ed., Gerhard Richter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 227.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 228.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, 229.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Quoted in *ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*, 230.
- 29 Quoted in *ibid.*, 231.
- 30 Quoted in *ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid* (*italics in original*).
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Ibid.*, 233.
- 34 See Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).
- 35 In this regard see, for example, the analysis by Beatrice Hanssen in her 'Benjamin or Heidegger: Aesthetics and Politics in the Age of Technology,' in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed., Andrew Benjamin (New York: Continuum, 2005), 73–92 Also see the various essay in the collection already cited above, *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, *op. cit.*
- 36 See Jacques Derrida, 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes,' in *The Work of Mourning*, eds., Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2001), 39.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 38–39.
- 38 Quoted in Caygill, *op. cit.*, 94; also see Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,' second version, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938 (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 118.

- 39 Caygill, op. cit.
- 40 Ibid., 94–95.
- 41 Ibid., 96.
- 42 Benjamin, 'The Work of Art,' op. cit., 117.
- 43 Ibid., 117–118.
- 44 Caygill, op. cit., 112–113.
- 45 See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans., Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- 46 See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacrum and Simulation*, trans., Shiela Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1994). In many other of his books Baudrillard constantly returns to the terms 'simulation,' 'simulacra,' 'hyperreality,' etc. in his persistent take on the problem of media.
- 47 See Marshal McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).
- 48 See Andreas Huyssen, 'In the Shadow of McLuhan: Baudrillard's Theory of Simulation,' in *Twilight of Memories, Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).
- 49 Ibid., 176.
- 50 Ibid., 179.
- 51 Ibid., 180. Huyssen further remarks, 'Likewise, McLuhan attacked the hostility of traditional humanists to media and modernization. [. . .] What Linguistic theory was for Baudrillard's sociology, popular culture and the media were for McLuhan's cultural criticism: a means to attack the hegemonic discourse of their respective disciplines. Where Baudrillard announced the end of classical political economy, McLuhan claimed that the age literacy, Gutenberg galaxy, was coming to an end in the electronic age. Where Baudrillard focused on the importance of process of signification in language and image in order first to expand the classical Marxist critique of reification and commodification and ultimately to dump it, McLuhan carried cultural criticism into the realm of popular culture, abandoned literature altogether, and yet remained true to his new critical heritage in privileging the medium over the message,' *ibid.*, 181.
- 52 Ibid., 188. 'What is interesting here,' Huyssen adds, 'is the fact that his 1967 periodization of simulacra is still linked to the discourse of value while in the later text the successive phases of the image are discussed in theological terms – yet another rapprochement with McLuhan,' *ibid.*
- 53 Ibid., 190.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 See Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 26.
- 56 In *ibid.*
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid., 33.
- 59 Ibid., 34.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Quoted in *ibid.*, 35. Also see N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1999), 5.
- 62 Ibid., N. 27, 153–154.
- 63 Ibid., 154.
- 64 See Richard Shiff, 'Digitized Analogies,' in *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, eds., Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 63–70.
- 65 Ibid., 66.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Ibid., 69–70.

78 *Media, technology, and modern experience*

68 Ibid., 70.

69 Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002).

70 Ibid., 6. Derrida reflects on the notion of virtuality in relation of *actuality*: 'I would insist not only on the *artificial* synthesis (synthetic image, synthetic voice, all the prosthetic supplements that can take the place of real actuality), but above all on a concept of *virtuality* (virtual image, virtual space, and so virtual event) that can doubtless no longer be opposed, in perfect philosophical serenity, to actual [*actuelle*] reality in the way that philosophers used to distinguish between power and act, *dynamis* and *energeia*, the potentiality of a material and the defining form of a *telos*, and therefore also of progress, etc.,' *ibid.*

71 Ibid., 115.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 120.

75 Ibid., 122 (*italics in original*).

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 126.

78 Ibid. (*italics in original*).

5 From *aisthesis* to *anaesthetics*

'Phantasmagorias are a technoaesthetics,' writes Susan Buck-Morss in her stimulating 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered.'¹ In this groundbreaking essay, Buck-Morss addresses the memorable epilogue of Benjamin's Artwork essay where he asserts: '*Such is the aestheticization of politics, as practiced by Fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.*'² Buck-Morss's interpretation is as novel as it is disturbing. Referring to Lacan's 'The Mirror Stage' thesis, she suggests that the narcissism of adults – in Lacan's terms, the 'imaginary ego' of the mirror image – is fascism's reflection. If this confirms the validity of Benjamin's thesis at the end of the Artwork essay, that under fascism 'we experience our own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order,' it also foregrounds the 'anaesthetizing tactic against the shock of modern experience' present everywhere in the image-phantasmagoria of mass culture, as 'the ground from which fascism can again push forth.'³ Benjamin's Artwork essay and Lacan's 'The Mirror Stage' were both written in 1936 and, as we suggested earlier, can be considered as *the* two anti-fascist declarations of the twentieth century. Significantly, after he delivered his paper in Marienbad, Lacan left immediately to take the train to Berlin in order to watch the Nazi Olympic Games there.⁴

A central thesis comes out of Buck-Morss's analysis that culminates in a definition of phantasmagoria important for our argument: Phantasmagoria is inevitably implicated in effects of *intoxication* or *anaesthetization*. In view of this, her essay helps illuminate aspects of phantasmagoria that were touched upon in previous chapters. They relate to the problem of *mediation* of technology in the organization of the human sensorium as itself the medium through which the subject opens itself to external reality. In what follows, we analyze the consequences of this mediation for the subject, whose constitution is conditioned by the stimuli arising from the modern city. At the center of this dynamic is a theory of experience that is directly related to a theory of the city conceived – to reiterate – on the model of Lacan's famous thesis of the 'unconscious structured like a language,' according to which the city is 'structured like a phantasmagoria.'

First, however, it is necessary to better understand 'anaesthetics' in connection to *aisthesis*. This is best accomplished by considering the meaning

of the term in Benjamin, as read by Buck-Morss, and its recent extension in the work of Jacques Rancière. The latter has contributed significantly to expanding the term ‘aesthesis’ in relation to politics. In this way, we argue that any valid and credible definition of ‘technology’ must ground itself between aesthetics and politics.



It is useful to first recall briefly the etymological meaning of the term ‘aesthetics.’ The original Greek word *aisthesis* means ‘perception by feeling.’ As Buck-Morss defines it, *aisthesis* is ‘the sensory experience of perception,’ which means that the ‘field of aesthetics is not art but reality’ in a corporeal and material sense. Buck-Morss cites Terry Eagleton, who in his *Ideology of the Aesthetic* emphasized that ‘Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body.’⁵ Simply put, ‘aesthetics’ is a form of cognition through bodily senses – through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, and smell – which constitute the whole corporeal sensorium. As Buck-Morss explains, the organs of the body related to these senses are located on the surface of the body, mediating between inner and outer. Thus, the original word ‘aesthetics’ has little to do with notions of art, beauty, or truth. The senses, on this view, are the ‘effects of the nervous system, composed of hundreds of billions of neurons extending from the body surfaces through the spinal cord, to the brain.’⁶ Importantly, Buck-Morss states that the nervous system is not contained within the body’s limits: ‘The circuit from sense-perception to motor response begins and ends in the world. [. . .] As the source of stimuli and the arena for motor response, the external world must be included to complete the sensory circuit.’⁷ The field of sensory circuits, as she further explains, corresponds to ‘experience,’ which in a classical philosophical sense mediates between subject and object. This leads to the key term ‘synaesthetic system.’ She writes:

In order to differentiate our description from more limited, traditional conception of the human nervous system which artificially isolates human biology from its environment, we will call this aesthetic system of sense-consciousness, decentered from the classical subject wherein external sense-perceptions come together with internal images of memory and anticipation, the “synaesthetic system.”⁸

Buck-Morss here shows convincingly that Benjamin’s understanding of modern experience is neurological and centered on the experience of shock. From Freud, Benjamin derived the idea that consciousness is ‘a shield protecting the organism against stimuli – excessive energies – from without, by preventing their retention, their impress as memory.’⁹ As Benjamin put it, ‘the threat from these energies is one of shocks. The more readily consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely they are to have a traumatic effect.’¹⁰ Buck-Morss writes: ‘Without the depth of memory, experience is impoverished. The problem is that under conditions of modern shock – the

daily shock of the modern world – response to stimuli *without* thinking has become necessary for survival. [. . .] The technologically altered environment exposes the human sensorium to physical shocks that have their correspondence in psychic shock, as Baudelaire's poetry bears witness.¹¹

However, since 'perception becomes experience only when it connects with sense-memories of the past', 'being "cheated out of experience" has become the general state, as the synaesthetic system is marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. As a result, the system reverses its role: Its goal is to *numb* the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather, one of *anaesthetics*.'¹²

Thus, according to Buck Morss,

the simultaneity of overstimulation is characteristic of the new synaesthetic organization of *anaesthetics*. The dialectical reversal, whereby aesthetics changes from a cognitive mode of being "in touch" with reality to a way of blocking out reality, destroys the human organism's power to respond politically even when self-preservation is at stake: Someone who is "past experiencing" is "no longer capable of telling . . . proven friend . . . from mortal enemy."¹³

In medical terms, during the latter part of the nineteenth century, anaesthetics emerged as a technique that doctors would prescribe against the disease of 'neurasthenia.' Its effect was the disintegration of the capacity for experience. Thus, to the 'already-existing Enlightenment narcotic forms of coffee, tobacco, tea, and spirits, there was added a vast arsenal of drugs and therapeutic practices, from opium, ether, and cocaine, to hypnosis, hydrotherapy, and electric shock.'¹⁴ 'Drug addiction,' Buck-Morss remarks, 'is characteristic of modernity. It is the correlate and counterpart of shock. [. . .] The experience of intoxication is not limited to drug-induced, biochemical transformations. Beginning in the nineteenth century, a narcotic was made out of reality itself.'¹⁵ And phantasmagoria, as Buck-Morss shows, was its principle effect.

To recall what we said in previous chapters, the term 'phantasmagoria' refers to an illusory appearance that tricks the 'senses through technical manipulation. And as new technologies multiplied in the nineteenth century, so did the potential for phantasmagoric effects.'¹⁶ Buck-Morss notes here the double function of technology: 'On the one hand, it extends the human senses, increasing the acuity of perception, and forces the universe to open itself up to penetration by the human sensory apparatus. On the other hand, precisely because this technological extension leaves the senses open to exposure, technology doubles back on the senses as protection in the form of illusion, taking over the role of ego in order to provide defensive insulation. The development of the machine as tool has its correlation in the development of the machine as armor.'¹⁷

Thus, phantasmagoria takes its place alongside the long history of drug-induced intoxications. But, whereas drug addicts, Buck-Morss tells us, confront reality, in a society where intoxication is the norm, ‘phantasmagoria itself becomes the social norm.’ ‘*Sensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control.*’¹⁸ It is not by chance that ‘Benjamin describes the flâneur as self-trained in the capacity of distancing himself by turning reality into a phantasmagoria: Rather than being caught up in the crowd, he slows his pace and observes it, making patterns out of its surface. He sees the crowd as a reflection of his dream mood, an “intoxication” for his senses.’¹⁹

At this point, Buck-Morss turns to Adorno’s discussion of Wagner’s music drama as *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) and states, ‘It is this pseudo-totalization that, for Adorno, makes Wagnerian opera a phantasmagoria.’²⁰ She adds, ‘Wagnerian music drama floods the senses and fuses them as a “consoling phantasmagoria,” in a “permanent invitation to intoxication, as a form of oceanic regression.”’²¹ In reference to Marx’s analysis of commodity that Adorno deployed in his discussion of Wagner, Buck-Morss explains that the ‘illusion of Wagner’s art is analogous’;²² ‘The task of music is to hide the alienation and fragmentation, the loneliness and sensual impoverishment of modern existence that was the material out of which it is composed,’ citing Adorno as having said, ‘the task of [Wagner’s] music is to warm up the alienated and reified relations of man and make them sound as if they were still human.’²³

At the end of her essay, Buck-Morss comes back to Benjamin’s famous description of ‘the crisis in cognitive experience caused by alienation of the senses that makes it possible for humanity to view its own destruction with enjoyment.’²⁴ Lacan’s thesis in ‘The Mirror Stage,’ she argues, both lends support to Benjamin’s thesis and is itself a theory of fascism. While we need not get into a discussion of Lacan’s complex argument here, Buck-Morss’s insights on the ‘intoxication of phantasmagoria’ are directly relevant to the ‘architecture of phantasmagoria’ and its correlate, ‘the phantasmagoria of architecture,’ addressed in later chapters.



We stated above that any conception of technology must be grounded between aesthetics and politics, without which it will be reduced to a concept without *mediation*, as seen in the cult of technology so characteristic of media theory today. To this end, it is now essential to consider Rancière’s extended discussion of *aisthesis*. In the ‘prelude’ to *Aisthesis, Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, Rancière writes: ‘The term *Aisthesis* has designated the mode of experience according to which, for two centuries we perceive very diverse things, whether in their techniques of production or their destination, as all belonging to art. This is not a matter of the “reception” of works of art. Rather, it concerns the sensible fabric of experience within which they are produced.’²⁵ The latter are material conditions of production

and reproduction and modes of perception that, according to Rancière, are part of 'the 'aesthetic regime of art.' In his earlier work, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière defines the aesthetic as 'configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity.'²⁶ The aesthetic, for Rancière, 'refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationship.'²⁷ This is what defines, for Rancière, any given 'distribution of the sensible,' in which *politics* is another name for police ordering.²⁸ As Gabriel Rockhill explains, for Rancière 'the essence of *the political* (*as opposed to politics*) consists in interrupting the distribution of the sensible by supplementing it with those who have no part in the perceptual coordinates of the community, thereby, modifying the very aesthetico-political field of possibility.'²⁹

A full discussion of the 'distribution of the sensible' in relation to political practice appears in Rancière's *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*.³⁰ When questioned about the relation of this practice with aesthetic practice, Rancière noted: 'I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.'³¹ He then remarks, 'There is thus an "aesthetics" at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin's discussion of the "aestheticization of politics" specific to the "age of the masses."³² He added:

This aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by a consideration of the people qua work of art. If the reader is fond of analogy, aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.³³

Rancière here disregards the historical juncture that had lead Benjamin to use the phrase 'aestheticization of politics,' a point to which we will return in the next chapter on Benjamin and the 'poverty of experience.' In a similar way, his note on the 'Laban notation of movement' of 'liberated' bodies used in Nazi demonstrations and that has recently come back in performance art, Rancière says that 'Benjamin's explanation via the fatal aestheticization of politics in the "era of the masses" overlooks, perhaps, the long-standing connection between the unanimous consensus of the citizenry and exaltation of the free movements of bodies.'³⁴

Closer to our concern about technology in the nexus of politics and aesthetics are Rancière's remarks about Benjamin's theory of technology.

Addressing a question posed to him in *The Politics of Aesthetics* regarding the development of photography and film as ‘mechanical arts,’ and their role in furthering the visibility of the masses, Rancière locates the ‘mechanical arts’ between a scientific paradigm and an *aesthetic* paradigm. By contrast, Benjamin, in his view, deduced ‘the aesthetic and political properties of a form of art from its technical properties. Mechanical arts, qua *mechanical* arts, would result in a change of artistic paradigm and a new relationship between art and its subject matter.’³⁵ This proposition is consistent, he says, with the modernist thesis that ‘the difference between the arts is linked to the difference between their technological conditions or their specific medium or material.’³⁶

The persistent success of Benjamin’s theses on art in the age of mechanical reproduction is, moreover, undoubtedly due to the crossing-over they allow for between the categories of Marxist materialist explanation and those of Heideggerian ontology, which ascribe the age of modernity to the unfurling of the essence of technology. This link between the aesthetic and the onto-technological has, in fact, been subjected to the general fate of modernist categories. In Benjamin, Duchamp, or Rodchenko’s time, it coexisted with the faith in the capabilities of electricity and machines, iron, glass, and concrete.³⁷

For Rancière, the visibility of the masses is ‘first and foremost rooted in the aesthetic logic of a mode of visibility that, on the one hand, revokes the representative tradition’s scale of grandeur and, on the other hand, revokes the oratorical model of speech in favour of the interpretation of signs on the body of people, things, and civilization.’³⁸ Rancière remarks:

This is what scholarly history inherited. However, its intention was to separate the condition of its new object (the life of the anonymous) from its literary origin and from the politics of literature in which it is inscribed. What it cast aside – which was reappropriated by film and photography – was the logic revealed by the tradition of the novel (from Balzac to Proust and surrealism) and the reflection on the true that Marx, Freud, Benjamin and the tradition of ‘critical thought’ inherited: the ordinary becomes beautiful as a trace of the true. And the ordinary becomes trace of the true if it is torn from its obviousness in order to become a hieroglyph, a mythological or phantasmagoric figure.³⁹

And further:

The phantasmagoric dimension of the true, which belongs to the aesthetic regime of arts, played an essential role in the formation of the critical paradigm of the human and social sciences. The Marxist theory of fetishism is the most striking testimony of this fact: Commodities

must be torn out of their trivial appearances, made into phantasmagoric objects in order to be interpreted as the expression of society's contradiction. Scholarly history tried to separate out various features within the aesthetic-political configuration that gave it its object. It flattened this phantasmagoria of the true into the positivist sociological concept of mentality/expression and belief/ignorance.⁴⁰

Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible is a significant expansion of the aesthetic beyond an empirical register centered on perception and the sensorium and towards a more rational conceptual framework of categories. At the same time, it allows us to conceive the aesthetic in terms of specific technical procedures, thus expanding technology to include the ways in which the sensible itself is configured. While this conceptual operation is not without its problems, it helps us understand phantasmagoria as more than just illusion.



The city and its architecture are tokens of a certain kind of non-clinical unconscious. As we previously noted, underpinning phantasmagoria there is an unconscious structure that we called the structure of fantasy. This fantasy is aesthetic in precisely the way Rancière describes the 'aesthetic unconscious.' According to Rancière, the reason Freud went outside the clinical domain, to literary figures and art, such as Leonardo Da Vinci's *Notebooks*, or Michelangelo's *Moses*, or Goethe's *Faust*, is that he found an 'unconscious thought' in these figures.⁴¹ In his *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Rancière claims that the relations between the thought and the non-thought are formed in the field of aesthetics. He thus adds a new dimension to his already familiar thesis that the aesthetic is not a science or a discipline of art but rather, more fundamentally, 'a particular historical regime of thinking about art and an idea of thought according to which things of art are things of thought.'⁴² He accordingly hypothesizes that 'Freudian thought of the unconscious is only possible on the basis of this regime of thinking about art and the idea of thought that is immanent to it.'⁴³ Freudianism itself, according to Rancière, only became possible with the advent, two hundred years ago, of the 'aesthetic regime of art.'

For Rancière, the fact that Freud stepped out of his discipline and went to art and poetry testifies to his belief in a 'profound rationality of "fantasy" (*fantaisie*)' from which the whole idea of putting 'fantasy, poetry, and mythology back within the fold of scientific rationality' emerged.⁴⁴ For, according to Freud, creative writers are allies of the psychoanalyst. 'Their knowledge of the *Psyche*,' as Rancière puts it, 'the singular formations and hidden operations of the human mind, is ahead of the scientists. They know things that the scientists do not, for they are aware of the importance and rationality proper to this Phantasmatic component that positive science either sees as a chimerical nothingness or attributes to simple physical or

physiological causes.⁴⁵ Poets, writers, and novelists are the allies of the psychoanalyst, therefore, precisely because they know that ‘fancies,’ ‘aberrations,’ and ‘non-sense’ carry their own rationality. Therefore, Freud’s project, according to Rancière, is in line with the aesthetic regime of art. Freud sought the unconscious thought in the work of art to establish an order between knowing and not-knowing, between *logos* and *pathos*, the real and the fantastic.⁴⁶

In the hermeneutic project of Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Rancière remarks, the principle is that nothing remains ‘insignificant’ – what positivists attribute to physiological rationality are in fact ‘signs encrypting a history.’ But Freud also posed ‘the paradoxical condition of this hermeneutics,’ Rancière says. He writes: ‘In order for the banal to reveal its secret, it must first be mythologized. The house and sewer speak, they bear the trace of truth – as will the dream or the parapraxis, and the Marxian commodity – insofar as they are first transformed into the elements of a mythology or phantasmagoria.’⁴⁷

It seems to us that this is the same thought which drove Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, and before him Louis Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (*Paris Peasant*) about which Benjamin wrote to his friend Adorno: ‘I could never read more than two or three pages in bed at night before my heart started to beat so strongly that I had to lay the book aside.’⁴⁸ It is the same project that must be taken up in deciphering the fantasy structure behind the ‘secret’ of the physical signs inscribed on the body of the city as hieroglyphic today; its phantasmagoric structure comes back in the form of specters – the same specters that Benjamin intensely pursued in order to conjure them up, without exorcizing them.

Notes

- 1 Susan Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,’ in *October* 62 (Autumn 1992), 3–41.
- 2 Quoted from the second version of ‘The Work of Art in Its Age of Technological Reproduction,’ in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–1938* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 122 (italics in original).
- 3 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 4 Also mentioned by Buck-Morss, *op. cit.*
- 5 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 13. In the footnote she adds: ‘If the “center” of this system is not the brain, but on the body’s surface, then subjectivity, far from bounded within the biological body, plays the role of mediator between inner and outer sensations, the images of perception and those of memory. For this reason Freud situated consciousness on the surface of the body, decentered from the brain (which he was willing to view as nothing more than large and evolved nerve ganglia).’
- 9 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 10 Quoted in *ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*, 16–17 (italics in original).

- 12 Ibid., 18 (italics in original).
- 13 Ibid. (italics in original). The last quoted sentence is from Benjamin's Baudelaire's essay.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid., 21–22.
- 16 Ibid., 22.
- 17 Ibid., N. 80.
- 18 Ibid., 23 (italics in original).
- 19 Ibid., 24.
- 20 Ibid., 25.
- 21 Ibid., 24.
- 22 Ibid., 25.
- 23 Ibid., 26.
- 24 Ibid., 37.
- 25 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), X.
- 26 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. and intro., Gabriel Rockhill, with an Afterword by Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 9. Rancière contextualizes his theoretical position by saying: 'The proliferation of voices denouncing the crisis of art or its fatal capture by discourse, the pervasiveness of the spectacle or the death of the image, suffice to indicate that a battle fought yesterday over the promises of emancipation and the illusions and disillusion of history continues today on aesthetic terrain. The trajectory of Situationist discourse – stemming from an avant-garde artistic movement in the post-war period, developing into a radical critique of politics in the 1960s, and absorbed today into the routine of disenchanted discourse that acts as the "radical" stand-in for the existing order – is undoubtedly symptomatic of the contemporary ebb and flow of aesthetic and politics, and of transformation of avant-garde thinking into nostalgia,' *ibid.*
- 27 Ibid., 10.
- 28 For this see glossary in Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*
- 29 See Gabriel Rockhill, 'Translator's Introduction,' in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. and intro., Gabriel Rockhill, with an Afterword by Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 3 (italics in original). Rockhill comments, 'It is partially for this reason that Rancière defines *the political* as relational in nature, founded on the intervention of politics in the police order rather than on the establishment of a particular governmental regime,' *ibid.*
- 30 See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 31 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, 12.
- 32 Ibid., 13.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid., 18.
- 35 Ibid., 31.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., 34.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 See Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009).
- 42 Ibid., 5. He explains that the use of the word 'aesthetic' to designate art is relatively recent: 'Its genealogy is usually referred to in Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*, published in 1750, and Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. But these landmarks are equivocal. For Baumgarten the term "aesthetics" in fact does not designate the

theory of art but rather the domain of sensible knowledge, the clear but nonetheless “confused” or indistinct knowledge that can be contrasted with the clear and distinct knowledge of logic, *ibid.*’ And further, ‘Kant’s position in this genealogy is equally problematic. When he borrows the term “aesthetics” from Baumgarten as a name for the theory of forms of sensibility, Kant in fact rejects what gave it its meaning, namely the idea of the sensible as a “confused” intelligible,’ *ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*, 7.

44 *Ibid.*, 49.

45 *Ibid.*, 48.

46 *Ibid.*, 53.

47 *Ibid.*, 37.

48 In Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 88.

6 Poverty of experience and the architecture of the city

The Modernist project did not need to resort to an ‘anaestheticizing tactic’ to avert the ‘shock of modern experience.’ It rather absorbed it. In this chapter we argue that Modern Architecture in the 1930s was able to ward off the lure of phantasmagoria. Modern Architecture, in this sense, was an ‘architecture without phantasmagoria’ that ‘owned up’ to what Benjamin called the ‘poverty of experience.’ This is not to deny that in the Weimar period, across a broad ideological spectrum, the dominant tendency on the left to regard technology as an opening for a *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) also displayed a certain naive fascination with the machine and with rationalization, which as John McCole in his *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* notes, unwittingly ended up espousing – via Taylorism and Fordism – the changing demands of the capitalist economy.¹ At times, this resulted in a cult of rationalization that projected into the future an optimistic hope in progress – as seen in the many ‘manifestoes,’ from Gropius to Le Corbusier and Mies Van Rohe, among many others, issued during these years.²

As Howard Caygill notes in his perceptive reading of the third version of Benjamin’s Artwork essay (section XV, dated 1939), it was during these years that architecture emerged as a ‘main site for interaction of technology and the human, a negotiation conducted in terms of touch and use. It is both a condition and an object of experience, the speculative site for the emergence of the “technological *physis*.”’³ Indeed, as Benjamin argued, architecture was the ‘concrete *a priori*’ and the ‘canonical art form’ for the new kinds of ‘distracted perception’ in which the masses *absorb* the work of art ‘into themselves’ in contrast with the mode of ‘concentration’ in which a person is *absorbed* by the work. As Benjamin put it famously: ‘Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective. The laws of architecture’s reception are highly instructive.’⁴ Other forms of arts come and go like epic and tragedy, for example, but architecture persists. It is a distinct form of art apart from all other forms because it is received in a ‘twofold manner,’ Benjamin says: ‘by use and by perception. Or, better: tactily and optically.’⁵ This reception can be understood only as distraction: ‘Tactile reception comes

about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which spontaneously takes the form of casual noticing, rather than attentive observation.⁶ As he put it in a most succinct and categorical formulation: 'Under certain circumstances, this form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value. *For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means – that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually-taking their cue from tactile reception-through habit.*'⁷

As Caygill notes, for Benjamin, art in the age of technical reproducibility reconfigures itself according to new technological conditions. The model for this is the art of architecture: 'the art which responds most readily to changes in the structure of experience.'⁸ If film in the age of technological reproducibility is *the* medium that in essence brings about the mode of distracted reception, it does so against the background of architecture's *always already having been* such a *medium*. Actually, as Caygill notes, Benjamin goes further: 'film merely "corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus" which are structured by the architecture of the city, or "changes that are experienced on an individual scale by a person in the street in big city traffic, and on a historical scale by every present-day citizen."⁹

It is in this sense that we argue that in modernist architecture of the 1930s the observer *absorbs* the building rather than being absorbed by it, insofar as use, for the first time, becomes not only dominant but largely replaces contemplation, as Benjamin would say, and in this way, albeit precariously, keeps phantasmagoria, for a short time, at bay. Of course, in a society in which the commodity mode of production prevails, phantasmagoria is always in waiting. Moreover, in a city that we have already defined as 'structured like a phantasmagoria,' an 'architecture without phantasmagoria' can only have subsisted precariously as an isolated occurrence. In any case, what is certain is that the architecture of the 1930s destroyed the hallmark of the Second Empire phantasmagoria of the '*intérieur*,' replete with its layers of traces and signs of habitation, replacing it with a new 'transparency,' which, although not without its own utopian naïveté, was a new beginning.

What this architecture did was promote, for the first time, a 'technological mode of experience' that was best theorized by Benjamin. As Caygill notes, Benjamin transformed and expanded the Kantian notion of experience, grounded in the intuition of time and space, into a 'speculative experience' that was quintessentially technological, capable at once of destroying a mode of the human sensorium, and of raising the prospect of a 'different nature,' in which 'an unconsciously penetrated space is replaced by a space consciously explored by humanity.'¹⁰ This was the most important contribution Benjamin made to our understanding of technology in the twentieth century, and it remains relevant even for the so-called digital technologies of today.

In this chapter we lay the ground for a critique of contemporary architecture as a radical step back from the early twentieth century. In Part III, we

will turn to the phantasmagorical *intoxications* of the hyper-mediated city and its tele-media-technology. But first, it is essential to define ‘experience’ in Benjamin’s work.



Benjamin’s ‘Experience and Poverty’ was written in 1933, three years before his Artwork essay. It was published in Prague on the eve of his flight from Germany at the time of the National Socialist seizure of power.¹¹ As McCole points out, Benjamin did not take into exile the cultural heritage of the ‘good Germany.’ Instead, he called for ‘owning up to the impoverishment of experience – and even more radically professing it – in order to “begin from the beginning, make a fresh start, make do with little.”’¹² Beneath the political crisis of his time, according to McCole, Benjamin ‘sensed an epochal upheaval in the organization of the human sensorium.’¹³ The vertiginous pace and disorienting acceleration of social and technological change in the opening decades of the twentieth century, according to Benjamin, had changed ‘the structure of perception and experience.’¹⁴ He cited Paul Valéry’s observation that, since the end of the Great War, ‘neither matter, nor space, nor time have been what they had been since time immemorial.’¹⁵ He then named Bertolt Brecht, Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, Paul Scheerbart, and Paul Klee as figures who ‘rejected the traditional, solemn, noble image of man, festooned with all the sacrificial offerings of the past. They turned instead to the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present.’¹⁶ Before we look further into Benjamin’s essay, we need to clarify the two terms of experience and technology in relation to the *shock*, or *trauma*, of modernity in its locus *par excellence*, the city.

