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## Avenue of atrocities: modern phantasmagorias and the anti-modern

by Günter Gassner

<1>

Among the materials for the 1935 Exposé of the *Arcades Project*: “Toppling of illusionism in the cityscape: perspectives”.<sup>1</sup>

Hausmann the demolition artist opened up nineteenth-century Paris. He created perspectives, new views in perspectives down long, straight and broad streets. These are perspectives, Frisby notes, that are “cleared for all except admirers, spectators and [...] consumers”.<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin recognises Hausmann’s true goal: “to secure the city against civil war. He wanted to make the erection of barricades in the streets of Paris impossible for all time”.<sup>3</sup> Perspectives against radical political change.

Ghostwriting the city – writing the city’s ghosts. Writing against Hausmann’s perspectives and also against the ones designed by Speer. The Avenue of Splendours, a North-South axis that was planned for the capital of the Reich, was closed-off to traffic. It had an underground highway, a not atypical vertical zoning for modern urban planning. It was meant to slow pedestrians down, to give them time to develop deep emotional bonds to the object ahead. For Hitler, Speer’s perspectives are part of “a tonic against the inferiority complex of the German folk”; a necessary intervention “to give self-confidence to the nation”.<sup>4</sup>

Writing haunting memories and unredeemed histories. How can ghostwriting become a process of opening the city to a perspectivism that works against authoritarian rule, against theoretical closure and for open-ended possibility?

Hausmann’s and Speer’s perspectives are nothing like a Baroque perspectivism that is based on Leibnizian monadology. Indeed, the latter is more an antidote for the former. The monad is an urban perspective in which the whole city is expressed but not everything can be distinctively perceived. Leaving Leibniz’s theological presupposition aside, monadology opens a space for radical urban politics that fundamentally challenges what is possible and what is impossible (i.e. what is deemed

to be impossible or, in other words, what is impossible within a compositional whole) in and for a city.<sup>5</sup>

No closed totality, no harmony exists: the revolutionary use value of perspectivism.

## <2>

Ghostwriting the racialised, capitalist city – rubbing against Benjamin’s attempt to write the prehistory of modernity with an emphasis on the transformation of a culture of production to one of consumption. Writing the city as a literary montage: a process of de-contextualisation and juxtaposition of seemingly incongruent elements. Ideas do not “fuse into harmony”.<sup>6</sup> Fragments are put next to each other to work against compositional wholeness. A technique of juxtaposition as we find it in the film and in the phantasmagoria.

In the nineteenth century, ‘phantasmagoria’ described a magic lantern show as well as a psychological experience in which “the distinction between subject and objective conditions breaks down”.<sup>7</sup> Phantasmagoria as a capitalist experience – the experience of a commodity-producing society that surrounds itself “with pomp and splendour”.<sup>8</sup> The term refers to the experience of a working class that does not recognise itself as a class (as the object and subject of the revolution) but as potential buyers and as a mass of individuals that wants and will be entertained.

The phantasmagoria was invented by the Belgian physicist and stage magician Étienne-Gaspard Robertson in post-revolutionary eighteenth-century Paris, as a lantern show that projected for its spectators a parade of ghosts. Robertson’s aim was not to merely scare spectators but to “exorcize the demonic power of the revolutionary memories haunting Parisian imagination”.<sup>9</sup> The phantasmagoria as the final closure of revolutionary actions?

## <3>

In his late work on the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin aims to show that “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”.<sup>10</sup> He understands not only world exhibitions, department stores, or modern interiors as phantasmagorias, but the superstructure itself. Ideology as phantasmagoria, as an experience of mystification. Phantasmagoria as the way in which a commodity-producing society “represents itself and thinks to understand itself whenever it abstracts from the fact that it produces precisely commodities”.<sup>11</sup>

The superstructure is not a *reflection* of the objective world but it is “the objective world’s *expression*, its representation as it is mediated through imaginative subjective processes.”<sup>12</sup> Phantasmagoria does

not refer to “subjective errors of perception”, but to fantasies and illusions that “rehearse how people perceive daily the contents of their social worlds”.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, phantasmagoria is also an illumination. As a result of changing one’s perspective (as Blanqui did when he looked at astral bodies), the final phantasmagoria reveals the phantasmagoria of phantasmagorias: “the image of progress [...] turns out to be the phantasmagoria of history itself”.<sup>14</sup> An illumination for a century that was “incapable of responding to the new technological possibilities with a new social order”.<sup>15</sup> It turns out that everything that seems to be new has always been present. The “ever-new face of the commodity that is created in new fashions and in advertising hides the ever-same reproduction of exchange values”.<sup>16</sup>

Still, phantasmagoria operates “not only in a theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition, but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence”.<sup>17</sup> Phantasmagoria as ideas about and ways of valuing the racialised, capitalist city, and phantasmagoria also as a direct, sensual engagement with the here and now.

#### <4>

Temporal distance is the prerequisite for a study of the prehistory of modernity. In a letter to Scholem in 1931, Benjamin mentions just how important the immediate spatial surrounding for his intellectual production is. At that point, he cannot even move to East or North Berlin and has to stay in “Berlin W. WW if you wish” because the “‘most modern’ culture” in West West Berlin “belongs not only to my private comfort but is also, in part, precisely the means of my production”.<sup>18</sup>

Why was Benjamin not accepting to move to New York until it was too late? The head office of the Institute for Social Research was located there since 1934. If Paris was the capital of the nineteenth century, New York was and is the capital of global finance.