For Benjamin, experience is defined by the two German words *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. In ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,’ he wrote:

The greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli; the more efficient it does so, the less impressions enter long experience [*Erfahrung*] and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience [*Erlebnis*]. Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense is the way it assigns an incident a precise point in time in consciousness, at the cost of the integrity of the incident’s content. This would be a peak achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into isolated experience. Without reflection, there would be nothing but the sudden start, occasionally pleasant but distasteful, which, according to Freud, confirms the failure of the shock defense.¹⁷

Benjamin goes on: ‘the shock is thus cushioned, parried by consciousness, would lend the incident that occasions it the character of isolated experience [*Erlebnis*], in the strict sense. If it were incorporated directly in the register of conscious memory, it would sterilize this incident for poetic experience

[*Erfahrung*].¹⁸ Earlier, with a reference to Freud on the question of memory, Benjamin wrote that ‘vestiges of memory are “often most powerful and most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness.” Put in Proustian terms, this means that only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an isolated experience [*Erlebnis*], can become a component of *memoire involantaire*.¹⁹ According to Freud, Benjamin notes, ‘the attribution of “permanent traces as the basis of memory” to processes of stimulation is reserved for “other systems,” which must be thought of as different from consciousness.’²⁰ According to Miriam Hansen, *Erfahrung*, in contrast, is a term ‘not having as much an empiricist connotation as “experience,” which links to “expert” and “experiment” and tends to assume a basically unmediated, stable relationship between subject and object. The German root of *fahren* (to ride, to travel) [. . .] conveys a sense of mobility, of journeying, wandering, cruising, implying both a temporal dimension, that is, duration, habit, repetition and return, and a degree of risk to the experiencing subject.’²¹

The dialectical relation, or tension, between the two intertwined concepts of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* defines modern experience for Benjamin. *Erlebnis* denotes the alienated subjectivity and the anaesthetics brought on by an overexposure to stimulations in the city. As he puts it, ‘only through relating the shock defense – the conditioned and habitual response to modernity – to reflexive experience can the experience of modernity be properly understood.’²² This, for Benjamin, was essentially an *urban modernity* in which the space of the individual *psyche* was transformed into the unconscious structure of a collective material culture. In ‘Convolute m’ (Idleness), Benjamin writes: ‘experience is the outcome of work; immediate experience [*Erlebnis*] is the phantasmagoria of the idler’;²³ and ‘what distinguishes long experience [*Erfahrung*] from immediate experience [*Erlebnis*] is that the former is inseparable from the representation of a continuity, a sequence.’²⁴ This indicates that the problem of urban modernity is precisely located in the dialectic between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. The city in modernity also produces dreamworlds, for Benjamin, in the precise sense that Susan Buck-Morss intends when she describes the latter as not just a ‘poetic description of collective mental state’ but rather ‘an analytical concept, one that was central to his [Benjamin’s] theory of modernity as the reenchantment of the world.’²⁵ The dreamworld of the twentieth century, as Buck-Morss further notes, was ‘the construction of mass utopia.’ Architecture participated in this mass utopia. Its ‘dream houses of the collective,’ however, were no longer the ones that Benjamin listed in Convolute L and Convolute K of *The Arcades Project* – the ‘arcades, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax museums, casinos, railroad stations in which phantasmagoria was the basic mechanism through which they reactivated the mythic forces in the dynamics of capitalism.’²⁶ As McCole says, ‘the appropriate response to the poverty of experience was not to long for any renewal of experience or attempt

to rejoin oneself to the great traditions of humanism and idealism. [. . .] The order of the day was rather to collaborate in the work of destruction,' through what Benjamin called a 'new, positive barbarism' as the only possible defense against the 'barbaric power of fascism.'²⁷ He wrote:

Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We use this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build further, looking neither left or right. Among creative spirits, there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a *tabula rasa*.²⁸

Those who begin with a *tabula rasa* are the 'constructors.' Among the first was Descartes, who, as Benjamin wrote, required nothing more to launch his entire philosophy than a single certitude, 'I think, therefore I am.' Einstein was another, as were the architects Loos and Le Corbusier, as well as the utopian novelist Scheerbart, among others. Indeed, architects occupy the top rank in Benjamin's 'Poverty of Experience.' He remarked: 'It makes no difference whether the poet Bertolt Brecht declares that Communism is the just distribution of poverty, not of wealth, or whether Adolf Loos, the forerunner of Modern Architecture, states, "I write only for people who possess a modern sensibility . . . I do not write for people consumed by nostalgia for the renaissance or the Rococo."²⁹ In either case, the decisive factor is a 'total absence of illusion about the age and at the same time an unlimited commitment to it.'³⁰

Filmic perception and a new organization of space in architecture, as McCole notes, were closely related. 'Modern architecture was the second field in which Benjamin found the signs of a new mode of perception. Here, too, what fascinated him was the interplay between a transformation of space and the emergence of a new collective subject.'³¹ Significantly, 'the technical revolution in architecture proceeded not from the creation of a new medium, as with film, but from the introduction of new materials, glass, and iron.'³² The tectonics of these new materials, says McCole, provided Benjamin with potent images: 'Its austerity and purity struck him as the only dignified response to the new poverty of experience and a bracing antidote to the profusion of false riches typical of the overstuffed bourgeois interior. But he also saw it as the harbinger of a social transformation: glass and iron constructions held the promise of a new spatial transparency; by lifting the spatial distinction between street and interior they would promote the overcoming of social distinction between private and public, isolated individual and mass.'³³

Sigfried Giedion, the Swiss art and architectural historian and ideologue of Modern Architecture, had a copy of his *Bauen in Frankreich* (translated into English as *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*) sent to Benjamin as a gift when it came out in 1928 – probably following

their encounter in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, if not in Berlin.³⁴ Benjamin read the book in February of 1928 and cites Giedion frequently in *The Arcades Project*, along with Adolf Behne (the author of *The Modern Functional Building*). Giedion's book stimulated Benjamin's thinking on 'construction' and on the fundamental break of Modern Architecture from what Giedion had called the 'historicizing mask' of the nineteenth century, through building engineering and the 'transparency' made possible by glass and iron. In Convolute K, Benjamin noted to himself, 'Attempt to develop Giedion's thesis.' And he went on to quote him: 'In the nineteenth century construction plays the role of the subconscious,' to which he added, however: 'would it be better to say "the role of bodily processes" – around which "artistic" architecture gathers, like dreams around the framework of physiological processes?'³⁵ But certainly, the historical view Giedion promoted resonated forcefully with Benjamin's own conception of history. Giedion had begun his book by prescribing the task of a historian: 'to extract the vast complexity of the past those elements that will be the point of departure for the future.'³⁶ Upon receiving his copy of the book, Benjamin in a thank you letter wrote to Giedion: 'I am studying in your book (among so many other things that most directly concern me) the difference between radical conviction and radical knowledge that refreshes the heart. You possess the latter, and therefore you are able to illuminate, or rather to uncover, the tradition by observing the present.'³⁷

Benjamin had developed two levels of meaning of technology in the term *Technik* that in German covers both 'technique' and 'technology' in English. The new architecture, as an extension of 'bodily collectivity' that is 'like a new sensory organ,' would open up a new realm of experience in which, significantly, the rationalization and efficiency with which architects of the modernist project were so much obsessed would play no role.³⁸ As McCole writes, Benjamin, before his encounter with Brecht, was developing a complex conception of *Technik* that would 'balance diverse and even conflicting elements.' He sought to 'articulate a view that was at once pro-technology and antiinstrumental,' an image of technology that in 'Experience and Poverty' he derived from the combination of 'the disillusioned sobriety of reduced circumstances with a visionary quality reminiscent of Scheerbart's utopias.'³⁹ His view on technology, according to McCole, came down to the intuition that '[t]echnology has a telos that ultimately is not instrumental.'⁴⁰ In what McCole describes as Benjamin's 'philosophical anthropology,' it is the emergence of a 'bodily collective subject' that grounds 'technology's noninstrumental quality as a *medium* in which this emerging collectivity represents itself.'⁴¹ Thus culture, as McCole writes, 'must adumbrate the possibilities of *all* technology. Not just the technology of cultural production.'⁴²



Benjamin's 'Experience and Poverty' is cited, recently, by the contemporary architectural critic Pier Vittorio Aureli in a short book entitled *Less Is Enough*

(a playful variation on the famous 'less is more' by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe).⁴³ This is in the context of a defense of 'asceticism' in early Modern Architecture against its perversion today in the ethos of so-called 'austerity.' Aureli begins his book by saying that 'less is more' supported the 'ethical and aesthetic value of a self-imposed economy of means.'⁴⁴ Mies's 'stripped bare architecture,' Aureli points out, used ready-made industrial elements to achieve a 'beauty' by using only what is necessary. In contrast, in the aftermath of 2008 economic meltdown, Aureli says, it has become fashionable for architects and critics to invoke 'less is more' in 'moralistic tones.' 'Less is more' is no longer an aesthetic principle, Aureli remarks, but 'a kernel of ideology of something else, something where economy of means is not just a design strategy but an economic imperative *tout court*.'⁴⁵ Thus, the phrase 'less is more' has been effectively attached to the logic of capitalism that always tries to reduce the costs of production: 'Capitalism has always tried to obtain *more* with *less*.'⁴⁶

Later in his text, Aureli comes to relate Benjamin's interest in Le Corbusier's bare architecture with the 'radical form of living' that Benjamin espoused in 'Experience and Poverty.' He writes: 'only a domestic space devoid of familiar traces and identity is able to reflect our condition of precarity, the poverty of experience engendered by industrialization and wealth of information that pervades life in the metropolis.'⁴⁷ For Aureli, perhaps the best representation of this 'radical form of living' was the minimal scheme of Hannes Meyer's Co-op Zimmer project, conceived for an exhibition on cooperative design in Ghent in 1924. He notes: 'the design was premised on the idea of a classless society in which every member would own the same minimum.'⁴⁸ 'Unlike many architects of his day,' Aureli further notes, 'Meyer defined the room, rather than the apartment, as the main unit for living, thus avoiding the whole issue of *existenzminimum* [minimum living] which was concerned with the minimal dimensions of a family house.'⁴⁹ Furthermore, 'unlike the private house, which is the origin of the real-estate logic of the city, the room is implicitly a space that is never self-sufficient. Like the monastic cell, the Co-op Zimmer is not a form of possession but rather the minimal space that allows each individual person to live by sharing the rest of the dwelling space.'⁵⁰

Aureli thus concludes that for Meyer, unlike Mies, 'less is not more, less is just enough,' without this signifying any form of 'repressive austerity.'⁵¹ However, Aureli goes on to say: 'Meyer seems to realize the idea of communism as it was defined by Bertolt Brecht: "The equal distribution of poverty." Brecht's statement mocks the very idea of capitalism as the best way to manage a situation of scarcity but understands poverty as a value, as a desired form of life which can become a luxury, paradoxically, only when it is shared by all.'⁵²

Aureli cites the 'aloofness' of contemporary architect Zumthor, Steve Jobs's slick and minimal design for Apple and the austerity of his own lifestyle, as so many manifestations of the aura of 'less is more' that capitalism

co-opts by getting maximum profit, getting *more* from *less*. He writes, 'This aura, this ideological need to balance market-saturation with pseudo-religious needs, is precisely the tendency that Benjamin saw as arising from poverty of experience caused by the wealth of information and communication,' and goes on to quote a passage from 'Experience and Poverty' where Benjamin wrote:⁵³

With this tremendous devolvement of technology a completely new poverty has descended on mankind. And the reverse of this poverty is the oppressive wealth that has been spread among people, or rather has swamped them entirely – ideas that have come with the revival of astrology, and the wisdom of yoga, Christian science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosis, scholasticism and spirituality.⁵⁴

Against the Neoliberal 'debt economy,' which Maurizio Lazzarato has ably analyzed in *The Making of Indebted Man*, Aureli claims: 'To say less is enough is to refuse the moral blackmail of the debt economy, which threatens us on the basis of our own expectations of greater wealth. While economy can only assess social wealth in terms of *more* – that is, more development and more growth – to say *less is enough* is an attempt to define a way of living that is beyond both the promise of growth and the threatening rhetoric of scarcity.'⁵⁵

Thus, Aureli attempts to isolate a certain way of thinking asceticism that avoids the aestheticization of poverty as well as the risk of being co-opted into a capitalist phantasmagoria. Douglas Spencer in his perceptive 'Architecture's Franciscan Turn: "Forms of Life" and Pre-critical Theory' challenges Aureli's asceticism and its basis in early Franciscan monasticism, showing that Franciscanism was far from representing a counterpoint to the rising merchant capitalist class. For Spencer, Aureli's argument is 'pre-critical': 'Rather than offering a critique of power by leaving it, the Franciscans, and their architecture, are implicated in exactly the kind of economic and managerial powers that Aureli seeks autonomy from, and precisely at the historical locus of their emergence.'⁵⁶

The values of communalism and sharing that Aureli wants to see directly expressed in the 'autonomy' of particular architectural forms, according to Spencer, reflect a historiography that has 'no need to be concerned with the ways in which these instances, and thus the forms of life and the forms of architecture with which they are concerned, might be mediated by a history of the economic, the managerial and the governmental. These historical, if not absolute, determinants, are unconsidered because it is supposed that they can be eluded through the redemption of an absolute architectural essence.'⁵⁷

In fact, as Spencer shows,

this project of autonomy too is itself inescapably mediated by economics, by managerialism, by governmentality, and this is what is troubling

about Aureli's dogmatic insistence that architects might be more genuinely political in focusing their attention on themselves as the source of their own production.⁵⁸

For us, this 'less is enough' offered as 'resistance' to economic imperatives of the Neoliberal order is bound to be co-opted by the same system. The problem is that Aureli's critique of current design lacks a radical philosophical discourse. His anti-capitalism is not complemented by a counter philosophical model of 'communism.' His attempt to save 'asceticism' from the perversion of 'austerity' remains at an ideal, even religious, level that has yet to undergo the process of '*profanation*' theorized in Agamben's work. Capitalism is capable of 'valorizing' Aureli's 'less is enough' even as a critique of the current mindless 'image industry.' This radically undercuts its supposedly emancipatory potential – not to mention the risk of historicism implicit in Aureli's invocation of Benjamin's 'Experience and Poverty' as a programmatic manifesto today, completely disregarding the historical juncture in which the essay appeared.

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So far, we have argued that the locus of the modern experience is the city, and that any theory of the city must be based on Benjamin's notion of technology and 'speculative experience.' The city shapes the organization of the human sensorium in which the subject is in a state of constant negotiation with specters and residual memories of the past. For Benjamin, as Caygill points out, 'the field of such negotiation is not exhausted by actual past experiences of the city, but also of those experiences which did not ever happen. The experience of the city includes the lost chances and missed encounters – such as "love at last sight" of Baudelaire *A une passante*.'⁵⁹ Indeed, Benjamin thought that the experience of the city is 'ecstatic and futural, haunted by intimations of the future' as well as specters from the past.⁶⁰ The theory of 'porosity' is the main concept through which Benjamin looked at the city, from his childhood memory of Berlin to Naples, Moscow, Marseilles, and Paris. A spatial intuition informs this notion of porosity and urban experience. The same intuition also informs the architecture of the city.⁶¹ As Benjamin wrote:

As porous as the stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyard, arcades and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided.⁶²

This kind of porosity is the very *experience* of architecture, for Benjamin, one that can disturb the conventional understanding of experience itself and, along with it, the received philosophy of architecture.

We now leave the particular historical juncture of 'Experience and Poverty' and move to the different though related notion of 'speculative experience,'

particularly as it helps to formulate the conceptual and critical categories necessary to understand the *total phantasmagoria* of the city today. There is no better way to do this than through David Kishik's *The Manhattan Project*, which extends Benjamin's analysis of the phantasmagorias of Second Empire Paris to another twentieth-century city when it makes Benjamin move fictionally from Paris to New York and live a long life in Manhattan, where he would write 'New York City, the Capital of the Twentieth Century.' *The Manhattan Project*, as he calls it, is not a repetition or imitation of *The Arcades Project* but a critical transposition to a new and quite different urban context.

From the start, Kishik outlines the conceptual ground on which Manhattan, as Benjamin conceived it, results from three pairs of oppositional categories: 'reality/fantasy, politics/economics, heaven/hell.'⁶³ Kishik methodically divides his book into six parts, devoted respectively to the city as 'fantasy,' the city as 'reality,' political power in the city, economic power, New York as 'hell,' and New York as 'heaven.' Kishik explains that in each of the three pairs – just as in *The Arcades Project* – the negative side trumps the positive. So 'hell trumps heaven,' 'fantasy trumps reality,' 'private or economic considerations trump public or political ones.'⁶⁴ As Kishik says, 'the entire city is seen as an interior, or an inside with "no outside."⁶⁵ The three pairs of oppositions are linked to Kant's three fundamental philosophical questions, the same questions that, according to Kishik, Benjamin took up in his earlier project: 'What can I know?' 'What ought I do?' and 'What may I hope?' These three organizing questions constitute, in our view, the main trajectories – at once epistemological and ontological – of the subject as it constitutes itself in the registers of economy, technology, and culture.

Kishik explains his approach as follows:

One can read the Arcades project as a cautionary tale about the chain reaction that goes into effect once the open street morphs into a kind of interior room, which then turns into a dreamscape, which becomes a wasteland. Privacy, fantasy, and purgatory go hand in hand. The later Benjamin could not help detecting the same process in the shopping malls that plagued suburban America during his afterlifetime. [. . .] Yet he also notes that these malls, these suburban nightmares, never manage to gain a substantial foothold in New York city. By rejecting the model of the mall, which is the arcade's next of kin, twentieth-century Manhattan proved its ability to resist the dark magic exercised by one side of Benjamin's trinity of polar opposites, which has ruled so effectively over nineteenth-century Paris.⁶⁶

Kishik stresses Benjamin's notion of 'distraction' and relates it to his 'infatuation with photography.' The latter, he holds, is reflected in his growing 'impatience' with a certain discourse of architecture that ignores its function

as more of distraction from the city life. He cites Augustine, who distinguishes between *urbs* (the physical city) and *civitas* (the city made of people). He then claims that Benjamin follows this division when he questions the focusing on New York's architecture, and asks a Shakespearean question: 'What is the city but the people?' Kishik writes: 'If skyscrapers could speak, they would probably try to convince us that New York is more than just a landscape built of sheer life.'⁶⁷ In order to prove them wrong, to demonstrate that the true measure of a city is not beautiful building but a beautiful life, some of the most animated pages of *The Manhattan Project* are dedicated to a methodical dismantling of architectural discourse. For Kishik, or for Benjamin, '[b]uildings are veils drawn over life's face.'⁶⁸

It is in the chapter on 'Thingification,' however, that Kishik engages a problem that is closely related to the argument we are developing in this book. *Reification* derives from *res* – Latin for 'thing.' The city has the tendency to be reified. When we reduce the city to a collection of objects in space, we reify it. Kishik cites Adorno writing to Benjamin in 1940 that 'all reification is a forgetting,' and Benjamin would have been mindful of this when, according to Kishik, he diverted his attention from the architecture of New York to the actual life of the city. After reification, Kishik says, comes *fetishization* – an extension and an intensification of reification that turns life into a thing and transforms it into pure spectacle, simulacrum, or phantasmagoria. He explains: 'The slippery slope leading from reification to fetishism to spectacle is a process that Benjamin also detected in the general way New York as a whole gradually came to be treated.'⁶⁹ Benjamin, he argues, witnessed in New York how the city turns into its own phantasmagoria. 'He came to the sad realization that his work on Paris only enhanced the fascination of his reader with the physical city and helped to fetishize it even further. It is yet to be seen whether *The Manhattan Project* can counter the tendency of today's New York to turn into a mere copy of itself.'⁷⁰

'When a city becomes a mere spectacle,' Kishik writes, a very particular conception of reification comes into play. Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* defines it – in contrast, we might add, to most orthodox Marxists – as the 'transformation of an abstract idea into an actual thing.'⁷¹ Benjamin, or Kishik, would have taken this definition in its broadest sense:

Although Arendt restricted reification to *homo faber*, the human being who fabricates artifacts like tables and houses, Benjamin claims that whatever people have a hand in, even the political sphere that Arendt considered the highest level of human existence, could be treated as a thing, a *res*, as the word *republic* suggests (*res publica*, the public thing). Politics – like philosophy and religion, or whatever else some Marxists call superstructure – could still be seen as *something* that, despite its immaterial nature, is the outcome of Arendtian reification, by persons who act and speak with one another.⁷²

Continuing his reflections on the notion of reification, Kishik takes on contemporary Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and his much-praised and influential *Delirious New York*, making some astute observations. For Kishik, if Benjamin approached nineteenth-century Paris as a phantasmagoria, he came to see twentieth-century New York as 'a place where all ideas, Ideals, and ideologies, every program, philosophy, and utopia pass through a powerful reification machine.'⁷³ In this regard, he sets his *The Manhattan Project* against *Delirious New York*. Although Koolhaas opens his book with a nod to reification in the epigraphs he cites from Giambattista Vico and Fyodor Dostoevsky, he does not, according to Kishik, consider the 'way ideas turn into things and fantasies become realities. Instead, he decides to bracket off the actual, concrete city in order to study a "theoretical Manhattan, a *Manhattan as conjecture*, of which the present city is the compromised and imperfect realization."⁷⁴ He cites Koolhaas's argument that the aim of the city is to 'exist in a world totally fabricated by men, i.e., to live inside fantasy.'⁷⁵

Kishik argues that for Benjamin, Koolhaas's thesis is more fitting to nineteenth-century Paris (at least as presented in *The Arcades Project*) than twentieth-century New York. Koolhaas uses the technology of fantasy to present Coney Island as a 'fetal Manhattan.' But Benjamin, according to Kishik, 'only states the obvious when he replies that Manhattan is not the actualization but the exact antithesis of Coney Island, which was created so that New Yorkers could escape every now and then from their daily reality overdose to a conveniently located and reasonably priced mirage.'⁷⁶ After all, 'Benjamin is not convinced,' Kishik says, 'that New York was ever delirious in the first place.'⁷⁷

If it is true that Koolhaas wrote *Delirious New York* as a retort to Tafuri's *Architecture and Utopia*, Kishik definitely takes the side of the latter. In a chapter entitled 'The Disenchanted Island,' Kishik cites Tafuri's use of Max Weber's term *disenchantment*, arguing that 'the true function of a New York building is not to produce dreams (as Koolhaas would have it) but to crush (or crash) every single one of them.'⁷⁸ Kishik states that Tafuri's competing account of New York architecture originated from a simple observation. A building in classical antiquity was meant to communicate 'particular, discernable values.' 'With the advent of capitalism, though, a rift is created between *eidos* and *ethos*, between the way buildings are built and the way life is lived. The consequence is that the architectonic form begins to send conflicting messages. For example, a wall made of glass may be an expression of fascism, socialism, or capitalism.'⁷⁹ Kishik here makes a perceptive observation:

On this point, Tafuri sees almost eye to eye with Koolhaas, who will call this condition the "great Lobotomy." The life that takes place inside a modern skyscraper, Koolhaas observes, has very little to do with the building's external façade. The lived form on the inside fails to reflect

the built form from the outside. This process leads to a decisive crisis because, Tafuri writes, “architectural ideology no longer has any purpose.” Buildings are no longer informed by either theory or utopia; they convey neither a philosophy nor an ideal.⁸⁰

Citing Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s familiar theory of how the Enlightenment’s disenchantment of the world, in which rationality takes the place of belief, which aims ‘to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge,’ Kishik notes that it can also lead to a ‘new mythology,’ adding that ‘Reason can easily beget madness rather than defeat it.’ Kishik reads Benjamin’s *The Manhattan Project* as a similar attempt ‘to shake off the mythical nightmare, though some detractors will claim that he is falling back into a new phantasmic order.’⁸¹

His working hypothesis is that although the “elevation of urban life to the level of myth” is one of modernity’s most basic gestures, this spell is most effectively cast on outsiders. Urban insiders are measured not by the number of years they have lived in the city but by their growing sense of disenchantment with it. For this reason, E.B. White describes New York as the only city “that takes itself with a grain of salt.”⁸²

In a brilliant discussion of the differing interpretations of the Rockefeller Center advanced by Tafuri and Koolhaas, Kishik sides with the former and argues that Benjamin did also. For Kishik-Benjamin, in New York, ‘anything that looks enchanting eventually solidifies into concrete.’⁸³

Nevertheless, as the New York built form went through this process of disenchanting reification, as the aura of the skyscraper began to disintegrate, it was also possible to achieve a subtle shift in the way we perceive the city. When the fetishism of architecture diminishes, when one abandons all hope of treating physical buildings as if they were living, thinking things, it becomes a bit easier to see the real life lived in their shadows. *Forma mentis* turn into *forma vitae*.⁸⁴

Kishik ends the chapter by transposing what Nietzsche said about Venice to New York, ‘that eight million deep solitudes together form the city and that this, not its buildings, is the true source of its enchantment.’⁸⁵ Kishik is an architecturally informed philosopher with a sensibility for culture and life in the modern city akin to Benjamin’s. His fictional narrative has many other fascinating aspects for which we do not have the space here to pursue further.

In Part III, we will attempt to extend the problematic developed so far to the contemporary city and its architecture, and specifically to the question of how technological media is adversely affecting the subject’s experience.

Notes

- 1 See John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 181. We rely on McCole's excellent analysis of Benjamin's essay in Chapter 4 of his book titled 'Owning Up to the Poverty of Experience: Benjamin and Weimar Modernism,' for our discussion.
- 2 See Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestos in 20th-Century Architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1975).
- 3 See Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 116.
- 4 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, Third Version,' in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 4, 1938–1940* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 268. In the first version of the essay, this XV section was titled 'Tactile and Optical Reception.'
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid. (italics in original).
- 8 Caygill, op. cit., 114.
- 9 Ibid., 115.
- 10 See excellent discussion by Caygill on Benjamin's notion of experience, ibid.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty,' in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 2, 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 12 McCole, op. cit., 156.
- 13 Ibid., 1.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 In ibid.
- 16 Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty,' op. cit., 733.
- 17 Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 319.
- 18 Ibid., 318.
- 19 Ibid., 317.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Quoted in *Benjamin's Arcades: An Unguided Tour*, eds., Peter Buse, Kent Hirschkop, Scott McCracken, and Bertrand Taithe (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 51. Also see Miriam Hansen, 'Forward,' in *Public Sphere and Experience: Towards an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletariat Public Sphere*, eds. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xiv–xvii.
- 22 *Benjamin's Arcades: An Unguided Tour*, 52.
- 23 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), [m1a, 3], 801.
- 24 Ibid., 802.
- 25 See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), x. Buck-Morss further explains, 'The term acknowledges the inherent transience of modern life, the constantly changing conditions of which imperil traditional culture in a positive sense, because constant change allows hope that the future can be better,' ibid., x–xi.
- 26 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ibid., Convolute [L1, 3], 405. Also see Convolute K [Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung].
- 27 McCole, op. cit., 156.
- 28 Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty,' op. cit., 732.

- 29 Ibid., 733.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 McCole, op. cit., 192.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*, intro., Sokratis Georgiadis, trans., J. Duncan Berry (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Arts and humanities, 1995). In the excellent introduction to the English edition, Georgiadis has reproduced the letter of thanks Benjamin sent to Giedion after receiving the book from him.
- 35 See Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., [K1a, 7], 391.
- 36 Giedion, op. cit., 85.
- 37 Quoted in the 'Introduction' by Georgiadis above, *ibid.*, 53.
- 38 See McCole's argument, op. cit.
- 39 Ibid., 193.
- 40 Ibid., 193–194.
- 41 Ibid., 194 (italics in original).
- 42 Ibid. (italics in original).
- 43 See Pier Vittorio Aureli, *Less Is Enough* (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2013). According to Aureli, Mies took the phrase 'less is more' from a poem by Robert Browning, 'Andrea del Sarto,' and used it in an interview in the *New York Tribune* on 28 June 1959; see *ibid.*, N. 1, 61.
- 44 Ibid., 7.
- 45 Ibid., 8.
- 46 Ibid. (italics in original).
- 47 Ibid., 36.
- 48 Ibid., 39.
- 49 Ibid., 40.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ibid., 41.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid., 49.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Ibid., 58 (italics in original).
- 56 See <https://spatialregister.wordpress.com/2015/11/23/architectures-franciscan-turn-forms-of-life-and-pre-critical-theory/>
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 See Caygill, op. cit., 119.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 For more of this see Chapter 4 of Caygill's book, op. cit.
- 62 Quoted in *ibid.*, 122.
- 63 David Kishik, *The Manhattan Project: A Theory of a City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 35.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Ibid., 36.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Ibid., 46.
- 70 Ibid., 47.
- 71 Ibid., For example, Kishik further explains, 'a carpenter who builds a table is reifying his mental image of the design, turning a blueprint into a physical, three-dimensional object by means of handiwork,' *ibid.*
- 72 Ibid., 47–48 (italics in original).

73 Ibid., 48.

74 Ibid., 49 (*italics in original*).

75 Quoted in *ibid.*

76 Ibid., 51.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., 54.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 54–55.

81 Ibid., 55.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., 57.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., 59.

Part III

Spectacle and phantasmagoria



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7 The ghost of Guy Debord

In the opening scene of one of Debord's last films, *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, we see the audience of a cinema, staring fixedly in a perfect reverse shot, facing the spectators, while Debord's voice-over intones:

I will make no concessions to the public in this film. Several excellent reasons justify this conduct to my mind and I shall give them. In the first place it is known well enough that I have never made any concessions to the dominant ideas of my epoch nor to any powers that be. Moreover, whatever the epoch, nothing important has been communicated by sparing the audience, even one composed of the contemporaries of Pericles; and in the frozen mirror of the screen the audience does not see anything at present evoking the respectable citizens of a democracy.¹

As the screen continues to show the mirror image of rows of viewers staring blankly at the spectator, Debord can be heard complaining that 'here indeed is the crux': that a public that has been completely deprived of freedom 'deserves less than any other to be spared.'² What follows is an unrelenting barrage of 'harsh truths' hurled against the spectator, an unforgiving description of present-day miseries under the regime of spectacular domination that is meant to jolt the public into self-awareness. Movie-going audiences, says Debord,

deceive themselves about everything, and can only talk nonsense about lies. They are poor wage-owners who believe they are people of property, mystified ignoramuses who think they are well-read. [. . .] How harshly the mode of production had treated them! By advancement through promotion, they have lost the little they had, and gained what nobody wanted.³

The assault continues in much the same tone for several more minutes, as the voice-over accompanies a montage of scenes showing people waiting patiently outside the entrance of a cinema, advertising photos of modern employees, landscapes of factories and waste products, displays of packaged

foodstuffs marked 'Red Label,' pan shots of modern high-rise residences, and relaxed gatherings of modern employees sitting at a table playing Monopoly. Against these ordinary moments in the daily life of the spectacle's model citizens, Debord's denunciation rages on: 'ill-fed on adulterated and tasteless food; with their ever-recurring illnesses badly looked after,' the spectacle's sad slaves must live 'under perpetual and petty surveillance; maintained in modernized illiteracy and spectacular superstitions which correspond to a new built environment, according to the concentration camp like convenience of present day industry.' Not only are they incapable of understanding the cause of their unhappiness, but they are 'separated from each other by the general loss of any language adequate to describe the facts (a loss which prohibits the slightest dialogue), separated by incessant competition, always spurred on by the whip.'⁴

While the screen shows further scenes of an attractive young couple sitting on a foam divan with a telephone, or standing in line at the supermarket, or receiving guests, the voice-over compares their daily lives unfavorably to earlier systems of servitude – slavery, peonage, and factory labor. At long last, the assault comes to an end with a slow tracking shot toward the center of an advertising image showing the couple in their modern residence, furniture designed by Gae Aulenti, with the voice-over declaring that 'a film which, for once, renders the public the service of revealing to it that its ill is not as mysterious as it imagines, and not as incurable, if one day we were to arrive at the abolition of classes and of the State' will have 'one virtue at least. It will have no other.'⁵

In Girum Imus Nocte came out in 1978, six years after the self-dissolution of the *Internationale Situationniste*, the revolutionary organization Debord headed from 1957 to 1972 that played such an important part in the Paris uprising of May 1968. The film's title (an ancient Latin palindrome meaning 'we go round and round in the night and are consumed by fire') and its literary style somewhere between prophetic and nostalgic are nothing like the revolutionary theoretical prose of Debord's pre-1968 writings, as seen, for example, in his preceding film *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973). But, while his tone may have changed, Debord's rage against the official order is every bit as strong and has even gained in bitterness. For an American public, this unique style of invective is not unreminiscent of H.L. Menken, who in his own battle against philistinism wrote in 1922: 'it is the safest and surest of all known tests. A man who gets his board and lodging on the ball in an ignominious way is inevitably an ignominious man.'⁶ This shift in tone is vividly apparent in the film's dominant figural motif, which, in contrast to the recurring images of fire in *The Society of the Spectacle*, is of flowing water – a metaphor, as Debord pointed out in his notes to the text of the film, for the passage of time.

Much of *In Girum* is about the struggle against the institutionalized amnesia of a society already well on its way toward the much touted 'end of history' that Frances Fukuyama would announce a decade later. Nostalgia

here, as Michael Löwy notes, is not a means of escape but a ‘poisoned weapon’ to be hurled against the pre-programmed forgetfulness of May 1968, to expose the ‘obedient lies’ of the media, the public relations experts, as well as intellectuals of all stripes (like the renegade *nouveaux philosophes*), in their self-serving efforts to drive May 1968 down a collective memory hole.⁷ Against the spectacle’s push to eradicate the living memory of the past and, along with it, even the thought of resistance, the nostalgic evocation of people, anonymous heroes, and events is a reminder that, as Debord puts it, ‘all usurpers have shared this aim: to make us forget that they have only just arrived.’⁸

We choose this long passage as a starting point to revisit Debord’s influential concept of spectacle in light of the appearance, recently, of a provocative and illuminating critique by French philosopher Jacques Rancière – a most perceptive yet also, we argue, tendentious account of a concept whose vicissitudes in architectural theory and elsewhere are the subject of this and the following two chapters.⁹ The passage’s pertinence comes from the fact that it enables us to articulate an important distinction between the force of historical memory on the one hand and what Rancière calls ‘Left-wing nostalgia’ on the other – in essence, the reactionary stance of cultural despair that is regrettably a common feature of the French (and not only French) intellectual scene today and that Rancière takes to task in a most effective way. At the same time, the opening scene of *In Girum* allows us to address several other questions Rancière raises about the role of the image in the theory of the spectacle and what he calls (following Joseph Jacotot) the ‘stultifying pedagogy’ of a certain kind of leftist cultural discourse.¹⁰ In both cases, in our view, similar distinctions can be drawn to separate what we take to be the living core of the theory of the spectacle from its widespread misuse and abuse in current writing – especially, as we shall see, in the discourse of today’s self-proclaimed architectural neo-avant-garde. Like Rancière, but with several important qualifications, we also believe that, fifty years after it was first formulated, the concept of spectacle may have become too compromised to retain much usefulness. Like him, we believe that ‘a new approach’ is needed. However, unlike Rancière, we do not seek a new beginning through a tabula rasa of all the ideas connected with the spectacle. Through a history and a theory of phantasmagoria, we attempt instead to reformulate, rearticulate, and expand the notion of spectacle in relation to contemporary experience, much as Debord himself did with his own theory of the spectacle relative to the older Marxian concept of commodity.



If the impact of an idea could be measured by the frequency with which it is invoked, the spectacle would certainly have to be counted among the handful of most influential concepts to have emerged in the field of critical theory in the last fifty years. Nothing today is more pervasive, in fact, than the tendency to refer to the media, or to mass mediated events, as ‘the spectacle’ – the use

of Debord's singular noun and definite article suggesting a vague theoretical stance of radical critique, which is usually left unexplained. In the vast majority of cases, such references are just posturing. In fact, one of the reasons for the term's remarkable longevity – it has now been around for well over half a century – is precisely the way it has been reduced to a generic descriptor applicable to the most varied contexts, with or without reference to the revolutionary political theory from which it emerged in the 1950s and which it helped to define.

Notable for being one of the few terms in situationist theory that did not come with a succinct, ready-made definition such as those that accompanied other words like 'derive,' 'psychogeography,' or 'situation,' the spectacle was, from its inception, *the* central concept of the situationist critique of capitalist consumer culture, at a time when, under the *Pax Americana*, Europe was quickly becoming a prime market for US consumer goods. The usefulness of the concept, for Debord, was its versatility – its capacity to operate on many levels simultaneously: historical, political, economic, cultural, and philosophical – and working effectively as a partially *under-theorized* and *hypothetical* term to bring coherence to a wide variety of phenomena.

The basic idea behind the use of the term is well known but bears repeating. Significantly reframing Marx's celebrated account of commodity fetishism in the first chapter of *Capital*, Debord presented the spectacle as an enlargement of Marx's concept of commodity. Moving in a direction closer to Marx's earlier – more subjective and less economic – *Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Debord posited the spectacle as a new unit of analysis more suitable to describe the characteristic forms of experience under what he took to be a new cycle of post-WWII capitalist expansion.¹¹ Thus, the opening lines of *The Society of the Spectacle* (hereafter *SOS*) plagiarized the first sentence of *Capital*, published almost exactly one hundred years earlier, while also subtly reconfiguring its meaning in more subjective terms. Where Marx had said that 'the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities,' Debord wrote:

- 1 The whole of life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.
- 2 Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a partial way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart.¹²

As several commentators note, the substitution of spectacles for commodities underscored what was, for Debord, capitalism's increasing focus on consumer goods designed to satisfy a new series of manufactured needs – products linked to lifestyle choices and private fantasy worlds that were the common fare of the budding consumer economy of the West. The

spectacle, in this sense, with its material as well psychic dimensions deliberately blurring the dividing line between the subject and his or her object world, represented a new and intensified stage of commodity fetishism – one in which capitalism created and exploited the emotional territories brought into being by the Fordist economy. Among these were the two pilot commodities of the 1950s, cars and televisions, each a new passionate world or fairyland of desires to be exploited and used to channel the creation of further needs.

The spectacle thus brought to a head what Jonathan Crary has described as a ‘fundamental reorganization of the subject’ whose origins could be traced back to the 1930s, in the new forms and technologies of mass conditioning like sound synchronization.¹³ Oriented by commercial as well as political interests, such a restructuring of the human subject was based on what Crary terms a new ‘science of attention’ focused on ‘capturing’ the subject in a social field increasingly saturated with sensory input. Needless to say, the deeply undemocratic and disabling effects of this reconfiguration of the subject’s life world was what the concept of the spectacle was meant to highlight – by showing how it instilled the passivity and receptiveness to external stimuli characteristic of the spectator’s contemplative stance. Today, we might note that quite similar ideas can be found in the writings of some of the staunchest critics of neoliberalism, who see an ‘Empire of illusion’ developing from the expansion of corporate power in the United States after the war, the emergence of the National Security State on the one hand and the exponential growth of the public relations industry on the other.

That the spectacle for Debord was a historical more than a philosophical category is apparent in the close attention SOS devotes to tracing the beginnings of the spectacularization dynamic in the mass politics of fascism and Stalinism – as seen especially in the representations of the working class that emerged in that period and that persisted in Europe, still largely unaltered, after WWII in many parties and organizations of both the left and right. These ‘concentrated’ ideological projections that were the typical forms the spectacle had taken in the authoritarian regimes of the 1930s, according to Debord, had marked the start of a process whose most advanced formations were the more sophisticated forms of diversified or ‘diffuse’ spectacle found in post-war Western liberal democracies – forms in which the same basic processes were applied more widely to generate the abundance and variety of commercial and political icons typical of the consumer economy. As former Situationist International (henceforth SI) member and art historian T.J. Clark has shown, this ‘diffuse,’ rather than ‘concentrated,’ form of the spectacle could itself be seen as resulting from a longer historical process that went back to the early forms of bourgeois culture, entertainment, leisure, and display that had emerged during the Second Empire Paris of Haussmann: new forms of social life such as the country outings, theater goings, picnics, and shopping excursions whose first commodified

representation, Clark argues in line with Meyer Schapiro, had been the art of Impressionism.¹⁴

Beyond its multiple historical sources, however, the concept of the spectacle also drew on a wide range of literary and philosophical and sociological themes that from Robert Musil to Daniel Boorstin had addressed the question of an altered or diminished sense of reality characteristic of modernity itself. As Rancière observes, a central source here was certainly the current of thinking that, through Marx's and Engels' theory of alienation, grew out of the Romantic tradition of Hegelian and Feuerbachian philosophy, particularly the critique of religion as a projection of human powers into a 'world beyond.' It is not by chance that the first chapter of *SOS* opens with a memorable quote from Feuerbach's *Critique of Christianity* that succinctly sums up a recurring argument of the book: that the spectacle is the latest manifestation of the religious illusion, whose power grows in proportion to the degree to which it encourages the subject's disconnection with his or her world. Feuerbach wrote: 'But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence [. . .] *illusion only is sacred*, truth profane.' Sacredness, according to Feuerbach, was in fact directly proportional to the degree of illusion, 'so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.'¹⁵

Feuerbach's whole critique of the religious illusion, as Martin Jay has noted, remains, even today, an essential ingredient in a long tradition of 'antiocularism' that at least since the time of Descartes has continued to inform French intellectual culture.¹⁶ Clearly, in highlighting 'the contrast between the lived, temporally meaningful experience, the immediacy of speech, and collective participation, on the one hand, with "dead" spatialized images, the distancing effect of the gaze, and the passivity of individuated contemplation, on the other,' Debord's notion of spectacle was strongly influenced by this tradition.¹⁷ Early on in the *SOS*, in fact, Debord takes to task 'the *weakness* of the project of Western philosophy, which was an attempt to understand activity by means of the categories of vision,' arguing that 'the spectacle reposes on an incessant deployment of the very technical rationality to which that philosophical tradition gave rise.'¹⁸

Such statements – like the often quoted definition of the spectacle as 'capital accumulated to such a degree that it becomes an image' – have led many to regard Debord's theory of the spectacle as simply a theory of the image *tout court*.¹⁹ This in fact appears to be the view held by Rancière, who in his recent *The Emancipated Spectator* – the most sustained critique of the idea of the spectacle to have appeared since Debord's death in 1994 – notes:

What in fact is the essence of the spectacle for Guy Debord? It is exteriority. The spectacle is the reign of vision, and vision is exteriority – that is, self-dispossession. The malady of the spectating man can be summed up in a brief formula: 'the more he contemplates, the less he lives.'²⁰

Rancière stresses – correctly, we believe – Debord’s conception of the spectacle as a realm of total falsehood and untruth. He also emphasizes the role that the ‘critique of separation’ – the romantic ideal of an authentic world of free and unmediated expression – plays in his thinking, tracing it back to the distinct but conceptually related traditions of the avant-garde theater of Brecht and Artaud, each positing, in different ways, as the goal of a ‘new theater,’ the abolition of conventional polarities between actor and spectator, image and reality.

For Rancière, however, by reenacting the ancient Platonic condemnation of theatrical illusion, both of these traditions – especially the Brechtian one that mostly subtends Debord’s critique of the spectacle – are bound to rely on a ‘naively representational schema’ that opposes, even as it tries to transcend them, the same basic polarities it attempts to destroy. This is the problem, according to Rancière, with a whole set of ‘Brechtian and post-situationist’ cultural practices he finds featuring ‘on the agendas of art institutions’: ‘Detournement [. . .] parodies, reprocessing, montage,’ according to Rancière, are so many exhausted techniques, good only for exposing what everyone ‘already knows.’ Thus, in what seems almost a catalogue of all that is considered *ringarde* in France today, much of it recalling the opening scenes of *In Girum*, he dismisses a whole type of work that, as he puts it, ‘presumes to denounce the reign of the commodity.’ This goes from ‘parodies of promotional films’ to reprocessed ‘advertising icons or media stars,’ from ‘montages of “vernacular” photographs showing us standard petty-bourgeois living rooms,’ to ‘overloaded supermarket trolleys’ and ‘the refuse of consumer civilization, and so on and so forth.’²¹

For Rancière, insofar as all such work relies on a Platonic idea of a world of appearances that must be ‘unmasked’ to reveal the hidden realities behind it, it remains trapped in a naive representational model – one that ignores ‘the aesthetic cut that separates outcomes from intentions and precludes any direct path towards an “other side” of words and images.’²² Far more relevant, for Rancière, are the more nuanced and aesthetically sophisticated still lives of Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa’s *In Vanda’s Room*, on the daily lives of slum dwellers in Lisbon, whose political effect, he contends, stems from the fact that they agree to be ‘just a surface,’ constructing with attention and patience ‘the feel of a documentary and the texture of a Vermeer painting.’²³

Hence, it would appear that for Rancière two of the most common arguments from the philosophy of language – the intentional fallacy and the indeterminacy of reference – are quite sufficient to discredit the whole Brechtian project of rational enlightenment and, along with it, the whole idea of critique as exposure and denunciation. Such a maximalist stance, however well motivated by an understandable annoyance at the recycled use of worn-out devices, is not without recalling Rancière’s own notorious dismissal of Benjamin’s thesis on the ‘aestheticization of politics.’ In either case, the ‘critique of critique’ he advances risks, in our view, blocking off any stance of direct

engagement that might seek to catalyze, expose, or mobilize a public, bridging the divide between cause and effect, image and reality, actor and spectator. Another danger, of course, is to inadvertently promote a depoliticized aesthetic like the one Benjamin criticized when he noted how photographic representations of poverty tended to turn misery into 'consumer good.'²⁴

Closely bound up with Rancière's critique of Debord and Brecht is the aspersion he casts on the 'stultifying pedagogy' he perceives in the latter's contempt for the audience of mindless consumers – a prime instance of which, one presumes (although Rancière does not refer to it directly), would be nothing more than the opening scene of *In Girum*. Against this, Rancière cites his own historical work on the independence of working-class culture in the early nineteenth century. Careful readers of Debord, however, will find little in his work to support either the phobia of images or the elitism Rancière imputes to him. To the contrary, throughout his life, Debord remained adamantly opposed to any attempt to reduce the spectacle to an abstract theory of images. The first page of *SOS* warned against this when it noted that 'the spectacle is not a collection of images. It is a relation among people, mediated by images' (and, one may assume, by other things as well: laws, language, practices, institutions, and so on).²⁵ Later on, we find him lamenting how 'the dominant lies of the epoch are in the process of making us forget that truth can also be seen in images.' Far from embracing the 'antiocularist' tradition, Debord insists that 'the image *that has not been intentionally separated from its meaning* greatly adds to the precision and certainty of knowledge.' Like a subordinate clause that is neither pleonastic nor incompatible, 'authentic illustration casts light on true discourse.'²⁶

This is not to deny that the *SOS* is not a critique, even to the point of obsession, of the deceptive ways images are used and misused.²⁷ But there is little to indicate that Debord ever intended such a critique as a totalizing model of *all* images, or of the image as such. Against such a reading, it seems more useful to cite Crary's observation that Debord's theory of the spectacle was shaped by the dominant pilot commodities of the 1960s – the car and the television – characterized by what he calls 'vehicular space,' whose technological specificity demanded precisely the passive, contemplative consumption Debord's theory attacks.²⁸ Crary goes on to argue that contemporary forms of consumption are in fact quite different – a point to which we will return.

As for the condescension that Rancière quite rightly denounces in the discourse of Left-wing nostalgia (John Carey, among others, has brilliantly shown how such attitudes are a persistent trait of Western intellectuals at least since the late nineteenth century),²⁹ suffice it to mention Debord's fearless portrayals of almost completely unknown characters of the Parisian underworld in *In Girum*, like the bohemian drifter Ivan Chtcheglov about whom he wrote: 'no-one else was his equal that year. [. . .] The powers that be, with their paltry falsified information – which misleads themselves almost as much as it benumbs those under their administration – have not

yet been able to calculate what the rapid passage of this man has cost them. But what does it matter? Shipwreckers have their names writ only in water.³⁰

However, if we understand Rancière's target to be not so much Debord himself as *Debordism* – the widespread and simplified reception the theory of the spectacle throughout the 1970s and 1980s and then again, in an even more distorted form, from the 1990s to the present – then his critique retains all of its force, and gains in precision. One of the most interesting aspects of Rancière's essay is that it shows how a certain reductive conception of the spectacle was able to transition seamlessly to a whole series of politically reactionary positions, as seen, perhaps most clearly, in the work of Jean Baudrillard, among others. According to Rancière, it was here that Debord's spectacle critique was effectively 'inverted':

Forty years ago, [spectacle critique] was supposed to denounce the machinery of social domination in order to equip those challenging it with new weapons. Today, it has become exactly the opposite: a disenchanted knowledge of the reign of the commodity and the spectacle, and the equivalence between everything and everything else and between everything and its own image. This post-Marxist and post-Situationist wisdom is not content to furnish a phantasmagorical depiction of a humanity completely buried beneath the rubbish of its frenzied consumption. It also depicts the *law of domination* as a force seizing on anything that claims to challenge it. It makes any protest a spectacle and any spectacle a commodity.³¹

Rancière goes on to show quite brilliantly how the compulsive questioning of images in the writings of Baudrillard, in particular, devolved into questioning their supposedly hidden meanings. As he puts it succinctly, 'the critique of the illusion of images was converted into a critique of the illusion of reality.'³² One paradigmatic example of this, we might suppose, was Baudrillard's notorious claim that 'the Gulf War did not happen.' Nor is it without relevance to our own argument in this book that Rancière would characterize this underhanded displacement from the real to the image as 'phantasmagorical.'

To conclude with two general remarks, it seems necessary to stress, first, that from its inception, one of the conspicuous features of the spectacle was its intentionally under-theorized status – a fact that, as mentioned above, reflected Debord's own tactical understanding of how theoretical terms could be used, here and now, as weapons of combat. This position, which sometimes even found value in some words having 'a rather pleasing kind of vagueness,' as Debord put it, is just one aspect of the 'serious parody' through which the SI, especially during its early years, sought to distinguish itself from the stern professorial tone of French intellectuals.³³ As the situationist Attila Kotani once said: 'philosophy must never forget that it has always played its part in the most burlesque and melodramatic of settings.'³⁴ The second

consideration follows from this and addresses Rancière's conclusion to his critique of the spectacle. Having shown that, as he puts it, 'we need a change of approach' capable of uncoupling 'the link between the emancipatory logic of capacity and the critical logic of collective inveiglement (seduction),' Rancière recommends that we simply do away with the entire theoretical apparatus of the spectacle. It is better, he argues, that we start over again, even if this means proceeding from a new set of 'clearly unreasonable' assumptions. Among them would be the realization 'that there is no hidden secret of the machine that keeps (the spectator) trapped in their place [. . .] no fatal mechanism transforming reality into image; no monstrous beast absorbing all desires and energies into its belly; no lost community to be restored.'³⁵

Tempting as such assumptions might seem to be for a new mode of critique finally free of the intractable difficulties of critical theory, premises such as these, in our view, are unsatisfactory. What they surrender far too easily is the driving impetus behind the theory of the spectacle: the need to describe truthfully the forms of contemporary experience in today's conditions of Neoliberal capitalism. Before we turn to this task, and to the role that the concept of phantasmagoria must play within it, we must reluctantly review the uses and misuses of spectacle critique in contemporary architectural theory.

Notes

- 1 Guy Debord, *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* (London: Pelagian Press, 1991), 3.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 5.
- 4 Ibid., 6–7.
- 5 Ibid., 14.
- 6 H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy: His Own Selection of His Greatest Writings*, edited and annotated by H.L. Mencken (New York: Vintage, 1982), 21.
- 7 Michael Löwy, 'Consumed by Night's Fire: The Dark Romanticism of Guy Debord,' in *Radical Philosophy* 48 (January/February 1988), 31.
- 8 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 16.
- 9 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London and New York: Verso, 2009).
- 10 See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
- 11 The best discussion of the relationship between Debord and Marx is still Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- 12 Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, op. cit., no pagination.
- 13 See Jonathan Crary, 'Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,' in *October* 50 (Fall 1989), 97–107.
- 14 T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and Its Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- 15 Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, no pagination (emphasis added).
- 16 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

- 17 Ibid., 429.
- 18 Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, op. cit., no pagination (italics in original).
- 19 Ibid., no pagination.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., 76.
- 22 Ibid., 82.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 See Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer,' in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 25 Debord, *Comment on the Society of the Spectacle*, op. cit., no pagination.
- 26 Guy Debord, *Panegyric Tome Second* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1997) (our translation; emphasis added).
- 27 See Giorgio Agamben on the image for Debord, in 'Difference and Repetition in Debord's Films,' in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed., Tom McDonough (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 313–320.
- 28 See Jonathan Crary, 'Eclipse of the Spectacle,' in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed., Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine Publisher, 1984), 284.
- 29 See John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligensia, 1880–1939* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005).
- 30 Debord, *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, ibid., 49–50.
- 31 Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, op. cit., 32–33 (italics in original).
- 32 Ibid., 45.
- 33 Guy Debord, 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,' in *Theory of the Derive and other Situationist Writings on the City*, eds. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: ACTAR, 1996), 18.
- 34 Attila Kotani, 'Gangland et Philosophie,' in *International Situationniste* 4 (June 1960), 34 (my translation).
- 35 Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, op. cit., 48.

8 Spectacle critique and architectural theory

If theory and philosophy, according to Rancière, have been used to invert the critical sense of the spectacle, what can we say about architectural discourse from the 1960s to the present? Are the pressures observable in a field such as architecture, subject as it is to quite different, and sometimes particularly strong, external institutional constraints, analogous to those in the human sciences and the humanities? In what way was the revolutionary impulse of situationist critique neutralized or deflected by the generally conservative professional and business culture latent within architectural theory?

For starters, it will be necessary to distinguish between a first period of direct influence, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, and the various cycles of rediscovery and neglect that over the last four decades have marked the reception of the SI and of Debord's theory of the spectacle. Situationist theory had a direct effect on two generations of architects born between the late 1920s and 1940s. They include direct participants in the SI and its predecessor organization, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, like the Italian Ettore Sottsass or the Dutch Anton Albers and Har Oudejans (both briefly members of the SI before being expelled amidst the acrimonies surrounding the so-called 'Amsterdam affair' in 1960). Also included in this group is a longer list of young avant-garde theorists and practitioners whose work achieved its greatest visibility in the decades around the turn of the millennium, such as Wolf Prix, Nigel Coates, Rem Koolhaas, and Bernard Tschumi, and who, although sometimes too young to have been directly engaged in the revolutionary activities of the early 1960s, were directly affected by the rapid spread of situationist ideas across Europe after May 1968.

Among the latter, Tschumi moved from his early years of activism as an architecture student in Paris to developing a pedagogical approach at the Architectural Association in London that was clearly inspired by situationist reconversion tactics of ludic reappropriation of urban space.¹ Similarly, the first actions of Viennese collective Coop Himmelb(l)au – from their Soft/Hard Cloud experiments (1968) to the London 'House with a Flying Roof' (1973), and the urban interventions in Basel and Vienna of the same period – applied methods of agitation not unlike those theorized by

the SI.² Constant Nieuwenhuis's *New Babylon*, publicized through a series of memorable illustrated speeches in architecture schools in Europe and even across the Atlantic, also exerted a pervasive influence of on a rising generation of radical designers, from Ron Herron to Rem Koolhaas, who as a journalist had interviewed Constant on the occasion of the latter's collaboration with a group of agitators, called Provos, in a series of city-wide campaigns against privatization and traffic congestion in Amsterdam. Throughout the 1960s, widely disseminated images of *New Babylon* served to represent a situationist architecture to a new generation of architecture students. Koolhaas himself recently recalled how he was moved to become an architect by the tradition of radical constructivism celebrated in Constant's work.

In different ways, the seminal work of Tschumi, Prix, Herron, Koolhaas, and others from the 1960s through the 1980s reflected the spread of counter-cultural, as well as situationist, ideas – ideas that with few exceptions were not well represented in the professional and academic literature of the time. Disseminated through mimeographed tracts or underground presses, architects would have imbibed them as part of the *zeitgeist* of May 1968. Long suppressed in the neo-conservative vilification of the 1960s movements that began, and still continues, with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, their impact is quite clear in the work of these architects. It can be traced in their frequent and direct borrowings from Constant and their thematization of flexible, interactive, programmatically indetermined space that was a common feature of their work. This underground influence remains, even today, not fully measured and understood.³

Of more immediate concern to the present, however, is the new interest in 'situationism' – a term the SI rejected as doctrinaire – that followed the path-breaking 1989–90 exhibition 'On the Passage of a Few People through a Relatively Brief Moment in Time' in Paris, London, and Boston, which brought the ideas of the group back to international attention.⁴ Among the effects of this and other similar initiatives was to stimulate a vogue of situationist design studios in architectural schools on both sides of the Atlantic. Another was the appearance, in quick succession from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, of several well-documented studies, anthologies, and monographs on the work of the group's members. One can form a good idea of the character of this literature by focusing on its principal concerns. By far the lion's share of attention went to Constant's *New Babylon* and to the earliest, so-called artistic phase of the group. Constant's work, in particular, was carefully dissected by Mark Wigley and figured prominently in several major international exhibitions, such as Documenta 10. Situationist urban theories were also summarized in a popular book by Simon Sadler. Comparatively little attention, by contrast, was spent on the so-called 'second,' politicized phase of the SI, roughly from 1961 through 1972, even though it was precisely during this time that the SI attained its greatest influence and prestige across Europe and beyond, generating much interesting debate

in the fields of art history and philosophy through the writings of Crary, Agamben, and others like Rancière.

While it is easy to see how the politics of the SI would have appeared highly problematic for theorists trying to make an impact in architectural education from the 1980s onward, the effect of that one-sidedness is the very small number of studies that attempt, within the field of architecture, to engage the notion of spectacle in a serious way. One such attempt from a historical architectural perspective is Mark Dorrian's.⁵ Dorrian argues quite convincingly that the process of commodification that stands behind the spectacle finds its origin in what might be considered the first building made to display Marx's 'vast accumulation of commodities': Paxton's Crystal Palace (1851). Dorrian quotes from the catalogue of the Great Exhibition to the effect that it is 'perhaps the only building in the world in which the atmosphere is perceivable [. . .] (from) the west of east extremity of the gallery [. . .] the most distant parts of the building appear wrapped in a light blue halo.'⁶ Dorrian here echoes an earlier essay by Agamben, who similarly identified Marx's visit to the Crystal Palace with the start of his reflections on the fetishism of commodities and from there the whole line of thinking that, through Lukács, leads to Debord's notion of the spectacle. Significantly, commenting on the same passage that Dorrian cites from the catalogue, Agamben notes: 'the first great triumph of the commodity thus takes its place under the sign of both transparency and phantasmagoria.'⁷ More recently, and in a similar spirit, Douglas Murphy has also re-examined the Crystal Palace as the birthplace of modern capitalist culture – a space, as he puts it following Benjamin, that operated as a 'training school in which the masses, barred from consuming, learned empathy with exchange value.'⁸ Murphy usefully traces the repercussions and extensions of the nineteenth-century fantasy exhibition palaces through the heroics of the early twentieth-century modernism up to more recent developments.

Both Murphy and Dorrian address the apparent line of descent connecting the fantasy structures of the great exhibitions halls to what might reasonably be regarded as their descendants today – in such extravagant structures as London's Millennium Dome and, more generally, in the 'spectacular' effects achieved through virtual technology. Yet as both authors admit, more than 150 years of accelerated change – change that partly reconfigured the very categories of space and time through which architecture is apprehended – make any effort to draw a direct genealogical line highly questionable. Dorrian, for example, argues that 'there is a certain history of light – of objects in light, and the light of objects – to be written in relation to the spectacle and through the optic of the "exhibitionary complex" from the standpoint of which the enchanting aura of 19th spectacles can only with difficulty be likened to today's virtual objects, where a "cold intensification" generates an "emissivity (that) never dazzles and obscures," and leaves no hiddenness.'⁹ A similar disenchantment is evident in Hal Foster's amusing take-down of

Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Recalling Debord's famous definition, 'the spectacle is capital accumulated to such a degree that it becomes an image,' Foster proposes that in the case of Ghery the reverse is also true: 'the spectacle is the image accumulated to such a degree that it becomes capital.'¹⁰ Thus reformulated in the narrowest of market terms, the notion of spectacle serves just as well to describe the financial strategies behind the whole phenomenon of 'iconic architecture' that Ghery's building represents and that, according to Foster, plays such a key role in today's corporate 'revival' of the city.¹¹

Such important and necessary critiques of the market forces behind the recent vogue for 'iconic buildings' are now a common tendency in architectural criticism. Their somewhat predictable character, however, reflects a relatively limited understanding of a term that, as Anthony Vidler notes, is often and unnecessarily restricted to a narrow class of 'spectacular' buildings – ignoring the rather different implications of Debord's critique of the city and 'the spectacle of everyday life.' The latter, of course, described the ordinary environment of modern architecture and city planning – a critique that, as we know, focused especially on the standardized residential spaces that increasingly made up the background for the alienated and passive existence of the modern-day spectator.¹²

As early as the mid-1980s, Jonathan Crary linked Debord's concept of the spectacle to a particular 'contemplative' phase of Western TV/car culture that beginning in the 1950s had posited a 'vehicular space' (based on the screen and the automobile's windshield) as the dominant form of the spectator's subjectivity. According to Crary, already by the mid-1970s, following the emergence of the home computer as a 'core product' of a new cycle of capitalist expansion, this model had entered a crisis stage.¹³ The shift to the digital was effectively eroding the contemplative consumption of commodities that had been the target of Debord's critique. Echoing Deleuze, Crary described a post-vehicular phase of commodity consumption as based on 'pure flow.'¹⁴ The grafting of networks of information and other electronic circuitry over an older car/TV culture, and the superimposition of a new 'arterial network' not unlike that of the railways in the nineteenth century over the crumbling infrastructure of an earlier system, all resulted in the realization that, as Crary put it, 'the charade of television is over.'¹⁵ Contradicting Baudrillard's 'negative eschatology' of implosion, Crary further suggested that the transition to a new hybrid system would be repeatedly marred by accidents, disasters, and unpredictable breakdowns – collateral effects reflecting capitalism's post-1970s need to co-opt and rechannel the disruptions of the 1960s into a revamped and more inclusive territory of economic exploitation. From this perspective, and with prescience given the date of the essay, Crary pronounced himself skeptical of the supposed 'interactivity' of digital interfaces, which, instead of opening up opportunities for new democratic forms of community, portended rather a Pynchon-like Cellular Space even more coercive, sedentary, and regimented than the passive

TV watching it was meant to replace – a space whose inescapably carceral character echoed Deleuze's dark prophecy of a society of control. As we shall see, despite its predictions of television's imminent demise, Crary's early attempt to historicize the spectacle – in line with some of the strongest strands of 1960s radical critique – has lost none of its relevance today.

Unfortunately, Crary's essay remains an isolated case in a growing body of architectural writing that, beginning in the 1990s, invokes the spectacle in a way that Martin Jay has rightly described as 'lose and unfocused.'¹⁶ One example will suffice: William Saunders's *Commodification and Spectacle in Architecture* (2005) presents a selection of articles from the *Harvard Design Magazine* that, while gesturing toward Debord's theory of the spectacle, fails utterly to engage it in any meaningful way.¹⁷ This is no accident, since most of the essays quite simply invert the term's meaning exactly along the lines described by Rancière in the previous chapter. Kevin Ervin Kelley's *Architecture for Sale(s): An Unabashed Apologia*, for example, instructs the reader about 'architecture that helps companies sell' by creating 'branding environments.' Daniel Naegel's piece on Michael Graves focuses on the 'indomitable optimism' he imbues in his product line for Target ('useful, inexpensive, available to all'), while Rick Paynor offers a somewhat elegiacal description of the 'safe, weather free, indoor cornucopia of places like Bluewater,' Britain's newest and biggest shopping mall.

In each case, instead of a critique of market forces one might have expected from the title of the anthology, one finds only the dull repetition of a single tired mantra – what Rancière called the 'disenchanted knowledge of the reign of the commodity and the spectacle' presented as a new '*law of domination*' no longer open to question or critique. Interspersed here and there, for occasional relief, the reader will find commentaries such as Michael Sorokin mulling over 'what went wrong' in the 1960s subculture to explain the cynicism of the present, or Louis Fernandez-Galiano lamenting architecture's vanished 'gravitas' 'in a universe devoured by the media' – but then, as he notes, perhaps 'such is the price to pay for political and economic freedom' (*sic*) – or Kenneth Frampton repudiating most of the essays contained in the book and scarcely concealing his discomfort in being in such company.¹⁸ The most egregious example of such market-honed thinking is certainly that of former techno-enthusiast Michael Benedict, singled out by David Noble in *The Religion of Technology* for his 'intoxicating reveries' of a digital new world.¹⁹ In a characteristic illustration of how the discourse of neoliberalism cynically exploits the critique of commodification to push it further, Benedict laments that 'the ceiling of expectations as to what architecture could and should and would achieve was lowered, ratcheted down by decades of efficiency-talk and rationality-talk.' He then proceeds to recommend a 'faster-than-expected' adoption of 'radically cheaper ways to design and build' that would allow architects 'to capture and invest the savings in better design and new stylistic maneuvers.'²⁰ Not surprisingly, Saunders himself would go on to edit another collection of *Harvard Design*

Magazine articles, entitled *The New Architectural Pragmatism*, presented in Amazon.com as a canonical reference for 'the use of spectacular buildings to brand cities and institutions.'

The use of spectacle to glamorize the recent phenomenon of iconic architecture has become so pervasive in architectural discourse that it even informs more serious scholarly endeavors, such as *Architecture between Spectacle and Use*, edited by Anthony Vidler. Here, with the signal exception of Dorrian's essay discussed above, none of the book's contributors make any effort to relate their disparate themes to the critical category of the spectacle. Thus Kurt Foster, for example, lavishes praise on Gehry's Disney Opera House in Los Angeles while justifying the subject's relevance to the theme on the exceedingly flimsy grounds that 'concert halls are theatrical stages of a sort.'²¹ Reverential pieces on other examples of 'spectacular architecture' such as Jorn Utzon's Sydney Opera House (a more pertinent choice would have been the project he designed for Asger Jorn's Museum in Silkeborg) make up most of the other contributions. Throughout these discussions, the question of architecture's critical relation to the spectacle is never raised. Careless and self-indulgent, the book as a whole reflects a persistent inability on the part of the same short list of established names to take seriously ideas that influenced, directly or indirectly, a whole generation of architects from the 1960s. Nothing is more revealing of the failure of architectural critics and theorists, today, to mount any kind of principled resistance to the most corrosive trend in Western architecture over the last four decades, the rise of neoliberalism.

The tendency to misuse Debord's theory of the spectacle is also evident in Peter Eisenman's grandly presented manifesto, 'Against Spectacle,' recently posted on the website of *Icon Magazine*.²² The statement sums up effectively how the term is understood in more-informed architectural circles and applied strictly as an aesthetic category, diminishing if not inverting its political meaning. According to this view, there is a society of the spectacle, and there is, consequently, an architecture of spectacle. This is characterized by all the deplorable features of commercialism: 'distracted viewing of surfaces,' 'fantastic imagery,' 'novelty,' 'seductive renderings,' and 'publicity.' The only effective avenue of resistance to this state of affairs is a 'new subjectivity' and self-awareness on the part of designers, a less passive attitude that will downplay distraction in favor of 'close reading.' Any reference to the political, economic, or even cultural determinants of the spectacle, however, is rigorously excluded. This gives the manifesto a curiously abstract and unfocused quality: the fact that we live in a world dominated by mind-numbing publicity, for example, is attributed to impersonal forces such as 'the contemporary inundation of information.' Architects are pictured as having been 'thrown' into a world they are powerless to change, facing a 'vicious cycle' they are ill-equipped to oppose except through acts of self-willed 'removal.' The general feeling of impotence that transpires from the manifesto is perhaps not unrelated to the contemporaneous (still-unfolding)

saga of Eisenman's *City of Culture* in Galicia, Spain – a 300-million-euro multicultural extravaganza commissioned by the regional parliament in 1999 at the height of Spain's real-estate speculation boom. With its skyline mimicking the rolling hills of Santiago de Compostela, this huge complex now stands, half-built and unvisited, an unsustainable burden for governments and taxpayers to come.

The refusal to even countenance the complicity of architects with the very forces they pretend hypocritically to denounce is a common feature of a great part of architectural discourse today. Against this, it is necessary to insist that if the spectacle is to have any use as a critical concept capable, as Debord would say, 'of explaining a wide variety of seemingly disparate phenomena' – it can only be as a theory of global Neoliberal capitalism. It was for this reason, as Albert Toscano and Jeff Kinkle note parenthetically, that the cover illustration of Champ Libre's re-edited *SOS* (1971) showed a map of the world representing 'the commercial relations between the nations of the world and the course they were expected to take in the future – a distant descendant of Charles Joseph Minard's formidable nineteenth-century maps of commodity flows.'²³ At a minimum, such a theory would have to show the strategic functions any given 'regime of images' serves to advance, including the modes of perception it favors and how the latter are favorable to it. This means understanding the technologies through which what Crary called a 'reconfiguration of the subject' is affected in practice.

Thus, it seems that the discourse around the spectacle among architectural critics today illustrates quite well what Debord already observed in 1967 – namely, the tendency to 'vulgarize [the spectacle] into a commonplace hollow formula of sociologico-political rhetoric to explain and abstractly denounce everything, and thus serve as a defense of the spectacular system.'²⁴ Such predictable manipulations, however, should not compel a dismissal of the concept itself. Rather, they should stimulate closer scrutiny and reconsideration in light of today's realities. As noted above, a critique of the concept of spectacle must be the basis for a new theory – one that preserves its hard-core assumptions while also accounting for the changed conditions of the present. As Debord noted laconically:

Theories are only made to die in the war of time. Like military units, they must be sent into battle at the right moment; and whatever their merits or insufficiencies, they can only be used if they are on hand when they're needed. They have to be replaced because they are constantly being rendered obsolete – by their decisive victories even more than by their partial defeats. Moreover, no vital eras were ever engendered by a theory; they began with a game, or a conflict, or a journey.²⁵

It is with these considerations in mind that we now turn to the theory of phantasmagoria.

Notes

- 1 See Bernard Tschumi, 'Introduction,' in *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 2–23.
- 2 See Frank Werner, *Covering + Exposing: The Architecture of Coop Himmelb(l)au* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2000).
- 3 See Libero Andreotti, ed., *Le Gran Jeu à Venir: textes situationnistes sur la ville* (Paris: Éditions de la Villette, 2007).
- 4 Elisabeth Sussman, ed., *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957–1972* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
- 5 Mark Dorrian, "'The Way the World Sees London": Thoughts on a Millennial Urban Spectacle,' in *Architecture between Spectacle and Use*, ed., Anthony Vidler (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2005), 41–57.
- 6 Ibid., 47–48.
- 7 Giorgio Agamben, 'Marginal Notes on the Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle,' in *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 74.
- 8 Douglas Murphy, *The Architecture of Failure* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2012), 14.
- 9 Dorrian, op. cit., 48.
- 10 Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London and New York: Verso 2002), 41.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Antony Vidler, 'Introduction,' in *Architecture between Spectacle and Use*, ed., A. Vidler (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2005), ix–x.
- 13 Jonathan Crary, 'Eclipse of the Spectacle,' in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed., Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine Publisher, 1984).
- 14 Ibid., 287.
- 15 Ibid., 293.
- 16 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 433.
- 17 William S. Saunders, ed., *Commodification and Spectacle in Architecture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
- 18 Ibid., 2.
- 19 David Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 159.
- 20 Saunders, op. cit., 15.
- 21 Kurt W. Foster, 'Their "Master's Voice": Notes on the Architecture of Hans Scharoun's and Frank Gehry's Concert Halls,' in *Architecture between Spectacle and Use*, op. cit. 25.
- 22 In <http://www.iconeye.com/404/item/3015-manifesto->.
- 23 Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015), 25.
- 24 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), no pagination.
- 25 Guy Debord, *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consuminur Igni* (London: Pelagian Press, 1991), 24–25.

9 From spectacle to phantasmagoria

Today, after almost half a century of neo-conservative counter-revolution, there is a felt need for a new *conceptual weapon of critique* more suitable to twenty-first-century conditions of life. The weakening force of the spectacle and the slow process of recuperation and inversion outlined in the previous chapters make such a need especially acute. Not that the impulse behind Debord's theory is any weaker now than it was then. On the contrary, the very same desire to understand life in its *actual* conditions also drives the tentative search for a new conceptual framework today. It was this *parti pris* on the side of the subject, incidentally, that allowed Debord to say about his films, and without conceit, that they were all about 'a most important topic: myself.' Indeed, what starting point other than the subject's lived experience is possible for a theory of the present? How else does one go about re-thinking the situationist program with an eye to *what has changed* – politically, culturally, economically, and technologically – over the last fifty years?

Already by 1988, in his *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord had begun to re-consider the spectacle in light of what he called a new stage of capitalist development. The *integrated* spectacle, he argued, subsumed characteristics of both the 'concentrated' and the 'diffuse' forms described in *SOS*.¹ For Debord, the most evident feature of this new mutant version of the spectacle was its wider scope and deeper range – the fact that for the first time, it merged together the police-state features of the communist-bloc countries with the technological power and dynamism of Western liberalism. This more coercive form of the spectacle reflected the increased power of capitalism following the general defeat of revolutionary movements linked to May 1968 and the start of a new global counter-offensive under Reagan and Thatcher in 1979–80, leading soon after, just as Debord's *Commentaries* were coming off the press, to the fall of the Berlin Wall. As Debord noted, these epochal changes were themselves made possible by a new arsenal of weapons perfected by a resurgent capitalist world order – such as the cycles of 'incessant technological innovation' through which resistance and critique were systematically undermined through changes in the very means of communication used to construct them, or the rise of a national security state apparatus of secret surveillance and monitoring.²

For Debord, there was no question that the integrated spectacle marked a more brutal phase in the history of capitalism. As he put it, while its earlier 'diffuse' model used advertising and deception to generate positive public relations narratives, after the defeat of May 1968 'those dreams had to be abandoned.' Today the integrated spectacle 'prefers to be feared. It knows full well that "its innocent air has gone forever."³ These harsher conditions were reflected as much in the growth of various 'networks of falsification' – in the media and in state or corporate propaganda centers – as in the proliferation of a vast underground security industry composed of 'secret services, both state and para-state,' including an 'indefinite number of police and counter-espionage services and . . . many private companies dealing in surveillance, security and investigation,' the cancerous growth of which sometimes resulted in chaotic overlap and competition between agencies with unpredictable and uncontrollable effects.⁴ Dismissed as wildly exaggerated at the time they were published, many of these considerations have now been assimilated into the common wisdom of social and cultural critics. As Agamben notes, they belong to one of the few accounts of the times that was able to rise to 'the level of the problem.'⁵ What remains to be fully formulated, however, is a *theory* of this aggressive new phase of spectacular domination based on the structurally new conditions of the present day.

We believe that this epochal change is captured best by the term 'phantasmagoria.' If the spectacle represented a cycle of capitalist expansion into a consumer economy, phantasmagoria would designate a triumphalist phase of neoliberalism brought on through deregulation and free capital flows. If the spectacle was tied to the televisual technologies of mass consumerism, phantasmagoria reflects the medial force of digital and web-based systems of what Jodi Dean has called contemporary 'communicative capitalism.'⁶ Phantasmagoria, in this sense, might stand for a new stage of capitalist totalization in which every aspect of life is reconstructed to align with a new set of normative trajectories that tie it into the tempo, the operations, and the new spatial coordinates of markets and information networks. And as with Debord's own shift from commodities to spectacles, the move from spectacles to phantasmagorias also implies dialectical reversals where the effect becomes a cause, and what was seen as a symptom (in the manner of a feedback loop) takes on a force of its own.

To better understand the nature and functions of phantasmagoria, it is useful to consider briefly Foucault's seminal notion of the *dispositif* or apparatus as elaborated upon, lately, by Agamben. Agamben introduces several important qualifications that closely align with our notion of phantasmagoria. Like Foucault, he describes *dispositif* as 'anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, and discourses of living beings.'⁷ For Foucault, this was a 'network of heterogeneous linguistic and nonlinguistic elements – virtually anything, including discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions – having

a *strategic function* within a power relation and at the intersection of power and knowledge.’⁸ More importantly for Agamben, however, is what distinguishes present-day *dispositifs* from their historical predecessors. Two such characteristics are, first, their ubiquity (the fact, as he says, that ‘there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus’) and, second, their *de-subjectifying* effects on human beings (the fact that the actions of the apparatus no longer give rise to a ‘recomposition of a new subject’ but do so only under a ‘larval’ or ‘spectral’ form).⁹ Agamben stresses the massive scale of manipulation and control implied in the present-day ‘proliferation of apparatuses,’ one result of which is that today, as he argues, ‘we confront the most docile and cowardly social body that has ever existed in human history.’ The proliferation of invisible networks of permanent surveillance insures ‘the incessant though aimless motion of this machine, in which every ordinary man is a potential terrorist.’¹⁰

It is worth noting that Agamben here uses the term ‘apparatus’ in a way that recalls Debord’s use of ‘spectacle’ – to substitute, update, and expand on the regime of ‘commodities’ whose ‘vast accumulation,’ according to the opening lines of Chapter 1 of *Capital*, characterized the appearance of the world in advanced industrial societies for Marx. In a similar way, we could say that today, in societies where modern conditions of production prevail, the world appears as a vast accumulation of apparatuses – or, we might add, phantasmagorias. While it is not our intention to theorize the distinction between apparatuses and phantasmagorias (the two terms are so close that each could be considered to be a sub-set of the other), their obvious similarities can serve to identify some ways in which phantasmagorias differ from their theoretical predecessor, the spectacle.

One such way is a heightened level of *technicity*. Where the spectacle, as Crary suggested, centered on the televised image, phantasmagorias are, by any measure, more complex and all-encompassing technical environments, tactile as well as visual, tectonic, multi-sensory, and multi-medial, reflecting the vastly superior power of present-day technology. Moreover, while the spectacle was still tied to the characteristic material object world of 1960s consumer products (cars, appliances, dress fashions, etc.), phantasmagorias appear to mark a new stage of reification in which objects are as it were, several stages further removed from their context of production, replaced by environments or affective atmospheres whose modes of operation are less firmly connected to the spectacle’s earlier image economy.¹¹ The very nature of phantasmagorias as ‘magical’ displays of technological prowess marks this technicity – and the various ways in which it helps to capture, engage, and transform the user – as one of their most essential features.

A related characteristic is a greater *force of penetration*. Obviously, this is connected to the quasi-ontological ability of new technologies to open up unprecedented regions of sensory experience, creating new ‘realities’ that simulate the mode of interaction of the real world, and undermining further

the already blurred distinction between the animate and the inanimate, the real and the imagined.¹² Compared with the spectacles of the past, today's phantasmagorias depend much more critically on the *means of transmission* through which subjects 'actively participate' as autonomous agents in the construction of phantasmagorical dreamworlds – the latter standing relative to the spectacle in a somewhat similar relation as the expanded 'life-styles' of the 1960s stood relative to the commodities of the earlier industrial age. As Kittler observes apropos of Foucault's account of the emergence of bio-politics from an older archaic legal order, the *channels* through which given 'discourse networks' are transmitted and received are as if not more important than the discourse's own mode of production.¹³

To a greater degree than was the case with the spectacle, phantasmagorias exploit the *mechanisms of capture and desubjectivization* of digital communication technology. Dean has effectively described the quasi-addictive interactions generated in web-based environments whose basic currencies are time and attention – mechanisms that she points out have now become the principal enabling features for whole new forms of labor-force extraction for corporations like Google or Amazon, which profit from the unpaid labor of internet users.¹⁴ While stressing the fluidity and adaptability of the 'imaginary identities' and 'accessories' offered to a subject's continuous process of self-fashioning, Dean convincingly shows how the underlying operations of control affiliated with desire, fear, and the promise of enjoyment are always and inevitably predicated on the impossibility of the subject establishing a firm place from which to make sense of one's world – hence the 'larval' or 'spectral' forms of pseudo-subjectivity mentioned by Agamben above. Like Žižek, Dean also emphasizes the 'reflexive entrapment' of symbols in contexts whose immediacy and locality prevent recourse to terms or ideas that might bring the subject out of its isolated setting. Affective intensities replace stable symbolic structures of knowledge so that, as Benjamin noted in a different but not unrelated context, what is gained in the power of suggestive effect is lost in the capacity to enlighten and provoke thought.¹⁵ Thus, the logic of desire driving the spectacle is replaced today by what Dean calls a 'logic of drive,' with its characteristic disfunctional forms of excess, such as bubbles, vicious circles, and 'viral proliferation' – some of which, inevitably, result in 'extreme or catastrophic ruptures, zero points from which something new begins.'¹⁶

The escalating (or accelerating) movement from commodity to spectacle, and from spectacle to phantasmagoria that all the above describe, brings up another significant feature of the phantasmagorical present. For not unlike Marx, who predicted the periodic crises of capitalism from the tendency toward lower profit rates under the effect of competition and technological advance, Dean emphasizes a tendential *decline in symbolic efficiency* resulting from such inflationary trends – trends that increasingly determine a state of ontological insecurity. Debord had similarly spoken of 'domination's falling rate of profit' and of the state of 'fragile perfection' he detected in the increasingly dogmatic tone of political discourse of his time.¹⁷ Indeed, as

levels of precariousness and insecurity rise, so does the question of legitimacy and the role of fear and anxiety in shaping individual notions of selfhood.¹⁸

Central to this whole phenomenon of increasing fragility and insecurity is, of course, the growth of militarism that, while it has never really abated since the end of WWII, takes on renewed force following the defeat of the 1960s movements and the fall of the Berlin Wall. More than the political spectacles of the immediate post-war years, phantasmagorias today appear to be closely linked to the new defense technologies whose commercial applications, from the internet to robotics, are now the driving sector of much of the economic life of the United States. As both a central sector of a global order based in the high-tech industry (itself rooted in innumerable local enterprises that make it necessary to the survival of more and more people and economic regions) and as the increasingly dominant and universal paradigm for the bio-political management of populations, military technologies, as Stephen Graham observes in his excellent *Cities under Siege: the new military urbanism*, have now 'become fundamental to virtually all acts of urban life and consumption in advanced industrial cities.'¹⁹ 'Systems of electronic control' are 'the new strategic architecture of city life,' increasingly supplanting without replacing the architecture of the disciplinary spaces that, from prisons to schools, made up the panoptical order of the city for Foucault.²⁰ Moreover, according to Graham, as an ever-broadening landscape of 'security' blends commercial, military, and security practices in parallel with market-fundamentalist notions for organizing social life, hyperinequalities and militarism become mutually reinforcing. Deepening the cross-over of urbanism and militarism, finally, is the well-funded development of a whole technophilic and lethal fantasy world of nanoscale network sensors, autonomous mechanized robots using pattern-recognizing software (Ronald Arkin at Georgia Tech is developing ethical rules for them), and 'total' overhead surveillance and control.²¹ What Graham calls the 'contemporary re-enchantment with war' through a 'military-industrial-media-entertainment-network' gives new meaning to Benjamin's denunciation of the cult of war in the epilogue to the Artwork essay.²²

As with the spectacle, the structural mutations introduced by the world of phantasmagorias can be examined across the full range of scales. Macroscopically, from the 1980s to the present, perhaps the most direct physical manifestations of it are the new 'world cities' of international finance capital, from Dubai to Singapore and the so-called 'New Beirut,' with their luxury-themed environments, supermalls, sumptuary compounds, and assorted 'off worlds' of the global elite. These direct outgrowths of the de-regulatory counterrevolution ushered in by Thatcher and Reagan – high-security spectral fantasy worlds 'where the rich can walk like gods in the nightmare gardens of their deepest and most secret desires' – are but the reverse projection of the vast zones of financial *dis*-investment and war that make up what Mike Davis has called that other product of neoliberalism, a *planet of slums*.²³ These fantasy

worlds are like a nested system of phantasmagorias, phantasmagorias of phantasmagorias, the phantasmagorias squared of neoliberalism.

But it is on the most intimate micro-level level of life today that the subjective effects of phantasmagoria as *a system of domination* can best be appreciated – in the dispossession, the larval existence, and the compulsive *turning inward* affected by individuals caught within the circuits of the hyper-mediated city. The French collective Tiqqun eloquently describes this condition as an existential state of ‘crepuscular vacant sovereignty,’ in which ‘errance takes us from the same to the same through identical paths.’²⁴ This new form of uprootedness ‘generates feedback loops such that whoever has been uprooted will uproot others’ and feel at home in exile.²⁵ For Tiqqun, such a condition merely represents the terminal stage of what Marx described as ‘the dissolution of all products and all activities into exchange value,’ where ‘the universal dependence of individuals indifferent to each other constitutes their social bond.’ Tiqqun writes:

The most characteristic concretion of this spectacular ethos, this specific *affective tonality* – on a planetary scale – remains the metropolis. There is no outside of the metropolis: Never have men been gathered together in such great number, and never have they been so totally separate from one another.²⁶

At the same time that it marks a new level of loss and dispossession, however, the affective tonality of the city dweller also serves to expand and reproduce the very system that causes it. As Dean notes, quoting Rob Horning,

identity has become someone else’s capital stock; we are driven to add labor to that raw material to make profits for the owners of our digitized identity containers. . . . Interiority has become a factory; social media the showroom floor.²⁷

Hence, labor’s alienation – as Tiqqun says – is *put to work*. Permanently seeking identity, the damaged subject compulsively repeats the same self-fashioning gestures with the same narcissistic contemplation of the world and of him- or herself that Debord had theorized. Unlike the consumer fantasies of the spectacle, however,

Neoliberal ideology does not produce its subjects by interpellating them into symbolically anchored identities (structured according to conventions of gender, race, work, and national citizenship). Instead, it enjoins subjects to develop [their] creative potential and cultivate [their] individuality. Communicative capitalism’s circuits of entertainment and consumption supply the ever new experiences and accessories we use to perform this self-fashioning – I must be fit! I must be stylish! I must

realize my dreams. [. . .] Neoliberal subjects are expected to, enjoined to have a good time, have it all, be happy, fit, and be fulfilled.²⁸

But this endless experimentation on oneself, this continual search for vestimental forms of identity or personality-kits is never more than the limited modality of an indifferent choice made by a prepubescent subject. Hence, the characteristic accompanying symptom of this interiorized exteriority: in Tiquun's words, 'a slight and constant attrition of being, a progressive drying-out, a little death distributed along a continuum. We are not SUBJECTS but we play the subject. Like the empty axis of this pit without walls, we are masked nothingness, aggregating the double nothingness of the untouchable "consumer" on the one hand, and of the pathetic impotent abstraction that is "the citizen" on the other.'²⁹ More than with the spectacle, therefore, phantasmagoria marks a further step in the breakdown of reality vs. appearance – a new level of irrationality and ontological insecurity in which nothing is more phantasmagorical than the idea of power and control.

In *What Is an Apparatus*, Agamben argues that any critical confrontation with the 'accumulation of apparatuses' must aim neither at destroying them nor, as some naively suggest, at using them in a 'correct way.' Like Crary in 'Eclipse of the Spectacle,' Agamben rejects the notion, current among technophiles, of a 'more democratic' use of a technical apparatus that 'already implies a certain process of subjectivation/desubjectivation which precludes using it "in the right way,"' and only serves 'the eclipse of politics and triumph of *oekonomia* – or management.'³⁰ Subverting apparatuses must rather aim at their *profanation*. It must challenge their status as apparatuses by 'returning to common use what has, through sacrifice, passed from the profane world to the sacred.'³¹

Notes

- 1 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London and New York: Verso, 1988).
- 2 Ibid., 50.
- 3 Ibid., 82.
- 4 Ibid., 81–84.
- 5 Giorgio Agamben, 'Violence and Hope in the Last Spectacle,' in *Situationists: Art, Politics, Urbanism*, eds., Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: ACTAR, 1996), 78.
- 6 Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010).
- 7 Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 15.
- 8 Michel Foucault, 'The Confession of the Flesh,' in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed., C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194–196 (emphasis added).
- 9 Ibid., 21.
- 10 Ibid., 23.

- 11 D.N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001) posits 'the figural' as the new digital logic of sense. The figural marks a semiotic regime in which the world of things is penetrated by discourse (and vice versa).
- 12 The best literary discussion of phantasmagorias is Max Milner's *La fantasmagorie: essai sur l'optique fantastique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982).
- 13 See John Armitage, 'From Discourse Network to Cultural Mathematics: An Interview with Friedrich A. Kittler,' in *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, 7–8 (December 2006), 19.
- 14 See Dean, *Blog Theory*.
- 15 Walter Benjamin, 'Pariser Brief (I),' reprinted in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, ed. Hella Tiedemann-Bartels (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), 495–507. Benjamin here is writing about Nazi monster rallies.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 17 Debord, *op. cit.*, 84.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 111.
- 19 See Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), 62.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 180.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 223.
- 23 See Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk, eds., *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (New York and London: The New Press, 2007), ix, and Mike Davis, *A Planet of Slums* (London and New York: Verso, 2007).
- 24 Tiqqun, *Bloom Theory*, Retrieved from bloom.jottit.com, theanarchistlibrary.org, 7.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 26 *Ibid.* (italics in original).
- 27 See Rob Horning, 'Social Media, Social Factory,' in *The New Inquiry* (July 29, 2011).
- 28 Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 66–67.
- 29 Tiqqun, *op. cit.*, 11. My translation from the French original.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 15.

Excursus II

The architecture of phantasmagoria

In this excursus, we indulge the modernist habit of seeking properties deemed 'intrinsic' to a phenomenon, in order to isolate the entity we have called 'phantasmagoria' as a relatively stable construct. The goal, however questionable historically, is to develop a concept that can work *critically* to describe several notable features of contemporary architecture and urbanism. To this end, Adorno's much celebrated (and reviled) account of Richard Wagner's phantasmagorias is an obvious starting point.¹

Long considered a paradigmatic example of Marxist critique that combines ideological analysis with the highest level of formal and, in this case, musicological analysis, the text has recently come in to some considerable and not unjustified criticism, most notably from Juliet Koss in *Modernism after Wagner*.² Koss's point, however, that Adorno offers a biased and anachronistic account of Wagner's work that is highly questionable historically does nothing, in our view, to invalidate the critical and theoretical force of his perspective on the rise of the 'culture industry' and the 'society of the spectacle.' On the contrary, in our view, as an example of how to read music (and by extension other forms of cultural production) as a cipher of social antagonisms, this text has lost none of its force, some of which, we think, can be usefully redirected toward the present architectural scene.

For Adorno, as we have seen, the basic principle of Wagner's phantasmagorias is the 'occultation of production by means of the outer appearance of the product.'³ This essential function can be traced across a wide variety of interpretative registers: formal, material, and socio-ideological. It is, in fact, the lens through which Adorno seeks to expose the myriad ways in which Wagner manipulated his audiences. While this definition of phantasmagoria does not exclude the presence of false consciousness and self-delusion in the work of the phantasmagorist, the element of *inganno*, or deceitfulness, remains central to its very nature as an illusionistic device. In the widest sense, Adorno's use of this critical category involves describing a series of more or less deliberate obfuscations or delusions regarding the social relations, economic rationale, working practices, material qualities, and ideological origin or purpose that come into play in the conception and realization of a work. In the case of Wagner, it offers a severe and disenchanted perspective on the

utilitarian goals of his musical productions, as seen through the techniques, ideas, and narratives that underlie them, in relation, especially, to the social, political, and ideological purposes they serve.

The first of these obfuscations concerns the very nature of the work as a product. As phantasmagoria, Adorno claims, citing Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, 'the product presents itself as self-producing.' Today, as already noted, this essentially *magical* quality of self-generation or *auto-poiesis* is more apt to be theorized through Deleuzian categories of 'self-organization' or 'emergence' – as in the 'new materialisms' celebrated by Spuybroek or Kipnis, for example. In either case, the image of self-creation is central to the whole perspective, dear to the Deleuzian school of architectural theorists, on architecture as a quasi-biological 'process' rooted directly in Nature itself.⁴

The basic ideological function of this biologically based outlook on the design process was made clear, recently, by Douglas Spencer, who argued convincingly that the discourse of 'emergence' and self-generation reassuringly *naturalizes* a good many imperatives of the post-Fordist economy, including the principles of flexibility, networking, and adaptability. Spencer stresses how the biological or metabolic paradigms adopted by this school of architectural theory replicate neoliberal organizational and managerial principles in which subjects are expected to acquire – as 'requisite survival skills' – the special competences in communicational performance and dispositions that the system demands. Within this discourse, according to Spencer, the real and actual conditions of architectural work of the post-Fordist neoliberal economy – the long hours, continuous retraining, and chronic precarity that increasingly characterize architectural labor today – are spirited away in favor of a more uplifting and high-minded narrative that stresses 'opportunity' or 'connectivity.' Spencer significantly describes this discourse as itself a 'new phantasmagoria.' As he puts it,

the discursive work of the new phantasmagoria consists of expressing these conditions in the affirmative terms of actor-networks, assemblages, self-organizing systems and new materialisms. [. . .] The reification of subjectivity is presented as returning us to an ontological truth we should aspire to conform to, rather than one determined by the conditions of financial capitalism.⁵

There is a distinct echo, in Spencer's critique, of Adorno's comments on Wagner's ideal of the 'Total Work of Art.' Wagner, as we know, advanced the program of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in response to the disintegrating forces of alienation and modernity that accompanied the rise of nineteenth-century capitalism. In practice, however, as Adorno made abundantly clear, the new methods instituted by Wagner promoted the very effects they were supposed to resist, aggravating rather than eliminating the division of labor inherent in opera, intensifying rather than dissolving the authoritarian role of the

individual author, undermining rather than enabling new forms of collective artistic production. Adorno here joined with Brecht's similar critique when he noted that the very notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* made its appearance at the time of the triumph of specialization – as a compensatory image added to, rather than fundamentally questioning, the present state of things.⁶ Much the same could be said, we believe, about the present-day discourse of architectural Deleuzians who, as Spencer shows, may well conceive their natural models of form generation along the lines of an 'alternative' and progressive ecological life view, while in practice working efficiently to ontologize the most heartless principles of neoliberalism. Indeed, as a paradigmatic case of Marxian 'false consciousness,' the whole idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a useful analogue for the way architecture is reconceived, in strictly organizational terms, by such theorists as Michael Speaks or Sarah Whiting, for example, along the lines of the managerial literature of the business community and in close alliance with their metabolic partners.⁷

Alongside the critique of Wagner's working methods, however, there is also Adorno's detailed description of the latter's 'phantasmagorical style' that is also not without relevance for the present state of architecture. With this term, Adorno meant the many 'musical' methods Wagner used to create what Cray has aptly called 'collective dream-like states.'⁸ The quotation marks around the word 'musical' here emphasize the equivocal nature of Wagner's stylistic innovations, which according to Adorno were motivated by non-musical or extra-musical (if not indeed, anti-musical – i.e., commercial) considerations, including the overriding need to maximize the emotional impact of the work on the public. Here, the recent declaration of Swiss architects Herzog and De Meuron that the strength of their buildings 'lies in the immediate visual impact they make on the visitor. For us, that is all that is important in architecture' may serve as a general marker for the place such considerations hold in contemporary design practice.⁹

Although many of Wagner's stylistic techniques have now been incorporated in the common practices of the culture industry, they remain relevant, we believe, to present-day modes of space-making. Among them, the most directly related to the phantasmagoric principle of concealing the process of production is what is known as the 'endless melody': essentially, for Adorno, the various ways in which – through the orchestration of gradual transitions, transpositions, and modulations – Wagner sought to weave a smooth unbroken fabric out of fragmentary and heterogeneous materials. This streamlining procedure, superimposing a single continuous texture to convey a 'look' of stylistic or formal coherence (a kind of ersatz unity expressing continuity and organic wholeness) is exactly what is at stake, in our view, in the smoothing techniques and undulating surfaces of so many neo-avant-garde works today – from NOX to Riser-Umemoto to Foreign Office.

One of the effects of this 'fetishization of the continuous and biomorphic modeling of its surfaces and forms' is the effective dissimulation of physical and material qualities.¹⁰ The dramatic ground-stair-ceiling 'experience' that

makes up the most sensational part of Zaha Hadid's Maxi Museum in Rome (2009), for example, is made of painted concrete, painted steel, and colored plastic, all treated in the most inconspicuous ways to make all material distinctions undetectable to the eye. The only way to ascertain the material qualities would be through touch, but a variety of devices, including the unreal fetish-like quality of the space itself, are used to actively discourage this. Nothing, it seems, must be allowed to distract from the phantasmagorical effect. All traces of labor, construction, structure and internal organization, and even material presence must be carefully removed in order to intensify the effect of the work as a miraculous apparition.

The privileging of sight over touch in similar biomorphic designs, of course, may sometimes lead to unintended consequences. A case in point is Foreign Office's Yokohama Terminal (2004), whose enormous material presence fails almost comically to achieve the lightness and fluidity of its digital design presentation. In a similar way, only a few years after its completion, unavoidable traces of time and use radically subvert the intended a-temporality and pristineness of Zaha's Maxi Museum, tending to turn it into an 'instant ruin.' Nevertheless, the drive to suppress the material tactility of space in favor of a purely visual experience recalls – on a different register – Adorno's critique of how Wagner's operas exploited the 'dozing' mode of the ear. For Adorno, this sensory bias was not accidental, inasmuch as it targeted the inert quality of a habitually unconcentrated and passive sense (the sense of hearing) in order to produce what he called an 'intoxicating brew,' an effect of oceanic regression.¹¹ In much the same way, many of today's most sensational 'iconic' buildings appeal to a particular affective modality of vision rather than touch to maximize the force of impact on the viewer.

One of the most effective Wagnerian methods to achieve a mystical union with the viewer is through the creation of 'moods' and 'atmospheres' that willfully aim to abolish any possibility of critical distance – the opposite, we might say, of Brecht's principle of distancing or *Verfremdung*. Diller and Scofidio's 2002 expo pavilion at Yverdon, Switzerland, in the form of a mist-generating bubble called 'The Blur,' appears to have been directly inspired by one of Wagner's scenic innovations, the steam curtain – which had a similar function to intensify confusion and indistinction on the stage, blurring the boundary between subject and object, the viewer and the scene. As with Wagner, the compulsive pursuit of immersive identification at any price is also a matter of gaining practical advantage in an underhanded way – as when 'atmosphere' serves conveniently to pass under a secondary register the reality of panoptical surveillance and control – as seen, for example, in the fashionable 'learning environment' designed for Rolex in Lausanne by the Japanese firm SANAA (2010).¹²

But the active pursuit of affective states of 'total immersion' – emanating directly, in most cases, from the commercial needs of the enterprise – has a whole list of other Wagnerian methods to draw on. One is Wagner's habit of 'fusing' disparate materials to generate strange and mutant sounds. Similar

cross-breeds – spatial, structural, or material – have become ubiquitous in today’s ‘iconic’ architecture, whose goal appears to be the avoidance of anything that might appear as a familiar or recognizable tectonic form. Here it must be said that Adorno was the first to recognize Wagner’s art of instrumentation and his wonderful chromatic effects. As he put it: ‘W’s orchestra is essentially intimate: the composer [. . .] is only really at home in the orchestra, where the voices of the instruments address him, magical and familiar at the same time, as colors are to children.’¹³

In much the same way, one would be remiss not to acknowledge the extraordinary creative energy invested, today, in developing the richest possible range of textures, material, and surface patterns in what appears to be an almost compulsive search for effects analogous to the color of Wagner’s sound. Yet, just as Adorno was quick to criticize Wagner’s hybrids for how they served to prevent the listener from perceiving how they were produced, so one might question the ultimate rationale behind the pursuit of surface effects in recent design, along with its ultimate consequences on the work as a meaningful whole. As Adorno argued, ‘The appearance, which in Wagner nourishes the essence, if it does not indeed create it, is also the side that the work of art presents to the world, in other words, as its “effect.” Not only does the appearance become the essence, but inevitably the essence becomes appearance.’¹⁴ Nothing was more symptomatic of the hollowing effect of this externalizing drive, for Adorno, than Wagner’s obsessive repetition of *leitmotifs* – musical refrains that, in their elemental succinctness, were ‘designed to be remembered, intended for the forgetful.’¹⁵ Today, it is difficult not to think of this while contemplating the widespread ‘minimalist’ practice of making a single detail the ‘form generator’ for a whole project. One paradigmatic instance of this, in recent years, would be Foreign Office’s Bamboo Building in Madrid (2007), a housing project in which a single formal façade device, flexibly conceived, is made to serve all possible existing needs. Here, as elsewhere, designers have assimilated Wagner’s ability to exploit the rhetorical force of simple, rudimentary formal structures (such as the elemental bar stanza – the AAB pattern on which all of his work is based) that, as Adorno pointed out, obviate the need of thematic development. Like Wagner’s music, the use of simple diagrammatic formulas that can be repeated and intensified but not actually developed seems to be a recurring feature of recent design – a sign of its strength and more fundamental weakness.

According to Adorno, ‘time is the all important element of production that phantasmagoria, the mirage of eternity, obscures. While days and months run into each other and vanish as in a moment, phantasmagoria makes up for this by representing the moment as that which endures.’¹⁶ Today technology, including the fascination with robotics and other rapid prototyping and assembly procedures (the latest is the fantasy of a direct ‘3D printing’ of buildings) serves a critical function to reinforce the appearance of the work as a magical object, a technological ‘wonder’ whose miraculous effects – like those of each new generation of commodities – will last until the next wave

of high-tech ‘innovation.’ Astonishment, amazement, ‘awesomeness’ are the favored terms used to describe such work, which exists in a suspended state of an instant that lasts forever. The shortened time of each new sensation underscores the degree to which the field is now subsumed into the logic of commodity production.

On another, quite different but related level, the drive to erase every sign of human labor also leads, quite naturally, to disavowing the role of construction work, as in the hundreds of Indian and Nepalese migrant workers who have died building Zaha Hadid’s al-Wakrah stadium in Qatar (for the 2022 World Cup), about which the architect had this to say: ‘I have nothing to do with the workers. I think that’s an issue the government – if there’s a problem – should pick up.’¹⁷

This comment brings us back to the overarching contradiction of the phantasmagorical style, according to Adorno, which is the way it allows the uncomfortable coexistence of apparently high-minded ideals with the ‘wholly profane’ calculations of commodity production. As Adorno put it, phantasmagoria ‘immortalizes the moment between the death of Romanticism and the birth of realism.’ This peculiar combination is one of Adorno’s main criticisms of Wagner. It is the lynchpin of his claim that, despite its protestations to the contrary, Wagner’s productions anticipated both the methods and the goals of the culture industry. Thus, after showing how the famous scene of the Venusberg in *Tannhauser* actually arose from the ‘ordinary theatrical requirements of the ballet’ which it had to mask as much possible through a ‘passive visionary presence,’ Adorno writes: ‘Where the dream is at its most exalted, the commodity is closest to hand.’¹⁸

Might something similar be said today about the strange mixture of mysticism and cynicism, religious fervor and crude materialism one finds, for example, in the following words written by Jeff Skilling, president and CEO of Enron, now serving a twenty-year sentence in federal prison for fraud, introducing an exhibition of Frank Gehry’s work sponsored by Enron at the Guggenheim in New York? Skilling wrote:

Enron shares Mr Gehry’s ongoing search for the moment of truth, the moment when the functional approach to a problem becomes infused with the artistry that produces a truly innovative solution. This is the search Enron embarks on every day, by questioning the conventional to change business paradigms and create new markets that will shape the New Economy. It is this shared sense of challenge that we admire most in Frank Gehry. We hope it will bring you as much inspiration as it has brought us.¹⁹

Notes

1 Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (London: Verso, 1991).

2 Juliet Koss, *Modernism after Wagner* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

- 3 Adorno, op. cit., 85.
- 4 See here Douglas Spencer's important 'Nature Is the Dummy, Circulations of the Matabolic,' in *Grounding Matabolism*, eds., Daniel Ibanez and Nikos Katsikis, *New Geographies* 06 (Cambridge: Harvard Graduate School of Design, 2014).
- 5 Ibid., 87.
- 6 See Koss, op. cit., 261. With the reservations noted above, we draw here from Koss's useful account of Adorno's position in the last chapter of her book.
- 7 For a selection of such writings, see William S. Saunders, ed., *The New Architectural Pragmatism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota, 2007).
- 8 See Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 254.
- 9 Quoted in Miles Glendinning, *Architecture's Evil Empire: The Triumph and Tragedy of Global Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 76.
- 10 Spencer, op. cit., 881. Interestingly, Joyce would be inspired by Wagner's endless melody to develop the literary form commonly referred to as the stream of consciousness.
- 11 Adorno, op. cit., 100.
- 12 See Spencer, op. cit.
- 13 Adorno, op. cit., 72.
- 14 Ibid., 79.
- 15 Ibid., 52.
- 16 Ibid., 87–88.
- 17 See, for example, <http://www.archdaily.com/480990/zaha-hadid-on-worker-deaths-in-qatar-it-s-not-my-duty-as-an-architect>.
- 18 Adorno, op. cit., 87–88.
- 19 Quoted in Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex: The Architecture of Power* (London: Penguin, 2005), 370–371.

Part IV

The architecture of phantasmagoria and the contemporary city



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10 Virtual technology, apparatus, and anaesthetics

Today, one does not have to go to Massachusetts General Hospital, as one did in the late nineteenth century, to study *anaesthetics* or to experience the manipulation of the synaesthetic system of the human sensorium.¹ Effects of intoxication can just as easily be obtained – for free – by walking down the streets of any number of contemporary cities, where architecture has become a vehicle for ‘voluptuous sensations,’ ‘dazzling visible impressions,’ ‘entrancing visions,’ ‘a world of new sensations,’ even the extreme feelings of pleasure and pain. As Susan Buck-Morss says, ‘the experience of intoxication is not limited to drug-induced, biochemical transformations. Beginning in the nineteenth century, a narcotic was made out of reality itself.’² Whereas drug-addiction was the characteristic of modernity in the nineteenth century – from Baudelaire to Freud, all took either opium or cocaine – *intoxication* through architecture has become one of the primary modalities of postmodernity in the early twentieth-first century. In this chapter, we articulate why this is the case.

As Buck-Morss writes, anaesthetics used to be prescribed to cure the disease called ‘neurasthenia.’ Significant among the effects of neurasthenia, according to the medical culture of the times, was a ‘disintegration of the capacity for experience – precisely as in Benjamin’s account of shock.’³ Today, not only doctors but architects resort to anaesthetic techniques. They use them to treat not neurasthenia but a more severe pathological condition of city subjects – psychosis. In psychoanalytical terms, pathological psychosis is the state of the subject in which the distinction between ‘reality’ and the Real is lost. Ironically, to the breakdown of experience prevailing in contemporary culture, architects offer techno-aesthetic ‘solutions’ in the form of ‘virtual technologies’ or ‘simulacra of hyperreality’ drawn from the same techniques that caused the symptoms in the first place. We will come to them later. Here we note that the synaesthetic system is what protects the organism against the overstimulation that bombards the senses from without. It is the correlate or counterpart of the ‘shock’ that, as Benjamin wrote, found its poetic expression in Baudelaire, who ‘placed the shock experience at the very center of his artistic work.’⁴ As Buck-Morss puts it, ‘the technologically altered environment exposes the human sensorium to physical shocks that

have their correspondence in psychic shock.⁵ Today, shocks to the synaesthetic system are different from both the nineteenth-century urban experience and the traumas of soldiers returning from the Great War on which Freud had developed his theories of shock. Today, the multiple causes of neurological disturbance must be sought in the socio-political, economic, and technological-aesthetic factors that have accompanied the rise of contemporary digital capitalism.

Phantasmagoria, or *phantasmagoric intoxication*, is a useful operative term for this use of architecture as a social narcotic, and the phrase 'the architecture of phantasmagoria' an equally valid general descriptor for the spatial reconfigurations brought about by media technology. In contrast to the architecture of the Second Empire and the 'phantasmagoria of civilization' of Haussmann's Paris, which were based on 'mechanical technology,' the phantasmagorias of today's architecture reflect the digital technologies of the virtual. Their effects on architecture are not self-evident; they demand interpretation. Before we can begin to understand the interaction of the human sensorium with objects-artifacts like architecture and the city that lie outside its cognitive system, it is necessary to theorize – however provisionally – the impact of digital technology in general.

In a time dominated by spectacle in culture and politics, every new developmental stage of technology brings about a new mode of alienation of the corporeal sensorium. As Benjamin noted in the prologue to his Artwork essay, to *undo* this alienation and 'to restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation' cannot be achieved 'by avoiding the new technologies, but by *passing through* them.'⁶ This 'difficult task' awaiting art is even more challenging in architecture, which is much more directly mediated by technology. Elevated to a high art by its many naive proponents, the 'new architecture' of today has surely not 'avoided' this new digital technology. On the contrary, it obsessively engages and attempts to *incorporate* it, instrumentally, into its own body of techniques and procedures. It has, however, failed to '*pass through*' it. That is the crux of architecture's recent, uncritical encounter with digital technology – the fact that, perhaps more than any other form of art, it has abetted, and aggravated, the general 'crisis of perception' in the organization of the human sensorium that contemporary techno-culture has brought on, in uniquely intense ways. If we consider that this crisis had already begun in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and that what Benjamin affirmatively called 'positive barbarism' had achieved some sort of resolution, however short-lived, in Modern Architecture, we see that what is at issue here is precisely the failure of contemporary architects to affect a comparable 'passing through' toward a new mode of perception such as modernism had accomplished in the 1920s and 1930s.



To better understand the relationship between architecture and the perceptual system of the human sensorium, it is useful to pause briefly, once

again, on the notion of *apparatus*. No architectural apparatus can exist in the absence of *aisthesis*, defined in its original sense as ‘sensory experience of perception.’ Moreover, according to Buck-Morss, the field of aesthetics is not art but *reality*. Before we take up the philosophical and political meanings of ‘apparatus’ in the next section below, a first general consideration must be made, and that is that contemporary architecture has been unable, through technology, to ‘restore’ the breakdown of experience occasioned by that same technology, or of overcoming the concomitant alienations that Benjamin saw as the ‘difficult task’ of art for ‘*humanity’s self-preservation*.’ Instead, as Buck-Morss has argued, the entire field of the aesthetic has made a 180-degree turn to become its opposite, an *anaesthetic*. As she puts it,

Phantasmagorias are a technoaesthetics. The perception they provide are “real” enough – their impact upon the senses and nerves is still “natural” from the neurophysical point of view. But their social function is in each case compensatory. The goal is manipulating of the synaesthetic system by control of environmental stimuli. It has the effect of anaesthetizing the organism. Not through numbing, much like a drug, but through flooding the senses. These simulated sensoria alter consciousness, much like a drug, but they do so through sensory distraction rather than chemical alteration, and – most significantly – their effects are experienced collectively rather than individually. [...] Whereas drug addicts confront a society that challenges the reality of their altered perception, the intoxication of phantasmagoria itself becomes the social norm. Sensory addiction to a contemporary reality becomes a means of social control.⁷

We use ‘the architecture of phantasmagoria’ to indicate not just the ‘excess of stimulation’ caused by media technology in contemporary culture and politics but the way phantasmagorias are themselves *mediated* architecturally, in real terms. The breakdown of experience follows from the atrophy of memory caused by the new technology precisely because, as Buck-Morss argues, ‘perception becomes experience only when it connects with sense-memories of the past.’⁸ This means that, insofar as contemporary architecture represses the ‘sense-memories’ of the past and history, it is, speaking strictly in Benjaminian terms, *anti-technological*. This claim might come as a surprise to the countless theorists of digital technology in architecture departments today. Yet at the basis of it is nothing other than the need to reclaim the political that has been repressed and forgotten in academic discourse over the last four decades. Contemporary architecture has become *anti-political* insofar as its *anaesthetics* has become a narcotic of reality that disrupts the cognitive – hence, political – system of the human sensorium.

In what follows, we take to task a long list of architects, critics, and writers in the academy that have uncritically promoted new technologies – a formation of *pseudo-avant-gardists* that has delivered architecture to the economic and cultural imperatives of the Neoliberal order. Of special interest

to us is how the fuzzy concept of the *virtual* has become a prescriptive tool for design theory and practice, helping to advance the universal claims of neoliberalism itself. Against this capitalist-ideological-architectural front-line, we try to bring back Gilles Deleuze's notion of the virtual as a way to resist the reactionary, triumphalist declaration of an 'end to criticality' that surrenders all radical *critique* of the city.

More specifically, in this and the following chapter, we deploy a constellation of concepts developed in this book to analyze the state of architecture in the hyper-mediated city. Our tone will be noticeably argumentative, interrogative, and polemical. In this chapter we first introduce the notion of 'apparatus' and show how architecture *as* apparatus functions to *intoxicate*, numbing the sensorial system of the subject and *subjectifying* it to the cultural forces of a system outside it. We then take up the philosophical notion of the *virtual* and show how the misnomer 'virtual reality' is a corruption of it. Our aim is to expose how a discourse of anti-criticality within architecture effectively aligns the discipline with the imperatives of digital capitalism and its tele-technological media. We claim that the phantasmagoria of an architecture that *incorporates* digital technology is not only incapable of undoing the alienation of the corporeal sensorium but becomes a means to further *anaestheticize* it in the interests of greater social control. We begin by exploring the term 'apparatus.'

• • •

From the mid-1970s on, Michel Foucault employed extensively the concept of *dispositif*. In an interview titled 'The Confession of Flesh,' Foucault was asked: 'What is the meaning or the methodological function for you of this term, apparatus (*dispositif*)?'⁹ Foucault answered by articulating three related meanings of the word. In the first place, he defined an apparatus as a 'thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble' of elements. Among them are 'discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as unsaid.' An apparatus, he noted, 'is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.'¹⁰

However, given that 'between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely,'¹¹ what is important in an apparatus, secondly, is to identify precisely 'the nature of the connections that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. Thus, a particular discourse can figure at one time as the programme of an institution, and at another it can function as a means of justifying or making a practice which itself remains silent, or as a secondary re-interpretation of this practice, opening out for it a new field of rationality.' Last but not least, Foucault argued:

I understand by the term "apparatus" a sort of – shall we say – formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of

responding to an *urgent need*. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function. This may have been, for example, the assimilation of a floating population found to be burdensome for an essentially mercantilist economy: there was a strategic imperative acting here as the matrix for an apparatus which gradually undertook the control or subjection of madness, mental illness and neurosis.¹²

We should perhaps note here that ‘apparatus’ is not a completely adequate translation of the French word *dispositif*, which before Foucault, had already been used in film theory by Jean-Louis Baudry in 1970, and later by Gilles Deleuze in his ‘What Is a *Dispositif*?’¹³ This inadequacy is addressed specifically by Giorgio Agamben in a recent essay that attempts to elevate the concept of *dispositif* to a new level. In his analysis, Agamben relates the concept directly to the notion of ‘subjectivation’ we discuss below. As we will see, Žižek in turn carries the notion of subjectivation forward from where Agamben left off.

In ‘What Is an Apparatus?’ Agamben stresses the ‘strategic’ importance of the *dispositif* in Foucault.¹⁴ Citing the interview just mentioned, he emphasizes how an apparatus always functions at a specific intersection of power and knowledge. Agamben suggests furthermore that the root of the term in Foucault is to be found in the notion of ‘positivity,’ as used by him in *The Archeology of Knowledge*. ‘Positivity’ is the ‘etymological neighbor’ of *dispositif*. According to Agamben, the first recorded use of the term in recent philosophy is in the writings of Jean Hyppolite, Foucault’s teacher at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (‘my master,’ as Foucault called him), and specifically in Hyppolite’s *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire de Hegel*. This links the first occurrence of the word ‘positivity’ to Hegel. Alongside ‘positivity,’ according to Agamben, *dispositif* also derives from the Latin *Dispositio*, which is itself the translation of the Greek *oikonomia* (‘divine economy’), a semantically complex term with theological roots. This economy, but also politics, Agamben says, ‘has no foundation in being: this is the schizophrenia that the theological doctrine of *oikonomia* left as its legacy to Western culture.’¹⁵ Consistent with the theological origins of *oikonomia*, Agamben relates the term ‘apparatus’ to ‘subjectification.’ He writes: ‘The term “apparatus” designates that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, *they must produce their subject*.’¹⁶ At this point, Agamben departs from Foucauldian philology and extends the term ‘apparatus’ to the contemporary scene. He writes:

I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession,

factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computer, cellular telephones and – why not – language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses . . .¹⁷

Such a definition produces two ‘great classes’: living beings (or substances) on the one hand, and apparatuses on the other. Between them is a third class, the subject.¹⁸ Agamben goes on to note that the boundless growth of apparatuses in modern times corresponds to an ‘equally extreme proliferation in the processes of subjectification,’¹⁹ a proliferation characteristic of an ‘extreme phase of capitalist development.’²⁰ But the process of subjectification is just as much one of de-subjectification: following Foucault, Agamben reiterates how in disciplinary societies apparatuses of discourse, practice, and knowledge effectively work to generate ‘docile, yet free, bodies that assume their identity and their “freedom” as subjects in the very process of their desubjectification.’²¹ Yet even as ‘a desubjectifying moment is certainly implicit in every process of subjectification,’ the two are no longer aligned with each other, Agamben claims.²² Subjectification and desubjectification have become separate, distinct, reciprocally indifferent processes that no longer give rise to a new subject, or do so only in the most ‘larval’ or ‘spectral’ of ways.²³

Contemporary societies therefore present themselves as inert bodies going through massive processes of desubjectification without acknowledging any real subjectification. Hence the eclipse of politics, which used to presuppose the existence of subjects and real identities (the workers’ movement, the bourgeoisie, etc.), and the triumph of *oikonomia*, that is to say, of a pure activity of government that aims at nothing other than its own replication. The Right and the Left, which today alternate in the management of power, have for this reason very little to do with the political sphere in which they originate.²⁴

It is in the process of attempting to describe the self-erasure of ideology in such a purportedly post-ideological brave new world of global commodification that Žižek turns to the Foucault-Agamben discourse on *dispositif* and proceeds to give it his own Lacanian interpretation. In the ‘Afterword’ to the second edition of his *Living in the End Times*, Žižek discerns ‘a series of complex echoes’ between the notion of *dispositif*, Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), and Lacan’s notion of the ‘Big Other,’ to which we might add Rancière’s recent ‘Distribution of the Sensible.’²⁵ Žižek argues that Foucault, Althusser, and Lacan each insisted on the crucial ambiguity of the term ‘subject’ (as both free agent and subject to power). In each case, ‘the subject *qua* free agent emerges through its subjection to the *dispositif*/ISA/“Big Other.”’²⁶ Endorsing Agamben’s analysis, Žižek emphasizes that

‘desubjectivation’ (‘alienation’) and subjectivation are two sides of the same coin: ‘it is the very desubjectivation of a living being, its subordination to a *dispositif*, which subjectivizes it.’²⁷ Thus, for example, when Althusser claims that ideology ‘interpellates’ individuals into subjects, Žižek notes that ‘individuals’ here refers to ‘those living beings on which a *dispositif*/ISA works, imposing on them networks of micro-practices, while the “subject” is *not* a category of living being, of substance, but the result of these living beings being caught up in a *dispositif*/ISA (or into a symbolic order).’²⁸ Foucault goes on to criticize Althusser’s ‘misplaced insistence on the “materiality” of the ISA,’ arguing instead that ‘the primordial form of the *dispositif*, the “Big Other” of the symbolic institution, is precisely immaterial, a virtual order.’ This order constitutes the subject as distinct from its state as an individual as a living being. Neither the subject nor the *dispositif*, in this sense, are categories of substantial or living being.²⁹ We should mention here that in *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek discusses political subjectivization and post-politics in terms of Rancière’s concept of political democracy, which he extends to the notion of ‘symbolic efficiency’ through a highly complex analysis of the concept of ‘appearance’ – an analysis that, we argue, can be taken as an exposition of Žižek’s own ‘aesthetic theory’ and his idea of a polity of art grounded in his concept of democratic emancipation.³⁰

Žižek subscribes to Agamben’s diagnosis of an ‘eclipse’ of politics in contemporary society, emphasizing, along similar lines, how multiple *dispositifs* operate to desubjectivize individuals ‘without producing a new subjectivity, without subjectivizing them.’³¹ Like Agamben, moreover, he insists on the paradoxical nature of this process. As he puts it,

“Biopolitics” designates this constellation in which *dispositifs* no longer generate subjects (“interpellate individual into subject”), but merely administer and regulate individual bare life – in biopolitics, we are all potentially *homo sacer*. The outcome of this reduction reveals, however, an unexpected twist. Agamben draws attention to the fact that the inoffensive desubjectivized citizen of post-industrial democracies – who in no way opposes the hegemonic *dispositifs* but rather zealously executes all their injunctions and is thus controlled by them in the most intimate details of his or her life – is “nonetheless (and perhaps for this very reason) considered as a potential terrorist”: “In the eye of the authority – and maybe rightly so – nothing looks more like a terrorist than the ordinary man.”³²

Neither Agamben nor Žižek mention architecture (as Foucault did) as an apparatus, nor do they discuss the role of technology. But in their respective discourses on ‘subject’ and ‘subjectification’ in the *dispositif*, we can trace a theoretical complement to Buck-Morss’s novel analysis, discussed above, of the numbing of the synaesthetic system in the perceptual apparatus of the body. The latter is conceived – in conjunction with Benjamin’s conceptual

constellation of aesthetics, perception, and politics – as a system open to the world outside. In this respect, it contradicts neither Agamben's statement, cited above, that every apparatus, as an apparatus of governance, implies a process of subjectification, nor Foucault's claim that, in every disciplinary society, apparatuses – through discourses, practices, and bodies of knowledge – create 'docile, yet free, bodies that assume their identity and their "freedom" as subjects in the very process of their desubjectification.' Furthermore, we would argue that in our time, architecture – through its disciplinary discourses, practices, and bodies of knowledge – *also* forms an apparatus that produces 'docile subjects,' through what one critic has aptly termed 'the anaesthetics of architecture.'³³ Moreover, following Žižek above, we would claim that in the phantasmagorias of the so-called 'post-industrial society' and by reenacting its injunctions through the same anaestheticization, contemporary architecture directly participates in *desubjectifying* the individual for the purpose of control.



With the specters of 'virtual technology' haunting contemporary architecture, a new technological fetishism has taken a hold of the field. The mysticism behind this fetish is the religion of the Virtual that, as an operative term taken out of its philosophical context, has been exploited, manipulated, and emptied of its meaning, so that it can be aligned with the *virtuality* of Finance Capitalism. If, as Benjamin wrote in his 1935 exposé, following Giedion's saying that 'construction plays the role of the subconscious,' the architects of the Second Empire 'failed to understand the functional nature of iron' by *masking* its rationality under a historicist drapery (just as Napoleon himself had failed to understand 'the functional nature of the state as an instrument of domination by the bourgeois class')³⁴ so contemporary architects have completely missed the real functional nature of the new technology as an instrument of class domination in the Neoliberal State by masking its constructional ethos under a veneer of new sartorial trappings. Of course, architects today conceal construction not with obsolete historicist forms but with draperies of a different sort – yet with the same phantasmagoric effects that Benjamin equated with the 'collective dream consciousness as superstructure.'³⁵ The same techno-aesthetic dreams and fantasies are shared by both architects and ideologues of the new Empire.

Today, the soberness of *functionalism* – or the New Objectivity that Irving Wohlfarth, after Max Weber, called 'a *second* disenchantment of the world' in the early decades of twentieth century – has been replaced by a new and even more pervasive *re-enchantment*. As Wohlfarth notes, this is a 'reactive' disenchantment that is both dishonest and indissociable from the more basic 'inexorable disenchantment' of modern capitalism. As he put it, 'the inexorable disenchantment and reactive re-enchantment of the world thus formed a fatal couple. For Weber, as for Marx, honesty consisted, on the contrary, in taking disenchantment as its word.'³⁶ Today, the main element

of falsehood in the technological re-enchantment of the world is based on a misnomer: 'virtual reality,' as configured in the master-narrative of a new tele-techno-digital-media 'reality.' Let us see first how such arguments instrumentally transpose the meaning of philosophical notions of the virtual and the simulacrum into a new technological determinism.

It was in Deleuze's 'Transcendental Empiricism' that the notions of the virtual and simulacrum were first articulated, specifically in *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*. Here, Deleuze, as the philosopher of the virtual, presented the nominal pair of virtual/actual in which the virtual is the 'ground' for the actual.³⁷ For Deleuze the actual was composed 'only of *states of affairs* and *lived experience*,' in which 'the plane of immanence could only be virtual and could consist only of virtualities.'³⁸ In *Difference and Repetition* he wrote, 'The virtual is opposed not to the real, but to the actual. *The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual.*'³⁹ In Deleuze's view, the reality of the virtual consisted of the differential elements and relations that made up its structure. He also distinguished sharply between the 'virtual' and the 'possible.' The two should not be confused. 'The possible is opposed to the real; the process undergone by the possible is therefore a "realization." By contrast, the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses full reality for itself. The process it undergoes is that of actualization.'⁴⁰ For Deleuze, these were essential distinctions that involved the question of existence itself, since 'every time we pose the question in terms of possible and real, we are forced to conceive of existence as a brute eruption, a pure act or leap which always occurs behind our backs and is subject to a law of all or nothing.'⁴¹ Moreover, the possible and the virtual were sharply distinct categories, the first referring to 'the form of identity in the concept,' the other to 'a pure multiplicity in the Idea which radically excludes the identical as a prior condition.'⁴²

We do not propose to engage in a comprehensive treatment of these two books. What is important is simply to note Deleuze's insistence on 'the *reality* of the virtual,' which is diametrically opposed to the pervasive phrase 'virtual reality.' As Žižek says, in support of Deleuze's reality of the virtual, virtual reality is itself 'a miserable idea: that of imitating reality, of reproducing its experience in an artificial medium.'⁴³ The 'artificial medium' here, of course, is media technology, including the discourse of digital media, and the 'virtual technology' of postmodern discourse and its problematics of the binary relation between 'reality' and the 'virtual image' or medium. In the postmodern age, as Žižek remarks sarcastically, 'reality is supposed to 'have receded or have been replaced by "hyperreality," a universe of images and codes that produce the real in their own terms.'⁴⁴

For Žižek, reality is always-already virtual. For him, the Deleuzian Virtual is the same as the Lacanian Real. At stake in both is the problem of the relation between 'Reality' and the Real. In *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek offers one of the possible definitions of the Real in Lacan: the real designates 'the remainder' that resists the reversal of the computer 'qua model of

human brains into brains themselves qua blood-and-flesh computer,' or, to take another example, 'of masturbation qua imaginary sexual act into the actual sexual act qua masturbation with a real partner.'⁴⁵ Reality, or what is experienced as reality, is constituted by such a reversal:

As Lacan puts it, "reality" is always framed by a fantasy, i.e., for something real to be experienced as part of "reality," it must fit the pre-ordained coordinates of our fantasy-space (a sexual act must fit the coordinates of our imagined fantasy-scripts, a brain must fit the functioning of a computer, etc.). This way, we can propose a second definition of the Real: a surplus, a hard kernel, which resists any process of modeling, simulation, or metaphoricization.⁴⁶

From this important proposition follows the simple conclusion that while computer-generated 'virtual reality' may be a semblance that forecloses the Real, what we experience as the 'true, hard, external reality' is based upon an exclusion – hence, the 'ultimate lesson' of 'virtual reality': the virtualization of 'true' reality itself, or, as he puts it, the mirage of a 'virtual reality' in which 'true' reality is posited as 'a semblance of itself, as pure symbolic edifice'; hence the fact that 'a computer does not think' means that 'the price for our access to "reality" is that *something must remain unthought*.'⁴⁷

It is not by chance that the word 'virtual' derives from the Latin *virtus*, meaning 'power, efficiency.'⁴⁸ *Virtus* can also be traced to *vir*, meaning 'man' or 'manliness,' as in 'virility,' as well as to 'virtue.' In classical philosophy, 'virtuality' is related to potentiality, to the 'power' of man. A somewhat analogous meaning can be found in modern physics, in the theory of optics and in such notions as virtual velocity, etc. When it is applied to computer generated 'virtual reality,' the virtual is related to the '*capacity to cause effects*.' As Nausseider writes in his Lacanian cyber ontology, 'the virtual is not imaginary; it produces effects.'⁴⁹ Among these effects are the fantasies and illusions produced through the machinery of the magic lantern and its various descendants, including cinema. Thus, well before the arrival of the computer, the technological meanings of 'virtuality' had more than two hundred years of history. With the computer came a whole battery of new terms like 'interactivity,' 'immersion,' 'interface,' and 'cyberspace,' through which the so-called 'digital revolution' and the discourse of the new media questioned the relation between the 'real' and the 'virtual,' the 'original and the 'copy,' and advanced the notions of Simulation and Simulacra thanks to which reality, or so we were told, was erased and replaced by the image more real than reality itself. Yet even before Baudrillard theorized the complete erasure of reality by its 'simulacra' through media technology, Deleuze had already taken up the idea of the simulacrum in the same two texts we cited above. In Deleuze, simulacrum has nothing to do with Baudrillard's concept.⁵⁰ Rather, it is related to Deleuze's own notion of philosophy as an 'over-turning' of Plato and a reversal – through a privileging of the

simulacrum – of the hierarchical relations between the original/model and the copy. Thus, in *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze wrote that ‘to “reverse Platonism” means to make the simulacra rise and to affirm their rights among icons and copies,’ and, further, ‘the simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbors a positive power which denies *the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction.*’ For Deleuze, the simulacrum internalized what he called ‘at least two divergent series,’ neither of which can be assigned to the original or to the copy.⁵¹

As we can see, Deleuze’s notion of the simulacrum was highly complex. While a full exposition of it is beyond the scope of this study, it is clear that his thinking around the virtual and the simulacrum shared little with the present-day use of the phrase ‘virtual reality.’ Against this reduced technological and instrumental determination of media technology, with its corrupted notions of the ‘virtual’ and of ‘virtual reality,’ Benjamin’s thesis of a media technology affecting the perceptual apparatus of the human sensorium retains its full force, especially with regard to the even more serious misconceptions, within architectural discourse, on the means, nature, and goals of a purported ‘virtual architecture,’ to which we now turn.

Notes

- 1 For these see Susan-Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,’ in *October* 62 (Autumn 1992), 3–61.
- 2 Ibid., 22.
- 3 Ibid., 19.
- 4 Ibid., 17.
- 5 Ibid., 16–17.
- 6 Ibid., 5 (italics in original).
- 7 Ibid., 22–23.
- 8 Ibid., 17.
- 9 See Michel Foucault, ‘The Confession of the Flesh,’ in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed., Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194–228.
- 10 Ibid., 194.
- 11 Ibid., 194–195.
- 12 Ibid., 195 (italics in original).
- 13 For more about this, see the discussion in ‘Translator’s Preface’ by Louis Burnchill in Alain Badiou and Fabian Tarby, *Philosophy and the Event* (London: Polity, 2010). Also see Jean-Louis Baudry, ‘Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,’ in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. L. Braudy and M. Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 206–223.
- 14 See Giorgio Agamben, ‘What Is an Apparatus?,’ in *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans., David Kishik and Stephan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1–24.
- 15 Ibid., 10.
- 16 Ibid., 11 (emphasis added).
- 17 Ibid., 14.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid., 15.
- 20 Ibid.

- 21 Ibid., 19–20.
- 22 Ibid., 20.
- 23 Ibid., 21. Agamben expands on his remarks by saying, ‘he who lets himself be captured by the “cellular telephone” apparatus – whatever the intensity of the desire that has driven him – cannot acquire a new subjectivity, but only a number through which he can, eventually, be controlled,’ 21.
- 24 Ibid., 22.
- 25 See Slavoj Žižek, ‘Afterword to the Paperback Edition: Welcome to Interesting Time!,’ in *Living in the End Times* (London and New York: Verso, 2011), 403–482.
- 26 Ibid., 417.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), see especially Chapter 4, “Political Subjectivization and Its Vicissitudes.” In this Chapter Žižek writes: “let us return, however, to Rancière’s basic emphasis on the radical ambiguity of the Marxist notion of the ‘gap’ between formal democracy (human rights, political freedom, etc.) and the economic reality of exploitation and domination. One can read this gap between the ‘appearance’ of equality-freedom and the social reality of economic, cultural, and other differences either in the standard ‘symptomatic’ way (the form of universal rights, equality, freedom and democracy is simply a necessary but illusory form of expression of its concrete social content, the universe of exploitation and domination), or in the much more subversive sense of tension in which the ‘appearance’ of *égalité*, precisely, is *not* a ‘mere appearance’ but evinces an effectivity of its own, which allows it to set in motion the process of the rearticulation of actual socio-economic relations by way of their progressive ‘politicization’ [. . .] One is tempted here to use the old Lévi-Straussian term ‘symbolic efficiency’: the appearance of *égalité* is a symbolic fiction which, as such, possesses an actual efficiency of its own – one should resist the properly cynical temptation of reducing it to a mere illusion that conceals a different actuality,” 195. See also Davis, *Jacques Rancière*.
- 31 Žižek, ‘Afterword to the Paperback Edition,’ op. cit., 418.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 See Neil Leach, *The Anaesthetics of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).
- 34 Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1935,’ in *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 4.
- 35 Quoted by Irvin Wohlforth in ‘Construction Has the Role of the Subconscious: Phantasmagoria of Mater Builder (with Constant Reference to Giedion, Weber, Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Benjamin),’ in *Nietzsche and ‘An Architecture of Our Mind’*, eds., A. Kostka and I. Wohlforth (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Arts and Humanities, 1999), 145.
- 36 Ibid. Also see Nadir Lahiji, ‘Introduction: Philosophy and Architecture: Encounter and Missed Encounter, Idols and Idolatry,’ in *The Missed Encounter of Radical Philosophy with Architecture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–18.
- 37 Here we are following the critical writing of Alain Badiou on Deleuze in his *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans., Louis Burchill (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2000), see chapter four, ‘The Virtual.’
- 38 Ibid., 46 (*italics in original*).
- 39 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans., Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 208 (*italics in original*).
- 40 Ibid., 211.

- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid., 211–212.
- 43 See Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.
- 44 See Christopher Horrocks, *Marshal McLuhan and Virtuality* (Cambridge, UK: Icons Book UK, Totem Books, USA, 2000), 42.
- 45 See Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 43.
- 46 Ibid., 43–44.
- 47 Ibid., 44 (italics in original).
- 48 See André Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 33. In subsequent citations of the roots of the word and its use in classical philosophy we are following this text.
- 49 Ibid., 35.
- 50 For a more complete discussion of Deleuze on simulacrum and its radical difference with the postmodern discourse, including Jean Baudrillard, see for example the useful text by Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).
- 51 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed., Constantine V. Bounds, trans., Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 262 (italics in original).

11 Phantoms of architectural theory

According to Žižek, there are certain aspects of ‘Deleuzianism’ that, ‘while masquerading as radical chic, effectively transform Deleuze into an ideologist of today’s “digital capitalism.”’¹ The transfer of these aspects to the discourse of contemporary architecture in the last three decades has been the trademark of intellectual activity in the discipline. The result has been predictable and troubling. Deleuzian ideologists have mounted an assault on the discipline of *theoretical critique* with boastful claims announcing ‘the end of the critical’ and ‘the end of theory.’ Their declared agenda has been to put architectural theory and the practice of critique under the tutelage of digital-techno-aesthetic capitalism and its Neoliberal political order.

It is the great merit of a recent analysis by Douglas Spencer in his *The Architecture of Neoliberalism* to have systematically exposed the intellectual complicity between architectural Deleuzians and Neoliberal ‘post-politics.’ As Spencer notes:

Everything is to be processed, blended, in an operation in which difference is valued on condition that it goes with the flow, that it renounces all antagonism. Nothing must be repressed but everything must comply. The very possibility of contradiction is smoothed out of existence. As a result, architectural Deleuzism approaches the neoliberal ideal of the post-political. Renouncing critical opposition, and any possibility of occupying a position of resistance, it can only endorse what “Works well within the framework of existing relations,” and only find its validation in making these function more effectively through the managerial ‘cunning’ of organizational complexity.²

In his text, Spencer effectively challenges the alignment of contemporary architectural theory and practice with Neoliberal management discourse. We will come back to his work again below.

As the architectural fashion of ‘deconstructionism’ in the 1980s began to fade, Deleuze quickly emerged as the central reference for the chic ‘avant-gardes’ of the academy. The latter, however, unlike their counterparts in philosophy, were largely composed of *pseudo*-Deleuzians. At the level of the

practice of philosophical theory, they sold a vulgarized version of Deleuze, composed of pseudo-philosophical concepts which they forced into the internal discourse of architecture. Serving effectively as ideologists of the Neoliberal order, they bear significant responsibility for bringing architecture in line with the cultural logic of late capitalism. Many are now household names in the 'theory' circles of prestigious academic institutions in the United States and Europe. Among them are critics/architects, writers, academics, as well as practicing professionals. Among the latter, the more familiar names include the 'anti-intellectual' architect(-'artist') Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, and the more articulate Rem Koolhaas, with many in between. Among the critic/architects, we might mention Jeffrey Kipnis, Sanford Kwinter, Gregg Lynn, Lars Spuybroek, Michael Speaks, Alejandro Zaera-Polo, Patrick Schumacher, Jess Reiser and Umemoto, Robert Somol, Sara Whiting, and Mario Carpo.

The practicing architects produce building *effects* that the 'theoreticians,' borrowing from Deleuze's philosophy, call 'affect' and 'percept.' For us, this practice expresses a techno-aesthetic phantasmagoria centered on maximizing the intoxicating force of visual shock. The works are typically described with the by-now-tired term 'iconic.' A more pertinent designation would be Hal Foster's 'image building.'³ Foster retraces this practice, from Gehry to Koolhaas, back to Robert Venturi's early distinction between 'duck' and 'decorated shed' from which a new stylistic trend emerges that Foster calls the 'decorated duck.' In an allusion to Adolf Loos's sarcastic critique of his own contemporary early twentieth-century architects, Foster describes it as a 'new Potemkin architecture of conjured surfaces.'⁴ Unlike the 'mechanical technologies' of the early decades of the twentieth century, the main tectonic expression of such 'conjured surfaces' derives from the digital tools of current virtual technologies.

This approach to design has evolved in a very short time from the level of a *tentative theory* to *pure ideology*. Various terminologies, paradigms, and 'Novel Tectonics'⁵ make up this new conceptual edifice, depending on whether the emphasis is scientific, technological, cognitive, biological, or (pseudo-)philosophical. Concepts like 'Parametricism,' 'complex and nonlinear systems,' 'emergence,' 'morphogenesis,' 'animate and inanimate,' 'blob,' 'fold,' 'fractal,' 'informal,' *informe*,⁶ and, last but not least, '*Architecture non standard*' – the title of a much-publicized exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 2003–2004,⁶ presented by Mario Carpo as the 'latest avatar to date of the digital revolution in architecture'⁷ – are the hallmarks of this discourse.

Whether or not, as some have suggested, one can discern through the seductive surfaces of these works the old-fashioned modernist dichotomy of 'skin and bones,' what is certain is that they yield a digitally warped object-building, elevated to the status of an evocative 'illuminated sculpture,' that leaves the viewer in a stupefied de-politicized state, like a hallucinated fool, completely incapable of assuming any critical distance towards the object.⁸ Architecture here dissolves into the notion of 'design,' covering everything

from 'jeans to genes,' as Foster notes. The figure of the architect is accordingly transmuted into that of a designer who most often occupies himself or herself, like Greg Lynn and Koolhaas, with the production of *luxury objects* for wealthy clients. As Foster notes, 'Those old heroes of industrial modernism, the artist-as-engineer and author-as-producer, are long gone, and the postindustrial designer now rules supreme.'⁹ Their basic material is 'datascares.' As one Dutch architect puts it, 'architects must focus now on emotive styling. . . . We give shape to the flow of data; we sculpt information.'¹⁰ Thus, this new design discourse also abets the reproduction and accumulation of objects in a post-Fordist economy by generating a *surplus-value* necessary for the smooth functioning of an ever-expanding global capitalism.

Immersed in a 'virtual reality,' the agents of this discourse recycle *A Thousands Plateaus* or *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* to affect a certain resistance of contemporary practice while carefully avoiding even the most indirect and remote form of political critique. By invoking the postmodern mantra that 'there is no firm reality, just the multitude of contingent social constructions,'¹¹ they de facto *assume* the ideological agenda of neoliberalism.

Greg Lynn's earliest flirtations with the concept of the 'fold' are a good example of this aestheticization of the *status quo*. Proceeding from a reflection on Wittkower's analysis of Palladian Classicism to a discussion of D'Arcy Thompson's study on the growth of natural organisms, Lynn suggested an affinity with the 'organic,' which would succeed in emancipating architectural forms from a static condition to the dynamic one characteristic of all living organisms. Positive attributes like 'unpredictability,' 'contingency,' and 'multiplicity' thus accompanied this change toward the informal.¹² As an illustration, one of Lynn's earliest projects was a reinterpretation of the Sears Tower in Chicago as a horizontal expansion of twisted bundles that extend along the Chicago River. Lynn argued: 'These supple deflections engender affiliations with particular local events – adjacent buildings, landforms, sidewalks, bridges, tunnels, roads and river's edge – that would have been repressed by a more rigid and reductive geometric system of description.'¹³

Without even pretending to deal with the social, political, or economic reality at hand, Lynn's approach took as the sole objective of its formal transformation to 'free form' from its 'eternal servitude to strict geometry.' This notion of freedom is, to say the least, a naive transposition of the political onto a strictly aesthetic plane. Even from an aesthetic point of view, however, the design tectonics of Lynn, in fact, are hardly novel. As Vidler notes: 'The "inside" of architecture, then to return to an early theme of Lynn, would not be shaped by occupation or by any other attribute than its profoundly *residual* character – like the fortuitous insides produced, say, by the external necessity to fashion a shape like that of the Statue of Liberty.'¹⁴

But even when contemporary practice succeeds in transcending the traditional opposition of 'skin and bones,' even when it generates new

‘masterpieces’ that defy gravity and overcome other ‘constructional’ parameters, eliciting awe and stupefaction, an essential question is always avoided: in what way does this architecture actively and genuinely participate in the creation, socially and politically, of a ‘better’ place? Such questions have no longer any place in the theoretical discourse of the new ‘avant-gardes.’

It is almost as if, in a paradigm shift, after laying waste to nature, the ‘new structuralists’ have taken it upon themselves to create an alternative natural reality. In a desperate effort to escape from an increasingly dysfunctional world, architecture has found a temporary refuge in the return to a politically and socially neutral world of ‘scientific’ facts, hence the fascination with the ideas of D’Arcy Thomson, with crystals and organic forms. This experimental approach is naturally combined with a sense of discovery, play, and scientific rigor and with the eternal search for the ‘new.’ Yet the material translations of these experiments remain limited to complex structures, often restricted to roof-systems for complex building types such as airports, train stations, or temporary exhibitions. In the midst of the euphoric rhetoric of ‘complexity,’ a few voices have made some attempt to keep the experiment in check, with concerns for material efficiency and sustainability. Yves Weinand and Markus Hudert, for instance, criticize the obsession with the ‘image’ that has dominated digital architectural production, producing visions that are difficult to realize.¹⁵

On the other hand, Mario Carpo has proposed a historical explanation for the paradigm shift that has taken place in the last three decades. In his *The Alphabet and the Algorithm*, he argues that the transition from the traditional means of architectural production, which he dates back to Alberti, to a new digital paradigm based on an algorithmic process, is nothing short of revolutionary. Its implications on design include the elimination of the author/architect at the head of the design process, and his/her replacement with a more ‘democratic,’ participatory model for the design of things, from tableware to cities. The reason behind this radical change appears very simple: the final death of the author would come as a result of the collapse of the standard reproducible copy, based on an original conceived by a single author, in favor of a multitude of variable and *nonstandard* objects that would challenge the original notion of authorship. This would come as a result of the increasingly open process that digital culture is fostering, according to Carpo, from social interaction sites to online encyclopedias. This interpretation of ‘participatory democracy’ is no different, essentially, from the common platitudes about how *Facebook* promotes real social interaction and fosters a healthy development of new forms of community, or how *Wikipedia*, for all its benefits, will eventually replace tedious scholarship.¹⁶

Underlying Carpo’s argument is an unquestionable confidence that the triumphant march of the ‘digital’ is akin to a Darwinian natural selection, or a Hegelian evolution toward higher forms that no one can resist in the end. In the absence of any possibility of resistance, everyone is called upon to embrace the new technology and participate in the festivities.

In his earlier essay titled 'Nonstandard Morality: Digital Technology and Its discontents,' Carpo mocked the critics of 'non-standard' design, who claimed that 'nonstandard technologies are sometimes advocated as harbingers of new architectural values that would be inherently anti-theoretical, anti-critical, proudly consumerist, hedonistic, and market-friendly.'¹⁷ Yet Carpo's enthusiasm for 'non-standard' digital design advances a profoundly de-politicized reading of Deleuze that is completely in line with the dominant tendencies of the moment. In his effort to contrast mechanical reproduction with the current 'non-identical' digital manufacturing processes, Carpo's superficial reading of Benjamin's *Artwork* essay strips it totally of its political dimension. This is not even to mention that further example of reductivist Deleuzianism that is his reference to the politically potent *Difference and Repetition* to promote his notion of the *non-identical*. Meanwhile, the liberating effects of this new digital euphoria – which Carpo diagnoses as having been wed in its first stages, almost by chance, to curvilinear forms and shapes that should not remain its sole manifestation – remain to be seen. Similarly, one awaits an explanation of how 'digitally produced' buildings that avoid recourse to traditional blueprint construction documents will be any more 'democratic' when they consist of a headquarters for a multi-national corporation or an authoritarian state, as seems to be ironically the case with many of these 'iconic' blobs and 'objectiles' dotting the new artificial landscapes of emerging cities from the West to the Far East.

Let us recall again that by the 1990s, 'Deleuzianism' had already become popular in architecture schools, where the idea of 'smooth and striated' spaces in *A Thousand Plateaus* was a common reference in the discourse of the neo-avant-gardes. The so-called 'new architecture' marked a sharp departure from the linguistic and semiotic paradigms of the 1980s. It claimed to be moving from Derrida to Deleuze and to be turning from linguistics to a more appropriate grounding in geometry and science. Beyond such considerations, it also moved away from the theoretical discourse of Deconstruction, as exemplified by Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi, as well as from the whole notion of 'criticality.' As Spencer notes,

Where Deleuzism in architecture originally undertook, then, to establish its autonomy from the linguistically oriented concerns of post-structuralism, it subsequently sought to distance itself too, as part of its affirmation of the new – indeed, affirmation of affirmation – from any obligation to engage with *critique*.¹⁸

Spencer further points out that 'through its alliance with the "post-critical" position emerging, around the same time in US architecture schools with the publication in *Perspecta* of Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting's now near-canonical "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism" in 2002, the "new architecture" took on critique itself, which it viewed

as extrinsic to the “proper” concerns of architects, and as a counterproductive form of “negativity.”¹⁹

In his massive two-volume *The Autopoiesis of Architecture*, Patrick Schumacher relies on Niklas Luhmann’s social system theory to advance a theoretical definition of architecture as a system of communication. He writes: ‘Systems of communication can therefore be theorized as autopoietic systems in the sense that they generate their own components and structures within the ongoing flow of communications.’ Schumacher borrows the term ‘autopoiesis’ from cognitive science and specifically Francisco Varela, and he turns it into the obsessive ‘leitmotif’ of his book. In fact, the definition of architecture as communication is a clever way to align it with media while wrapping the argument in the ‘sophisticated’ terminology of system theory. Schumacher then proceeds to define ‘society’: ‘Within this theoretical framework society is defined as overarching, all-encompassing system of communication.’²⁰ Schumacher has the audacity to offer this definition of society after claiming a long list of thinkers whom he says influenced his intellectual trajectory. They include Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Theodore Adorno, Alain Badiou, and, by our count, twenty-four more writers and philosophers. But few if any of these thinkers would have subscribed to his description of ‘society’ as a harmonious-corporate entity, or an organic Whole. It never seems to occur to Schumacher that such a ‘society’ *does not exist* except in his own fantasy, and that contrary to his neo-corporate model, society, as Žižek puts it, is ‘always traversed by an antagonistic split which cannot be integrated into a symbolic order.’²¹ It is an ideological fantasy to construct a vision of society that is *not split* in this way. To reductively conceptualize society as an ‘overarching, all-encompassing system of communication’ is to eliminate all antagonisms as ‘noise.’ It is worse than nonsense.

What we have here, in effect, is a phantasmagoria of theory in which ‘reality’ – in Schumacher’s ‘algorithmic parametricism’ – is hyper-mediated into a constructed fantasy. To the extent that it is devoid of any social content, it cannot be taken seriously. It can, however, work quite effectively to promote the further mediatization of architecture to suit the demands of the culture industry and the re-enchanting ‘realities’ of the society of the spectacle.

Schumacher of course is not alone in today’s academia in citing Marx only to then shamelessly ‘de-Marxify’ the discourse of architecture. Spencer in a section of his aforementioned work, entitled ‘De-Marxification: DeLanda, Latour and Luhmann,’ effectively exposes what is actually behind Schumacher’s theory that has drawn so many followers in the discipline through the ‘avant-garde’ appeal of an allegedly ‘neutral’ academic intellectual work on theory. Spencer writes:

Patrick Schumacher, in his two-volume treatise *The Autopoiesis of Architecture*, has derived the ontological basis for architecture’s ‘new agenda’

from the sociologist Niklas Luhmann. [. . .] Here, again, accounts of biological and material processes are extended to assertions about social, economic and cultural ones, the authority of which appears underwritten by indisputable ‘laws of nature.’ And, again, these assertions are mobilised to undermine any basis from which architecture might reflect critically and politically on its disciplinary practice. The bounds by which architecture is circumscribed as an autopoietic system, according to Schumacher, foreclose the very possibility of its exercising any critical faculties or political agency. Schumacher insists that architecture’s accommodation of the existing social order must now be absolute since “it is not architecture’s societal function to actively promote or initiate political agendas that are not already thriving in the political arena.”²²

Spencer notes further: ‘Following the arguments of Luhmann, the political is understood strictly and exclusively as that which is exercised by elected political parties. This is the “specific medium” of the political to which all are entitled to participate “via voting in political elections” as the legitimate extent of their contribution to the social order which architecture is henceforth to serve unquestioningly.’²³ Spencer quotes Schumacher as having stipulated that ‘those who want to debate architecture should keep their political convictions to themselves,’ and, further, ‘political agendas must be pursued in the political system,’ and that ‘those who want to argue politics should enter politics proper.’²⁴ ‘With this latest turn,’ Spencer writes, ‘Schumacher proposes the absolute exclusion of the political from the architectural.’²⁵



The claims by the architectural Deleuzians to ‘openness,’ ‘complexity,’ and ‘self-organization’ thoroughly accord with the managerial imperatives of a ‘new spirit of capitalism’ that advocates at the level of design de-hierarchicized and networked forms of organization. Ironically, many of these terms were first conceived as a critique of capitalism, only to be later absorbed into the rigid unchanging order of capitalism itself. Much the same can be said about the whole recycling of the conceptual machinery of the ‘fold,’ the ‘virtual,’ ‘smooth,’ the ‘non-standard,’ back into the imperatives of late capitalism. In this operation, the self-proclaimed ‘avant-garde’ has effectively reversed the latter’s fundamental project of *critique*.²⁶ To cite one example, Zaha Hadid’s project for three ‘signature towers’ in Dubai (the most fertile ground, apparently, for the new architecture’s ‘virtual’ revolution) takes the notion of the disappearance of the author and overturns it into the signature of a star designer, working for a lavish clientele, which now seems to replace the *Etat Civil*.

In conclusion, against this, the question Benjamin posed in ‘The Author as Producer’ remains as timely as ever: Does the intellectual (or the architect in our case) succeed in promoting the ‘socialization of the intellectual means of production’? Or does his/her work continue to be inscribed within the

same economy that reinforces the dominant powers and social relations, only changing the ‘forms’ of their operation?

And, moreover, should not architecture follow analogically Baudelaire, the contemporary of Marx and Wagner, in a *direct* confrontation with the experience of shock and the impoverishment of experience – *contra* Wagner’s cult of surface unity – recording its fragmented and painful reality in a way that, as Buck-Morss notes, ‘pierces through the phantasmagoric veil’? Should not architecture abandon the illusion of Wholeness, the ‘immersion’ in a techno-aesthetic ‘total environment’? Why not insist on an architecture of ‘resistance’?

Notes

- 1 Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), xii.
- 2 See Douglas Spencer, *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), forthcoming. Also see his previous essay ‘Architectural Deleuzism: Neoliberal Space, Control and the “Uiver-City,”’ in *Radical Philosophy* 168 (July/August, 2011), 9–21. In agreement with his argument, we follow his line of analysis further below.
- 3 See Hal Foster, ‘Image Building,’ reprinted in *Architecture between Spectacle and Use*, ed., Anthony Vidler (Williamston: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008), 164–179.
- 4 See Hal Foster, ‘A New Little Dictionary of Received Ideas about Contemporary Design,’ delivered as a lecture at the conference in Paris in 2007 on ‘Walter Benjamin and Architecture,’ and subsequently printed in French in *Speilraum: W. Benjamin et L’Architecture*, ed., Libero Andreotti (Paris: Editions La Villette, 2011), 337. See also, Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London and New York: Verso, 2002).
- 5 See Jesse Reiser and Nanako Umemoto, *Atlas of Novel Tectonics* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006).
- 6 See the catalogue by Frédéric Migayrou and Zeynep Mennan, eds., *Architectures Non Standard* (Paris: Editions du Center Pompidou, 2003).
- 7 See Mario Carpo, ‘Nonstandard Morality: Design Technology and Its Discontents,’ in *Architecture between Spectacle and Use*, ed. Anthony Vidler (Williamston: Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 2008), 127–142. See also his recent book, *The Alphabet and Algorithm* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).
- 8 See Anthony Vidler, ‘Skin and Bones,’ in Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space, Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 219–234.
- 9 Foster, ‘A New Little Dictionary of Received Ideas about Contemporary Design,’ op. cit.
- 10 Quoted in *ibid.* Also see his *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London and New York: Verso, 2002). Foster further writes: ‘Where are architects left in this situation? Again, they seem able to do everything – “and, at the same time, nothing.” It is the architect redefined as designer who occupies this paradoxical position: as architecture expands into total design, it also runs the risk of partial dissolution there. “It seems that it will soon be necessary for architects to offer a complete array of services,” Hani Rashid (of the design firm Asymtote) comments, “and to do so with a seamless integration of all aspects of the process.”

Some architects celebrate this condition of total design. "The architect is going to be the fashion designer of the future," Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos (of UN Studio) state.¹¹ Further, '[t]he new architectural network studio is a hybrid mixture of club, atelier, laboratory, and automobile plants, encouraging plug-in professionalism.'

11 See Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 26.

12 Greg Lynn, *Fold, Bodies, and Blobs: Collected Essays* (Brussels: Books by Architects, 1998), 52.

13 Ibid., 55.

14 Vidler, *Warped Space*, op. cit., 229.

15 Ibid., 107.

16 Here we are citing from a critical essay co-authored by Nadir Lahiji and Elie Haddad, an unpublished essay presented at the 2012 Annual ACSA conference; see the proceedings of the conference.

17 See Carpo, op. cit., 127. Carpo is referring to Michael Speaks' article titled 'After Theory,' in *Architectural Record* 193, no.6 (June 2005), 73–75.

18 Douglas Spencer, 'Architectural Deleuzism: Neoliberal Space, Control and the "Univer-City,"' in *Radical Philosophy* 168 (July/August, 2011), 11 (italics in original).

19 Ibid., 11.

20 See Patrick Schumacher, *The Autopoiesis of Architecture: A New Framework for Architecture*, vol. 1 (Chichester: Wiley, 2011), 2. We do not have space here to comprehensively discuss Schumacher's writing and take him to task for all that he simplistically and fashionably claims for his theory of architecture.

21 For more on this notion see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 120.

22 See Spencer, *The Architecture of Neoliberalism*, op. cit., no pagination.

23 Ibid. Also see Patrik Schumacher, *The Autopoiesis of Architecture*, vol. 2 (Chichester: Wiley, 2011), 451.

24 Spencer, *The Architecture of Neoliberalism*, op. cit. See also Patrik Schumacher, *The Autopoiesis of Architecture*, vol. 2, op. cit., 472.

25 Spencer, op. cit., no pagination.

26 Ibid.

12 The city as phantasmagoria of the world interior

Blanqui's cosmic speculation conveys this lesson: that humanity will be prey to a mythic anguish so long as phantasmagoria occupies a place in it.

Benjamin, Exposé 1939, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century'

In the 'introduction' to the 1939 exposé, Benjamin presents his investigation into the 'reifying representation of civilization' as the 'new forms of behavior,' and the 'new economic and technologically based creations,' that constitute the nineteenth century's 'universe of a phantasmagoria.' In these creations, he identifies four phantasmagorical formations that he sets out to illuminate, not only 'theoretically by an ideological transposition,' as he says, but also in the 'immediacy of their perceptible presence.'¹ They are the phantasmagorias of the arcades, world exhibitions, the flâneur, and the interior. In this final chapter, we look at the last of these, the phantasmagoria of the interior, which, as Benjamin wrote, is 'constituted by man's imperious need to leave the imprint of his private individual existence on the rooms he inhabits.'²

The phenomenon came into existence, according to Benjamin, in Second Empire Paris and persisted at least until Jugendstil's cult of the domestic interior. Today, we argue, the themes and concerns that defined the phantasmagoria of the interior survive *not* in the space of the private individual but in the space of collectivity – that is to say, in the City as Interior. By transposing Peter Sloterdijk's notion of 'the capitalist world interior' to the city of contemporary techno-capitalism, we argue that the Interior, today, *is* the City itself.³ This can be seen in the two different moods that drive the nineteenth-century interior and its twenty-first-century successor.

As Benjamin wrote, in the time of Louis Philippe, when the bourgeoisie was ascendant, the domestic interior was the domain of the private individual. It served to 'sustain him in his illusions' against the realities he encountered at work. It was his *etui* and 'represented the universe.'⁴ This interior was in accord with the 'innermost core of bourgeois coziness' and served as a 'stimulus to intoxication and dream,' about which Benjamin would

write extensively in 'Convolute I' of *The Arcades Project*. The mood of the bourgeois interior, according to Benjamin, involved an 'aversion to open air.' 'To live in these interiors was to have woven a dense fabric about oneself, to have secluded oneself within a spider's web, in whose toils world events hang loosely suspended like so many insect bodies sucked dry.'⁵ The kind of intoxication Benjamin ascribes to the bourgeois interior, in this sense, was not unlike the state produced by drugs, like hashish, in common use throughout the nineteenth century.

By contrast, the mood of the twenty-first-century interior is quite different. It is neither a 'universe' nor a private 'world' but a 'global' state of being. Instead of a 'spider's web,' it is a 'network' in which the World Wide Web is an interior in which the individual is caught or trapped. Above all, it represents no longer the incipient industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century but the financial capitalism of a new Neoliberal Empire in which the individual, as Maurizio Lazzarato writes in his *The Making of the Indebted Man*, is 'an entrepreneur of the self.'⁶ Moreover, the 'mood' in this interior, while still and unequivocally a form of intoxication, is not drug-induced. It is characteristic of a different, though related, kind of intoxication. Each case enacts specific forms of technology and specific relations to art and architecture. In the former, especially in Jugendstil, these relations are not expressed in the form of an ideology but manifest themselves rather as the 'last attempted sortie of an art besieged in its ivory tower by technology.' Ibsen's *Master Builder* vividly expresses how 'the attempt by the individual, on the strength of his inwardness, to vie with technology leads to his downfall.'⁷ In the second case, instead, the 'ivory tower' of art and architecture is brought down by a form of a virtual-digital technology that is *voluntarily* embraced. This is an *accelerated* technology whose political consequences we outline below.



Sloterdijk takes the metaphor of the 'Crystal Palace' from Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, published in 1864, and juxtaposes it to Benjamin's Parisian arcades. In both cases, according to Sloterdijk, 'an architectural form was declared the key to understanding the capitalist condition of the world.'⁸ The specter of Benjamin haunts Sloterdijk's important analysis, even if at times, in our view, he tries to conjure it away. Dostoyevsky, in fact, had visited the Crystal Palace in 1862 - not the one in Hyde Park designed and built in 1851 by Joseph Paxton and subsequently dismantled but rather its successor in the Sydenham suburb of London, which as Douglas Murphy in his *The Architecture of Failure* has shown, reflected a somewhat different intention.⁹ For Sloterdijk, Dostoyevsky's tale is the 'first expression of an anti-globalization stance in which Western civilization figures as a "crystal palace."¹⁰ Sloterdijk writes:

For Dostoyevsky, the image of the whole of "society" moving into the palace of civilization symbolized the will of the Western branch of

humanity to conclude the initiative it had started – to make the world happy and achieve mutual understanding between people – in a post-historically relaxed state. After the writer had become acquainted with the existence in a “house of the dead” through his deportation to Siberia, the prospect of a closed house of life now revealed itself to him: biopolitics begins as enclosure-building.¹¹

Sloterdijk then observes that the visionary of the nineteenth century and the communists of the twentieth already understood that ‘social life could only take place in an expanded interior, a domestically organized and artificially climatized inner space.’¹²

Comparing the two architectural references of Dostoyevsky and Benjamin, the Crystal Palace for the first and the Parisian Arcades for the second, Sloterdijk opts for the ‘crystal palace’ as the emblem of the ‘interior’ for his thesis. We must point out here that Sloterdijk fails to note the fact that the ‘arcades’ are quite ambiguous in their spatial structure, being neither inside nor outside, whereas the Crystal Palace is clearly an inside. In passing, we also must note that it was the Arcades that *prefigured* the Crystal Palace and not the other way around. In *The Arcades Projects*, however, Benjamin at least four times cited the Crystal Palace and Paxton as a precedent.

Benjamin’s interpretation of the arcades, Sloterdijk claims, was inspired by the ‘realistic’ but ‘trivial’ Marxist refrain about how ‘the shiny surfaces of the commodity world conceal a less pleasant, sometimes bleak working world.’ Sloterdijk in his liberal-conservative position is of course predictable in qualifying Benjamin’s interpretation and his use of the Marxian term ‘phantasmagoria’ as ‘trivial.’ As Douglas Murphy, who has also discussed Sloterdijk’s book in his recent *Last Futures*, notes: ‘In using the Marxian term “phantasmagoria” to describe the crystal palaces and arcades, Benjamin intended not only to signify the ideological fantasies created by the world capitalism but also the dreams of their transcendence, and in this he affiliated himself with the world of radical functionalism, of an architecture based upon material technology and socialism.’¹³ He further adds, ‘He [Benjamin] also prefigures Sloterdijk’s understanding of the interiority of capitalism, stating that: “Arcades are houses of passages having no outside – like the dreams.”’¹⁴ In any case, this ‘insight,’ Sloterdijk claims, ‘was distorted by the suggestion that the capitalist world context as such was hell – populated by damned souls who regrettably learned no political lessons from their damnation.’¹⁵ So Sloterdijk’s attitude toward Benjamin is rather mixed at best. He goes on to say: ‘Viewed as a whole, Benjamin’s studies document the vengeful joy of the melancholic who compiles an archive of evidence to show that the world has gone wrong.’¹⁶ He further states that if we want to remain faithful to Benjamin’s ‘important suggestions’ for the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, our methodological approach must be rectified. Benjamin’s suggestions ‘would have to be adapted to the architectural models of today – above all the shopping malls . . . exhibition centers, major

hotels, sport arenas and indoor amusement parks. Such studies could then bear titles closer to *The Crystal Places Project* or *The Hothouses Project*, or ultimately even *The Space Stations Projects*.¹⁷ We agree and note that several writers including Buck-Morss have already done this.¹⁸

Sloterdijk further comments that the arcades ‘undeniably embodied a suggestive spatial idea in the age of incipient consumerism – they carried out in a public interior that merging of salon and the universe which Benjamin found so stimulating. In the researcher’s eyes, they were “temples of commodity capital,” streets of “lascivious commerce only,” a projection of the Oriental bazaar into the bourgeois world symbolizing the metamorphosis of all things by the light of buyability.’¹⁹ Yet, according to Sloterdijk, the Crystal Palace, which housed the Great Exhibition first and then turned into a leisure park, ‘was intended to make “society” as a whole an exhibition in itself.’²⁰ For this reason, it ‘already pointed far beyond the architecture of the arcades.’²¹ Benjamin would thus have disregarded ‘the basic rule of media analysis, namely that the format is the message.’²² According to Sloterdijk, while the arcades marked a new step in the *mise en scène* of the commodity, the Crystal Palace anticipated ‘an integral, experienced-oriented, popular capitalism’ – in short, a ‘comprehensive absorption of the outside world’ at a scale of enclosure so large that ‘one might never have to leave it.’²³

Sloterdijk’s idiosyncratic evaluation of Benjamin’s work does not alter the fact that his notion of ‘the world interior of capital’ reflects his own haunting, as a thinker, by the specter of Benjamin. We find his notion relevant to describe the place of the City in the grand narrative of global capitalist modernity. The City, we argue, is the locus of the phantasmagoria of the Interior. As Žižek notes in his recent discussion of Sloterdijk in *Trouble in Paradise*, the Crystal Palace is the first manifestation of globalization as the ‘construction and expansion of a world interior whose boundaries are invisible yet virtually insurmountable from without, and which is inhabited by one and a half million winners of globalization. Three times this number are left standing outside the door.’²⁴

Sloterdijk uses the term ‘terrestrial globalization’ and writes that ‘the world interior of capital is not an agora or trade fair beneath the open sky but rather a hothouse that has drawn inwards everything that was once the outside. The bracing climate of an integral inner world commodity can be formulated in the notion of a planetary place of consumption. In this horizontal Babylon, being human becomes a question of spending power, and the meaning of freedom is exposed in the ability to choose between products for the market.’²⁵ As Žižek remarks, endorsing Sloterdijk’s claim that the primary fact of the Modern Age is ‘not that the earth goes around the sun, but that money goes around the earth,’ this interior is built on capitalist excess. ²⁶ As Žižek writes:

What Sloterdijk correctly points out is that capitalist globalization not only stands for openness, conquest, but also for a self-enclosed globe

separating the Inside from the Outside. The two aspects are inseparable: capitalism's global reach is grounded in the way it introduces a radical class division across the entire globe, separating those protected by the sphere from those outside its cover.²⁷

Within the division of the Inside from the Outside that subtends the phantasmagoria of the City-World Interior, more and more public space is privatized. Spatially, the characteristic aspect of this 'third wave of globalization,' as Sloterdijk calls it, is a 'de-spatialization' of the globe that is directly a function of speed and that has made 'the Modern Age's sense of expansiveness disappear once more.'²⁸ The response to such a 'third wave,' according to Sloterdijk, is 'a nebulous unease at the over-communicative constitution of the world system – a justified sentiment, we would argue, for what is celebrated today as the boon of telecommunications is experienced by countless people as a dubious achievement with whose aid we can now make one another as happy from afar as was once possible only among next-door neighbors.'²⁹

This negation of distance, paradoxically facilitated by tele-media-digital-technology, may be situated within the recent discourse on *Accelerationism*. In techno-aesthetic terms, acceleration can be considered to be a constitutive feature of the City as a phantasmagoria of the Interior. We will illustrate how the cult of digital Acceleration is manifested in the so-called 'Digital City,' a construct that well reflects the movement of the interior from the Crystal Palace to the hothouse of contemporary World Capitalism. In our travel in time over a century and a half, we have arrived at the new phase of *technocapitalist* acceleration, in which, as we will see, looms the legacy of Marx and his specters.



In the past forty years, as Luciana Parisi shows, 'algorithmic automation' and computer design based on numeric controlling machines has been integrated into the 'generic function of computation resulting in custom fabricating processes, machine control protocols, real time simulations,' and interactive models that can be easily manipulated.³⁰ Computational design 'embraces the elemental properties of materials and the generative rules subtending the dynamic nature of spatio-temporal structures.'³¹ With the transformation in the advance of computational design thinking linked to the 'intelligence of materials' in this 'accelerated automation,' digital design and architecture have been associated with an approach to design based on the 'convergence between evolutionary biology and non-standard geometry or topology.'³² In the face of such transformations, Parisi poses some pertinent questions: 'If computational design thinking has rejected the deductive model of universal rules and its top-down method of form finding, then what do solutions simulating the biophysical behavior of matter tell us as to the nature of algorithmic automation itself in this new phase of technocapital

acceleration?’³³ ‘Do they mean that the technocapital acceleration of automation has become one with the physical dynamics of matter, defining a dynamic rather mechanical instrumentalisation of reason?’³⁴ For Parisi, ‘the limit of computational design thinking is its uncritical perpetuation of idealist materialism according to which the relation between computation and reason is mediated or to some extent caused by material data.’³⁵ Hence, ‘far from being an abstraction of physical structures, automated architecture is instead a manifestation of algorithmic spatio-temporalities that have nothing to do with what already exists in nature (or the relation between rules and randomness that exists in the biological and physical data).’³⁶ Parisi thus argues, quite convincingly:

Computational design thinking thus becomes a mode of doing and practicing a thought derived from what already happens in the physical world. From this standpoint, the acceleration of automation perfectly coincides with the technocapitalist illusion that matter can generate infinitesimal variations, an inexhaustible abundance that turns continuously smaller elements into vast resources for the productive eternity of the whole.³⁷

During the last two decades, this ‘technocapitalist illusion’ in the digital acceleration of design thinking has been pushed aggressively in architectural discourse. The case that concerns us most here is the publication of an issue of *Architectural Design* entitled *Digital Cities*, guest-edited by Neil Leach.³⁸ Here, Leach, who after writing critical tracts in the late 1990s joined the bandwagon of digital technocapitalists, features Schumacher’s ‘Parametricism’ alongside his own essay on ‘Swarm Intelligence,’ projects by students at Design Research Lab at the Architectural Association in London under Schumacher’s supervision, and project proposals by Zaha Hadid Architects, in which Schumacher is a partner. The materials included in this publication are a perfect illustration of what we critically call the hyper-mediated city. Here Schumacher, the self-appointed guardian of the ‘avant-gardes,’ elevates ‘Parametricism’ to the level of ‘a new Style’ that has now replaced Modernism, and pushes it as far as possible, even to the point of a new conceptual approach to city design. He writes:

Avant-garde architecture and urbanism are going through a cycle of innovative adaptation – retooling and refashioning the discipline to meet the socioeconomic demands of the post-Fordist era. The mass society that was characterized by a universal consumption standard has evolved into the heterogeneous society of the multitude, marked by a proliferation of lifestyle and extensive work-path differentiation. It is the task of architecture and urbanism to organize and articulate the increased complexity of our post-Fordist society.³⁹

This passage, including its (incredibly disingenuous) reference to 'the society of multitude,' reiterates, in our opinion, the argument of Accelerationism to which we come in the next section below. Schumacher says that Parametricism 'succeeds Modernism as the next long wave of systematic innovation. The style finally closes the transition period of uncertainty that was engendered by the crisis of modernism and that was marked by a series of short lived episodes including Postmodernism, Deconstructivism, and Minimalism. Parametricism is the great Style after modernism.'⁴⁰ In response, one can only agree with Douglas Murphy when he notes: 'You have to admire the chutzpah of someone self-proclaiming such a grand style; not since Le Corbusier has an architect been arrogant in such a way.'⁴¹ This comparison, however, we believe is unfair to Le Corbusier and understates his contribution, however politically questionable, to the discipline.

Challenging Le Corbusier's Cartesian rationalism – specifically his ode to the 'straight line,' as opposed to the 'pack-donkey' road in which one 'meanders' in a 'distracted fashion' – Schumacher calls on Frie Otto to argue that 'parametricist sensibility gives more credit to the "pack-donkey's path" as a form of recursive material computation than to the simplicity of clear geometries imposed in a single, sweeping gesture.'⁴² It is not clear to us, however, why the computational 'donkey' of parametricism in the post-Fordist re-organization of society is any better than its counterpart in the Fordist technology.

In *The Autopoeisis of Architecture*, nevertheless, Schumacher appeals to what he calls a 'new demand for diversity and complexity [that] has been engendered by the momentous socio-economic restructuring that has been transforming the metropolitan centres over the last 25 years: post-Fordist network economy, globalization and the attendant, increased lifestyle diversification.'⁴³ On this point, Murphy properly asks: 'what does Schumacher mean by *demands*? Does he mean consumer demand? It certainly does not appear that he means political demands.'⁴⁴ He then remarks:

It seems that Schumacher is casting himself in role of prophet, but then forgetting to have a message to spread. Is it right that a "style" articulating the very spirit of an age should be nothing but the uncritical reflection of its most banal forces? [. . .] In all "Parametricism" has no critical kinks needing unfolding, no potential sticking points needing smoothing out in order to serve the needs of contemporary clients. It cannot be an avant-garde in any real sense, merely an acquiescent pseudo-radicalism.⁴⁵

In other words, it would appear that the 'Emperor is naked.' The main effect of the digital 'revolution' appears to be that it has blunted the political-cultural and techno-aesthetic critique of Modernity, considerably confusing, in the process, the function of architecture within it. We are being told – arrogantly – that Parametricism is the end point of a movement of

‘overcoming’ Modernity. To evaluate this claim, however, as Murphy puts it, we would “have to ascertain whether or not the digital revolution in architecture has *created any new space*.”⁴⁶ The same holds for that other term – the ‘Digital City’ – which like Parametricism, is best understood as techno-capitalist acceleration discourse imported, without mediation, into architecture.



What the political implications of the debate around Acceleration are on the left, and what place Benjamin’s specter has in it, must be carefully examined.⁴⁷ Before we do, however, one point must be made clear: from Aleandro Zaera-Polo to Schumacher, advocates of digital acceleration in architecture embrace a regressive notion of acceleration that has nothing to do with the debate around the term on the left. In sharp contrast with the latter, and despite their empty claims to the contrary, proponents of acceleration in architecture are *agents* – not critics or theorists – of capital. Their standpoint is shaped by an a priori, wholesale embrace of post-Fordist digital capitalism that makes them, as Spencer shows convincingly, into the techno-aesthetic apologists of neoliberalism. One should not be misled by superficial invocations of the early works of Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. None of these apologists of acceleration in architecture understood or ever had much interest in the particular historical juncture of France in the aftermath of 1968, when these works came out (1972) and the strategy of Accelerationism was explicitly theorized, in the context of the debate provoked a few years later by the publication of Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* (1974) and of Baudrillard’s *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976).

As a movement and a debate on the left, the notion of acceleration is the subject of Benjamin Noys’s fascinating book, *The Persistence of the Negative*. Here, Noys traces the sources of the idea in *Capital* (volume 3), where Marx wrote that ‘the *real barrier* of capitalist production is *capital itself*.’ Advocates of acceleration, according to Noys, embrace a similar idea when they argue that to overcome capitalism, ‘we must crash through this barrier by turning capitalism against itself.’⁴⁸ For Noys, such arguments are ‘an exotic variant of *La politique du pire*: if capitalism generates its own forces of dissolution then the necessity is to radicalize capitalism itself: the worse the better.’⁴⁹ In *Malign Velocities*, Noys takes up more fully the theory and debate around Accelerationism and, as we will see, looks critically at its appeal on the left, with special reference, significantly, to Benjamin.

As the editors of the anthology *#Accelerate* note in their introduction to a collection of essays that includes the ‘Manifesto for an Acceleration Politics’ by Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek and other essays: ‘Accelerationism is a political heresy: the insistence that the only radical political response to capitalism is not to protest, disrupt, or critique, nor await its demise at the hands of its own contradictions, but to accelerate its uprooting, alienating,

decoding, abstractive tendencies.⁵⁰ They further point out that the term was introduced into political theory to 'designate a certain nihilistic alignment of philosophical thought with the excesses of capitalist culture (or anticulture), embodied in writings that sought an immanence with this process of alienation.'⁵¹ The uneasy status of the concept, and what has prompted a fierce debate, not surprisingly, is its position between 'subversion and acquiesce,' between 'realist analysis and poetic exacerbation.'⁵² The editors locate this debate in the context of the post-Thatcher/Reagan crisis of the left, and the subsequent embrace, by a large part of Western culture, of the hegemonic Neoliberal claim that 'there is no alternative.'

Mackay and Avanesian write that by desisting from the 'grand narrative' of the Enlightenment, 'the general reasoning is that if modernity=progress=capitalism=acceleration, then the only possible resistance amounts to deceleration, whether through the fantasy of collective organic self-sufficiency or a solo retreat in miserablism and sagacious warnings against the treacherous counterfinalities of rational thought.'⁵³ A well-known example of such thinking is Michael Hardt and Tony Negri's *Multitude*, which advances the ideas of 'cognitive capitalism' and 'immaterial labor' in the context of an argument quite similar to that of political accelerationism. Recently, Žižek has stepped into the debate by citing the Italian philosopher critic Franco (Bifo) Berardi – himself formerly close to Negri's work – who in his *After the Future* questions the assumptions on which political accelerationism is based. For Žižek, Berardi's position is the exact opposite of Negri's.⁵⁴ On the question of 'cognitive capitalism,' Žižek argues that 'far from bringing out the potential transparency of social life, today's 'cognitive capitalism' makes it more impenetrable than ever, undermining the very subjective conditions of any form of collective solidarity of the "cognetariat."⁵⁵ Žižek goes on to cite Berardi's warnings against what he calls the 'Deleuzian "gospel of hyper-dynamic deterritorialization."' For Berardi, 'if we are not able to step outside the compulsion of the system, the gap between the frantic dynamics imposed by the system and our corporeal and cognitive limitataions sonner or later can lead depression.'⁵⁶

Another famous example of the acceleration argument is found in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* where they wrote:

But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one? – to withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World Countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist "economic solution"? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go further still, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the view point of a theory and practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to "accelerate the process," as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet.⁵⁷

Against this, Žižek believes that the accelerating flows of deterritorialization are the 'opaque and inertial forms of capital' and questions Deleuze's and Guattari's apparent belief that an 'absolute deterritorialization' can be achieved by accelerating the tendencies of capitalism. 'Of course,' he remarks, for Deleuze and Guattari, 'the aim of such acceleration is not to reinforce capitalism but rather to generate its meltdown, pushing it to the "hard-edge excess that ruins all values, including the "value" that is the core function of capitalism itself.'⁵⁸ As Noys argues, however, in the context of the gradual weakening of May 1968, as seen especially in the debates that followed the appearance of *Anti-Aedipus*, such a prospect could be confused with other contemporary tendencies of a quite different political stripe. Moreover, with the fading away of political radicalism during the 'reactionary 1980s,' the accelerationist positions of Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard and Baudrillard, would come to be seen as prescient, registering 'the durability of capitalism and its ability to spread its domination, often by recuperating forms of struggle.'⁵⁹

In his attempt to break with the appeal of acceleration, Noys in the last chapter of *Malign Velocities* turns to Benjamin and to what he believes is the latter's close engagement with questions of acceleration and production. In his dialogue with Bertolt Brecht, Noys recalls, Benjamin engaged in a debate of how to 'subject capitalism to "refunctioning" (*Umfunktionierung*).'⁶⁰ According to Noys, the economic and political circumstances of this debate – including a global crisis of capitalism, inflation in Germany, the rise of fascism, and the failure of revolutionary movements – all resonate forecfully with our own time: hence the continuing value of Benjamin and Brecht's dialogue, and especially of their notion of 'interruption.' The latter would be exemplified in Benjamin's talk radio programs, in his essay on Eduard Fuchs, and in his 'Theses on the Concept of History.' In all these places, as Noys puts it nicely, 'the break is the figure of interruption.'⁶⁰ Noys also points out how acceleration is closely related for Benjamin to the question of a 'defective reception' of technology. An example is the rise of iron work, train construction, and speed and 'locomotive' technology. In 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,' Benjamin wrote:

The questions that humanity brings to nature are in part conditioned by the level of production. This is the point at which positivism fails. In the development of technology, it was able to see only progress of natural science, not the concomitant retrogression of society. Positivism overlooked the fact that this development was decisively conditioned by capitalism. By the same token, the positivists among the Social democratic theorists failed to understand that the increasingly urgent act which would bring the proletariat into possession of this technology was rendered more and more precarious because of this development. They misunderstood the destructive side of this development because they were alienated from the destructive side of dialectics.⁶¹

As Benjamin put it, 'a prognosis was due, but failed to materialize.' The predictable result was a 'bungled reception of technology' and the failure to understand the runaway logic under which the latter was forced to develop. From the start of the Industrial Revolution, the series of 'energetic, constantly renewed efforts' that were the 'industrial poetry' of the Saint Simonians, the realist sanctifying of the locomotive by Du Camp, and the revolutionary glorification of the same in the poetry of Ludwig Pfau all served merely to discover that 'the speed of traffic and the ability of machines to duplicate words and writing outstrip human needs. The energies that technology develops beyond this threshold are destructive.'⁶² As Noys observes, Benjamin's key insight was that one could no longer simply accept technology as it is. Rather a rational 'refunctioning' of it depends, crucially, on 'the interruption of capitalist acceleration.'⁶³

Noys claims that Benjamin and Brecht both at times adopted an accelerationist position, but they also interrupted and disrupted the 'accelerationist fantasy,' as in Benjamin's famous metaphor of the revolution as 'pulling the emergency brake.' As Noys remarks, the 'homogeneous empty time' about which he wrote in 'On the Concept of History' 'is the time of train on the track, which can speed up and slow down. The emergency brake of Benjamin's metaphor for revolution is not simply the stopping of a train on the smooth tracks of progress. Rather, as with the metaphor of the angel of history, it suggests that the train tracks into the future are being laid immediately in front of the train. [. . .] The "rails" of history accelerate us to disaster if we are not aware of the destructive side of the dialectic of production.'⁶⁴ So the 'emergency brake' is not a return to a pre-capitalist moment. Rather, 'we destroy the tracks to prevent the greater destruction of acceleration' and to avoid catastrophe.'⁶⁵

The emergency brake is the operator of Benjamin's non-teleological politics of temporality, which aims to wrest the classless society from the continuing dialectic of production/destruction that is our constant "state of emergency." Instead of accelerating into destruction, we have to think destruction as an intimate and on-going possibility. [. . .] Benjamin's interruption suggests a more definitive break (or brake) with the aim of production. The stopping of the angelic locomotive tries to jump the tracks of history, or jump out of the vision of history as infinite waiting for the revolutionary situation. [. . .] The difficulty of applying the emergency brake does not mean that interruption should be abandoned.'⁶⁶



Returning to the hyper-mediated 'digital city,' its accelerationist apologists, and other assorted 'parametricists': clearly, their brand of acceleration, driven by new computing technologies, promises a 'full immersion' into the forces of cyber-techno-media. The *negative* moment in the 'dialectic of

destruction' has no place in their program. Indeed, no discernible theory, much less critique, of capitalism accompanies their discourse. Instead, what we find is only the *affirmative* side of Deleuzianism that endorses the replication of capital's processes of deterritorialization, of flow and flux, of smooth and striated space.

Given that we cannot return to the stability of a Fordist past, we can only look into the dialectical contradictions of the present moment. No such contradictions, however, ever register in the vocabulary of architectural technologists, whether their focus is ecology, morphology/morphogenetics, biopower, or parametricism. Technology appears as pure *jouissance*, or, as Lyotard once said mocking the French, as the 'euphoria that follows a meal washed down with Beaujolais.'⁶⁷ And as Noys makes clear, 'the political sensibility underlying accelerationism is one of *jouissance* taken to the extreme, and merged with the promise or fantasy of full immersion in the Real.' Paraphrasing the Marquis de Sade, Noys notes that it is always a matter of 'one more effort, to truly be accelerationists,' or, as Schumacher would have it, to truly be parametricists.⁶⁸

Such is the state, today, of the City as the World Interior caught in a network of an accelerated cybernetic techno-utopia. In this City, everything is liquid, in flow and in flux. 'All that is solid melts into air,' and the material inertia of things pose no resistance. The psychopathology of the subject is no longer related to the narcissistic personality disorders, neuroses, and hysteria of the big twentieth-century metropolis. Instead, in psychoanalytical terms, it has become a psychotic state, the prevailing malady of the subject in the developmental stage of simulated technology, in which the distinction between what is 'reality' and the Real is no longer operative. Simulacra, not in Deleuze's but rather in Baudrillard's sense, is the removal of the origin by the copy, in which the image is more real than the reality itself. Such a state is the hallmark of accelerationism, in which the intensification of nervous stimuli overwhelms the synaesthetic system of the subject. In a constant state of intoxication, psychically mutilated by a sensorial apparatus disturbed to the point of hampering its capacity to recognize the Real, the subject's cognitive system is damaged in its very constitution. The inevitable result is a de-politicization that is both the product and the cause of the 'post-political' turn of contemporary capitalism. Such is the condition of the generic city dweller today.

It was perhaps the media theorist Friedrich Kittler who, in 'The City Is a Medium,' defined this condition most clearly when he noted, in a statement that in its phantasmagoria can be read as a warning, that 'media record, transmit and process information.'⁶⁹ 'This is reason enough to bring together the workings of the city with concepts from general information science. Reason enough, moreover, to decipher past media and the historical function of what we refer to as "man," as the play between commands, addresses, and data.'⁷⁰

If, as we should, we find this definition of man unsatisfactory, we must pull the emergency break.

Notes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,' Exposé 1939, in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (The Belknap Press, of Harvard University Press, 1999), 14.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 See Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, trans., Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013).
- 4 Walter Benjamin, 'Exposé 1939,' in *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., 19.
- 5 See 'Convolute I: The Interior, The Trace,' in *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., 216.
- 6 See Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).
- 7 Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé 1935,' in *The Arcades Project*, trans., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 9.
- 8 Sloterdijk, *ibid.*, 173.
- 9 See Douglas Murphy, *The Architecture of Failure* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2012).
- 10 Sloterdijk, op. cit., 169.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 170.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 13 See Douglas Murphy, *Last Futures: Nature Technology and the End of Architecture* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 208.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Sloterdijk, op. cit., 174.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*, 175.
- 18 See Buck-Morss, *Dialectical of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), specially 'Afterword.'
- 19 Sloterdijk, op. cit.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 See Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of the Capitalism* (London and New York; Brookline and London: Melville House, 2015), 71–72.
- 25 Sloterdijk, op. cit., 12–13.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 27 Žižek, op. cit., 72–73.
- 28 Sloterdijk, op. cit., 13.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 See Luciana Parisi, 'Automated Architecture, Speculative Reason in the Age of the Algorithm,' in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, eds., Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanica, 2014), 403. Parisi lists some of the recent books on digital architecture, most important among them includes N. Leach, ed., *Designing for a Digital World* (New York: Wiley, 2001); K. Terzidis, *Algorithmic Architecture* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2006); M. Meredith, T. Sakamoto and A. Ferre, eds., *From Control to Design: Parametric/Algorithmic Architecture* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2008); S. Kwinter and C. Davidson, eds., *Far From Equilibrium: Essays on Technology and Design Culture* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2008).
- 31 *Ibid.* She further remarks, 'Instead of following geometrical and mathematical patterns, this form of material computation aims to directly follow the physical

emergent patterning and material processes of self-assembly out of the interaction of loose elements. In contrast to the mechanical automation of sequentially linear and assembly systems, this new form of algorithmic automation is driven by the physical strategies of materials to compute both architectural form and spatio-temporal performance,' *ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*, 404.

33 *Ibid.*, 407.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*, 408.

36 *Ibid.*, 410.

37 *Ibid.*, 417.

38 See 'Digital Cities', *Architectural Design*, Profile no. 200, guest-edited by Niel Leach (January/August 2009).

39 Patrik Schumacher, 'Parametricism,' in 'Digital Cities', *Architectural Design*, Profile, no. 200, op. cit., 5.

40 Quoted in Murphy, *The Architecture of Failure*, *ibid.*, 133–134. With a slight difference in wording of the same passage see also Schumacher, 'Paramatericism,' *ibid.*, 15.

41 *Ibid.*, 134.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Schumacher, *The Autopoeisis of Architecture*, op. cit., vol. I, 292.

44 Murphy, *The Architecture of Failure*, *ibid.*, 135.

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*, 130 (*italics in original*).

47 For an incisive discussion, see David Cunningham's 'A Marxist Heresy? Accelerationism and Its Discontents,' in *Radical Philosophy* 191 (May/June, 2015), 29–38.

48 See Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critical of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2010, 2012), 5.

49 *Ibid.*

50 See Robin Mackay and Armen Avanesian, 'Introduction,' in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, eds., Robin Mackay and Armen Avannessian (Falmouth: Urbanica, 2014), 4.

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*, 5–6.

54 Žižek, op. cit.

55 *Ibid.*, 142.

56 *Ibid.*

57 Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities, Accelerationsim and Capitalism* (Wincheiter and Washington: Zero Books), 2.

58 *Ibid.*, 2–3.

59 *Ibid.*, 6. Noys adds, 'The totalizing effects of capital would appear capable of rolling-up revolutionary advance, making the search for a revolutionary subject outside of capital superfluous. While Deleuze and Guattari would maintain faith in new revolutionary subjectivities – the "schizo," and what they would later call "minor" becomings – Lytord and Baudrillard would more firmly embrace disenchantment,' *ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*, 89.

61 Walter Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,' in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol.3, 1935–1938* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 266.

62 *Ibid.* See also Noys, op. cit., 89.

63 Noys, *Malign Velocities*, op. cit., 90.

64 Ibid., 91.

65 Ibid., 92.

66 Ibid.

67 Quoted in *ibid.*

68 Ibid., 100.

69 See Friedrich Kittler, 'The City Is a Medium,' in *New Literary History* 27 (1996), 722.

70 Ibid.

Epilogue

Specters of the city and the critique of ideology

The city we have been theorizing in this study – the successor to the one that Benjamin, in his characteristically antinomic way, described as ruled by the specters of Hell and Heaven – must also be submitted, especially in its contemporary configurations, to a materialist ‘critique of ideology.’ Only in this way can the *theory* of the city we are advancing – ‘the city structured like a phantasmagoria’ – also become a *theory of critique*. It is imperative, in other words, that the critique of the city be grounded in the critique of capitalism. This means firmly rejecting the prevailing academic tendency to equate any and all *principled* critiques of capitalism with assorted ‘totalitarian’ doctrines of the left or the right. Even as we resist the dominant Neoliberal consensus, however, we think it is legitimate to raise the question, again, of ideology – of what defines it, of how it operates, and of what constitutes it. In what follows, we propose that one plausible, if preliminary, reply to this question might be a socialized notion of the specter, or *spectralization* as a distinctive mode of socialization.

As Derrida shows, both *ideology* and *specter* belong in a signifying chain that includes such terms as *secret*, *mystical*, *enigma*, and *fetish*, in which the word ‘phantasmagoria,’ he argues, plays a *suturing* role. Derrida writes: ‘The “Phantasmagoria” that Marx is working here to describe, the one that is going to open up the question of fetishism and the religious, is the very element of social *and* spectral becoming: at the same time, by the same token.’¹ Moreover, ‘[t]his description of the phantasmopoetic or phantasmagoric process is going to constitute the premise of the discourse on fetishism, in the analogy with the “religious world.”’²

Derrida continues:

For commodities as Marx is going to point out, do not walk by themselves, they do not go to market on their own in order to meet other commodities. This commerce among other things stems from phantasmagoria. The autonomy lent to commodities corresponds to an anthropomorphic projection. The latter *inspires* the commodities, it breathes the spirit into them, a human spirit, the spirit of a *speech* and the spirit of a *will*.³

Neither Marx in *Capital* nor Benjamin in the *Arcades Project* ever brought the notion of *ideology* to the fore. The reasons for this omission are not hard to understand. For Marx, ideology would have been latent in the fetish character of the commodity. Similarly for Benjamin, ideology lay buried deep within the 'cultural values' of bourgeois society. While Marx spoke about the *phantasmagoreuin* of the commodity in the market, Benjamin wrote about the phantasmagoria of the 'commodity-on-display.' The different emphasis reflected two distinct, though related, concerns – in the first case to describe the form in commodity fetishism, in the second to understand modern, metropolitan experience and the role phantasmagoria might play in a critical diagnosis of the cultural pathologies of capitalism. But certainly, and most importantly, Marx's notion of the *sensuous non-sensuous* character of the commodity resonated for Benjamin, who described 'life-styles' and 'culture' – which are conditioned by commodity production – as 'sensuously transfigured in their immediate presence.' The proximity of Benjamin's concept of 'transfiguration in the immediate present' to Marx's notion of 'sensuous non-sensuous' suggests that Benjamin perhaps already knew that the *present* in its immediacy is not contemporaneous with itself. At any rate, it seems he envisioned the Arcades in terms not unlike those Marx had used in the famous example of the 'wooden table' in the first chapter of *Capital*. In both cases, we might say that the artifact, or commodity, exemplifies a condition of *spectrality*. Nor is it by chance that Derrida refers to Marx's passage as the 'séance of the table' – an image that immediately recalls Etienne-Gaspard Robertson's popular late eighteenth-century 'séances' with the magic lantern, discussed above.

According to Marx, insofar as a table is a 'use-value,' there is nothing mysterious about it. As a commodity, however, it is 'a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.'⁴ As he put it:

Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.⁵

The 'mystical character of the commodity,' Marx adds, 'does not therefore arise from its use-value.'⁶ Rather, the commodity reflects the social relations between producers.' It is through this 'substitution,' as Marx says, that 'the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social.'⁷

Derrida's commentary to this famous passage is particularly noteworthy the commodity-table, he says, comes on stage and 'begins to walk around and to put itself forward as a market value. *Coup de théâtre*: the ordinary, sensuous thing is transfigured (*verwandelt sich*) it becomes someone, it assumes

a figure.⁸ In this way, ‘this woody and headstrong denseness is metamorphosed into a supernatural thing, a *sensuous non-sensuous* thing, sensuous but non-sensuous, sensuously supersensible. . . . The ghostly schema now appears indispensable.’⁹

Marx follows the statement cited above with a key passage, which has by now become the *locus classicus* of commodity fetishism. The commodity, he says, ‘is nothing but definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic [phantasmagoric] form of a relation between things.’ To this he adds, significantly, that ‘[i]n order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take a flight into the misty realm of religion.’¹⁰ It is precisely in this ‘flight,’ we argue, that ideology appears, without being named. For Marx, the origin of all ideologies is religion. Religion is in the beginning of ideology. As Derrida notes, in fact, the treatment of ‘phantomatic’ in *The German Ideology* already ‘confirms the absolute privilege that Marx grants to religion, to ideology as religion, mysticism, or theology, in his analysis of ideology in general.’¹¹ Indeed, for Derrida what is at stake in Marx’s ‘pedagogy’ is, ‘*on the one hand*, the irreducibly specific character of the specter,’ and, ‘*on the other hand*, ‘the irreducibility of the religion model in the construction of the concept of ideology.’¹²

In a similar way for Žižek, in ‘The Specter of Ideology,’ commodity fetishism embodies the ‘uncanny “spiritualization” of the commodity-body.’¹³ But Žižek goes further than Derrida when he underscores the same point we make in the preface to this study – that to invoke specters is to undermine the ontological opposition between ‘reality’ and ‘illusion’ – and goes on to add a new dimension to the specter that is missing in Derrida, emphasizing the formal matrix, the ‘pre-ideological kernel’ that is grafted into various ideological formations, which leads him to claim that ‘there is no reality without the spectre,’ and that the circle of reality ‘can be closed only by means of an uncanny spectral supplement.’¹⁴ Žižek credits Lacan for the insight that what we experience as reality is not the ‘thing itself’ but the thing as ‘always-already symbolized, constituted, structured by symbolic mechanisms – and that the problem resides in the fact that symbolization ultimately always fails, that it never succeeds in fully “covering” the real, that it always involves some unsettled, unredeemed symbolic debt.’ ‘*This real (the part of reality that remains non-symbolized) returns in the guise of spectral apparitions.*’¹⁵ It is in this sense that Žižek makes an important distinction:

“Spectre” is not to be confused with “symbolic fiction,” with the fact that reality itself has the structure of a fiction in that it is symbolically (or, as some sociologists put it, “socially”) constructed; the notions of spectre and (symbolic) fiction are codependent in their very incompatibility (they are “complementary” in the quantum-mechanical sense). To put it simply, reality is never directly “itself,” it presents itself only via its incomplete- failed symbolization, and spectral apparitions emerge in

this very gap that forever separates reality from the real, and on account of which reality has the character of a (symbolic) fiction: the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality.¹⁶

Thus Žižek locates the spectral in what we might call a primordial repression – ‘the hole of the real’:

The pre-ideological “kernel” of ideology thus consists of the *spectral apparition that fills up the hole of the real*. This is what all the attempts to draw a clear line of separation between “true” reality and illusion (or to ground illusion in reality) fail to take into account: if (what we experience as) “reality” is to emerge, something has to be foreclosed from it – that is to say, “reality,” like truth, is, by definition, never “whole.” *What the spectre conceals is not reality but its “primordially repressed,” the irrepresentable X on whose “repression” reality itself is founded.*¹⁷

This reading of a spectrality that ‘fills out the unprecedented abyss of antagonism, of the non-symbolized real’ allows Žižek to distance himself from Derrida’s interpretation, according to which ‘spectrality, the apparition of the Other, provides the ultimate horizon of ethics.’¹⁸ He writes:

According to Derrida, the metaphysical ontologization of spectrality is rooted in the fact that the thought is horrified at itself, at its own founding gesture; that it draws back from the spirit convoked by this gesture. Therein resides *in nuce* his reading of Marx and the history of Marxism: the original impulse of Marx consisted in the messianic promise of Justice *qua* spectral Otherness, a promise that is only as *avenir*, yet-to-come, never as a simple *futur*, what will be; the “totalitarian” turn of Marxism that culminates in Stalinism has its root in the ontologization of the spectre, in the translation of the spectral Promise into a positive ontological Project. . . . Lacan, however, goes a step further here: *spectre as such already bears witness to a retreat, a withdrawal.*¹⁹

The name of that withdrawal, Žižek says, is *freedom*. In aligning Lacan with Marx against Derrida’s critique of communist ‘ontologization,’ Žižek thus ultimately defends the actuality of the ‘communist hypothesis’ against the exhausted echoes of Cold War discourse in Derrida – urging us, as Marx did in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, to ‘let the dead bury their dead.’

Žižek’s understanding of the spectral is useful for our purposes. Transposed to our theory of the city, it reaffirms a certain *spirit* of Benjamin’s analysis of the city, and of the ‘cultural values’ of modern urban life. Of course Benjamin, as we have seen, adopted the notion of phantasmagoria from Marx and his theory of commodity fetishism, which he elevated to a critical category to diagnose the pathologies of the Second Empire’s

‘phantasmagoria of civilization,’ without ever submitting it to a thorough theoretical investigation. In effect, instead of engaging in the elaborate Marxist debate on the relation between *value*, *use-value*, and *exchange-value*, Benjamin introduced the novel concept of *exhibition-value*. Like Marx in *Capital*, Benjamin eschewed the word ‘ideology’ and instead talked about the ‘wish images,’ dreamworlds, and ‘awakenings’ that Susan Buck-Morss discusses in her *The Dialectics of Seeing*.²⁰ Benjamin would have needed the psychoanalytical concept of *social fantasy* – as developed by Žižek moving from the individual level of *psychical reality* – to bring the dimensions of ‘desire’ and the Real into a fully theorized notion of phantasmagoria.

It is one of the most important contributions of psychoanalysis to have problematized the relationship between fantasy and ‘reality,’ moving away from the traditional view of imagination and illusion as obstacles standing in the way of a ‘correct’ perception of the world. In psychoanalysis, as Dylan Evans argues, ‘reality is not seen as an unproblematic given in which there is a single objectively correct way of perceiving, but as something which is itself discursively constructed.’²¹ At the same time, fantasy is seen as an ‘imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfillment of a wish (in the last analysis, an unconscious wish) in a manner that is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes.’²² Hence, the expression ‘psychical reality’ above is not synonymous with ‘inner life’ or ‘internal world.’ As Freud wrote: ‘If we look at unconscious wishes reduced to their fundamental and truest shape, we shall have to conclude, no doubt, that *psychical reality* is a particular form of existence not to be confused with *material reality*.’²³ Even more important, as Evans notes, memory is a critical component of psychic reality inasmuch as ‘memories of past events are continually being reshaped in accordance with unconscious desires, so much so that symptoms originate not in any supposed “objective facts” but in complex dialectic in which fantasy plays a vital role.’²⁴ In this sense, fantasy is the *mise en scène* of unconscious desires, a stage in which what is *prohibited* is always present in the actual formation of the wish.

In ‘The Seven Veils of Fantasy,’ Žižek discusses the workings of fantasy in ideology, challenging the conventional notion of a ‘fantasy-scenario’ that would obfuscate a more objective or unmediated perception of a given situation. A classic example, for a former East European like Žižek, would be when ‘instead of a full rendering of the antagonisms that traverse our society, we indulge in the notion of society as an organic Whole, kept together by forces of solidarity and cooperation.’²⁵ According to Žižek, it is precisely this conventional dualistic notion of fantasy as a way to disguise deep-seated antagonisms and obfuscate ‘the horror of the real’ that Lacan rejects. For the latter ‘cannot be reduced to . . . a fantasy-scenario which obfuscates the true horror of a situation.’²⁶ Instead,

[t]he first, rather obvious thing to add is that the relationship between fantasy and the horror of the real that it conceals, is much more ambiguous than it may seem. Fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same

time it creates what it purports to conceal, namely its “repressed” point of reference. Aren’t the images of the ultimate horrible Thing, from the gigantic deep-sea squid to the ravaging twister, fantasmatic creations par excellence? One should specify the notion of fantasy with a whole series of features.²⁷

Žižek goes on to argue, along the lines of Kant’s ‘transcendental schematism’ that ‘fantasy does not simply realize a desire in a hallucinatory way. [. . .] Fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates, i.e., it literally “teaches us how to desire.”’²⁸

In Marxian-psychoanalytical terms, transposing this thesis to the city would mean understanding how its architecture, as a series of phantasmagorias, acts always and everywhere as ‘an imaginary resolution of society’s real antagonisms’ – and how, therefore, it demands ideological critique. Ultimately, of course, the ‘real antagonism’ that for Žižek is not given to direct experience in a Kantian sense or to the perceptual apparatus of the human sensorium in Benjamin’s sense, is nothing other than *class struggle*. Space is the *place* where ‘class struggle’ happens. Yet this very site is itself an irreducibly heterogeneous field of real phantoms (and phantomatic realities) that are the ‘ultimate support,’ as Žižek puts it, of the critique of ideology. Indeed, according to Žižek, ‘there is no class struggle “in reality”’: “class struggle” designates the antagonism that prevents the objective (social) reality from constituting itself as a self-enclosed whole.’²⁹

[W]hat matters is that the very constitution of social reality involves the “primordial repression” of antagonism, so that the ultimate support of the critique of ideology – the extra-ideological point of reference that authorizes us to denounce the content of our immediate experience as “ideological” – is not “reality” but the “repressed” real antagonism.³⁰

• • •

We now turn to Benjamin’s notion of ‘exhibition-value’ – already briefly touched upon in the context of our discussion of Agamben’s idea of *profanation* – in relation to the commodity’s division into use-value and exchange-value. That division, Marx argued, is what turns the object into a *fetish* and constitutes it as phantasmagoria. If, following Agamben, we regard the ‘spectacle’ as the extreme condition of capitalist commodification, in which ‘everything is exhibited in its separation from itself,’ it follows that ‘spectacle and consumption are – as Agamben puts it – the two sides of a single impossibility of using.’³¹ In this generalized and extreme condition of late capitalist experience, the city becomes pure ‘spectacular exhibition.’ Separated from the sphere of ‘production’ and delivered over to the sphere of *consumption*, the city can no longer be *used* in the sense that Agamben intends. For ‘what cannot be used is, as such, given over to consumption or to spectacular exhibition.’³²

For Agamben, as we have seen, ‘to profane means to return to common use that which has been removed to the sphere of the sacred.’ In the same way that Benjamin discussed it in his ‘Capitalism and Religion,’ in its extreme phase, capitalism, according to Agamben, ‘aims at creating something absolutely unprofaneable.’³³ Its religious core is especially evident, we might add, in its latest and most dogmatic expression in the doctrine of neoliberalism. Agamben further writes: ‘Consumption, which necessarily destroys the thing, is nothing but the impossibility or negation of use, which presupposes that the substance of the thing remains intact (*salva rei substantia*).’³⁴ After historically relating ‘use’ to ‘property’ rights, in contrast with the monastic (Franciscan) conception of use as the ‘highest poverty,’ Agamben turns to the present. He writes:

If, today, consumers in mass society are unhappy, it is not only because they consume objects that have incorporated within themselves their own inability to be used. It is also, and above all, because they believe they are exercising their right to property on these objects, because they have become incapable of profaning them.³⁵

At this point, as noted earlier, Agamben advances a provocative thesis: namely, that ‘*the impossibility of using has its emblematic place in the museum. The museification of the world is today an accomplished fact.*’³⁶ It is important here to underscore Agamben’s particular understanding of this process of museification, since it bears directly on our own thesis of the city structured like a phantasmagoria. Agamben explains:

the spiritual potentiality that defined the people’s lives – art, religion, philosophy, the idea of nature, even politics – have docilely withdrawn into the Museum. “Museum” here is not a given physical space or place but the separate dimension to which what was once – but is no longer – felt true and decisive has moved. In this sense, the museum can coincide with an entire city. [. . .] But more generally, everything today can become a Museum, because this term simply designates the exhibition of an impossibility of using, of dwelling, of experiencing.³⁷

Interestingly, Agamben finds support for his notion the ‘impossibility of using’ in Benjamin’s ‘invention’ of ‘exhibition-value’ in his Artwork essay. He observes that in the Marxian opposition between use-value and exchange-value, exhibition-value figures as a ‘third term’ irreducible to the other two. As he puts it, exhibition value ‘is not use-value, because what is exhibited is, as such, removed from sphere of use; [but it is also] not exchange-value, because it in no way measures any labor power.’³⁸ Benjamin, however, would not have put this concept in exactly these terms. Recall that in the Artwork essay, ‘exhibition-value’ emerged from a particular set of considerations about the decay of ‘aura’ and ‘cult value’ and the invention of photography, and later

film, in the era of technological reproducibility. In the essay's second version, Benjamin used Atget's photographs of Paris streets to explain how:

In Photography, exhibition value begins to drive back cult value on all fronts. But cult value does not give way without resistance. It falls back to a last entrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait is central to early photography. In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge. [. . .] But as the human being withdraws from the photographic image, exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to cult value. To have given this development its habitation constitutes the unique significance of Atget, who, around 1900 took photographs of deserted Paris streets.³⁹

To conclude: if contemporary culture, as some have suggested, has returned the aura back to the object, the exhibition value of such a reinvestment – as we have argued – belongs to phantasmagoria. It reflects the fetish character of the commodity that results from the dialectic of use-value and exchange value. At the same time, however, Agamben's notion of the city as a museum, in which exhibition-value predominates, suggests two basic modalities of the city's interior. The first, in line with the founding metaphor of the Crystal Palace and Sloterdijk's considerations mentioned above, is 'The World Interior of Capital.' The second is simply the World itself as a Museum of the Interior. Both converge in the general idea of the 'Interior of Capital,' in which the driving force of phantasmagoria is remaking the city into a total museum.

Notes

- 1 See Jacques Derrida, *The Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans., Peggy Kamuf, intro., Bernard Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 156.
- 2 Ibid., 158.
- 3 Ibid., 157 (italics in original).
- 4 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 163.
- 5 Ibid., 163–164.
- 6 Ibid., 164.
- 7 Ibid., 165.
- 8 Derrida, op. cit., 150.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Marx, op. cit., 165.
- 11 Derrida, op. cit., 148.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 See Slavoj Žižek, 'The Spectre of Ideology,' in *Mapping Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 20.
- 14 Ibid., 21.

- 15 Ibid. (italics in original).
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid. (italics in original).
- 18 Ibid., 26–27.
- 19 Ibid., 27 (italics in original).
- 20 See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989).
- 21 See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 59.
- 22 See L. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans., Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1973), 314. Here we should mention that the French '*fantasme*' is more philosophically resonant than its German's equivalent, '*Phantasie*,' which refers to a 'specific imaginary production' rather than to the world of phantasy or imaginative activity in general.
- 23 Ibid., 315 (italics in original).
- 24 Evans, op. cit., 60.
- 25 See Slavoj Žižek, 'The Seven Veils of Fantasy,' in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed., Dany Nobus (London: Rebus Press, 1998), 190.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid., 190–191.
- 28 Ibid., 191.
- 29 Žižek, 'The Spectre of Ideology,' op. cit., 21.
- 30 Ibid., 25.
- 31 Giorgio Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation,' in *Profanations*, trans., Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 82.
- 32 Ibid., 82.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid., 83.
- 36 Ibid. (emphasis added).
- 37 Ibid., 83–84.
- 38 Ibid., 90.
- 39 Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility,' in *Selected Writing, Volume 3, 1935–1939*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 108 (italics in original).

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