How can relationships between nineteenth- and twentieth-century “[d]ream houses of the collective”, between arcades, panoramas, railroad stations and modern skyscrapers be described?<sup>19</sup>

In anticipation of perhaps moving to New York eventually, Benjamin gives an essay on Baudelaire the title ‘Central Park’. Its form is not like the juxtaposition of fragments in the *Arcades Project*. There are hardly any direct quotes in the former. It consists of 45 sections (numbered 1 to 45), each of which includes up to eight extremely short paragraphs. In its “contingent, disorderly, obsessive and repetitive” form, it mixes reflections on Baudelaire with theoretical and methodological concerns.<sup>20</sup> ‘Central Park’ is a *sequence* of fragments: continuities are constructed that allow for discontinuities. A mental change of location from Paris to New York that allows even for some linearity in the text.

While the *Arcades Project* “is the vast, sprawling, disorderly historical metropolis; *Central Park* is the clearing at its center”.<sup>21</sup> ‘Central Park’ opens perspectives from within the city. Walking along the crooked paths that warp views, these are perspectives that estrange the city and reveal its gaps and rifts. New perspectives on the cityscape and its skyscrapers.

#### <5>

The New York skyline is the modern skyline. In his prehistory of metropolitan urbanism, Koolhaas identifies The Great Exhibition held in 1851 in the Crystal Palace in London as an “inspiring example” for Manhattan’s ambition.<sup>22</sup>

Metropolitan urbanism implies a culture of congestion that is defined by fragmentation. Each urban block is a single structure, each building represents a “different ideology”, and each floor arranges “new and exhilarating human activities in unprecedented combinations”.<sup>23</sup>

Before passing its first zoning laws in 1916, which described for each block an imaginary envelope defining the maximum allowable construction, New York represented the laissez-faire model of skyscraper development. The city imposed “no restrictions on the height or lot coverage of structures other than tenements”.<sup>24</sup>

What limited building height in the first couple of years of the twentieth century was not a lack of imagination and increasingly less technical constraints, but the logic of highest rate on the money invested. At some point “the law of diminishing returns sets in, and rents for the additional stories do not cover costs. Taller buildings need extra foundations, bracing, and mechanical systems, but by far, the greatest price of height lies in the requirements of efficient vertical circulation. While elevators are expensive to build and operate (especially with attendants), their major cost accrues in the large amounts of space consumed by shafts”.<sup>25</sup>

Technological progress allows buildings to grow up right through the sky. The New York skyline is both a reflection and an expression of modernity. The materialisation of a myth of modernity: a belief in progress, taking technical progress as standing in for progress for humanity itself. Is this a modern phantasmagoric politics “whose basis is the identification of industrialization with progress”?<sup>26</sup>

#### <6>

As Benjamin flees from Nazi Germany, he does not include fragments about the concept of race, racial hierarchies, or the entanglement of racism and capitalism in his work. Yet, fascism’s revolutionary conservatism, its anti-modern modernism is the standpoint from which he constructs his

prehistory of modernity. And it is one that is relevant for our own position, given the surge of authoritarian tendencies and the rise of right-wing extremism around the globe.

In 1935, the Nazis found the new discipline of systematic spatial planning. After his failed career as commissioner for the German Reich Settlement (*Reichssiedlungskommissar*), Gottfried Feder gets appointed Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the Technical University in Berlin. There he develops modern technocratic urban planning ideas and the diagram of *Die neue Stadt* [The new city], which he puts in opposition to a liberalism that he identifies in a city like New York: the “soulless chessboard system of the American giant cities and the completely haphazard urban expansion of the liberalist epoch must be overcome”.<sup>27</sup>

The modern in the new city: Through technological progress, “modern expectations on a community, where every human being is an equitable and viable part of the whole ethnic community” can be answered.<sup>28</sup> Not a modern city but a city with a modern city hall, modern public baths, modern hospitals, modern sanatoriums, modern car workshops. A new city as the result of a “modern approach to urban planning”.<sup>29</sup>

#### <7>

The new in the new city: a city that is designed “in the spirit of the new era” with a “new will of the community”.<sup>30</sup> The new city has no skyscrapers, it has no rectangular grid, no culture of congestion. It has a concentric logic or, rather, it is polycentric, a further development of Theodor Fritsch’s *Die Stadt der Zukunft* [The city of the future] from 1896.<sup>31</sup> It is a small city for only 20,000 inhabitants that is part of a new order of the German *Lebensraum*. The “spiritual conversion of the nation out of the chaos of liberalist thinking to a new idea of community”.<sup>32</sup> The creation of a “new community spirit” with the help of a “new science of a new art of urban planning” on the basis of “new basic ideological ideas”.<sup>33</sup>

The new city is a self-contained organism: a city that grows “organically out of the social structure of the population”, inspired by “the harmony and inner order of a well-grown human being or other well-formed living being”, and closed to international migration and migration from the countryside because “[o]pen cities are a huge threat to urban design and city planning”.<sup>34</sup>

The new city is a communitarian city: “The basic principle is based on the fact that a number of smallest communities are grouped together in one group and this group is reunited into groups of a higher order, etc. Grouping street communities into a sub-core, sub-cores into a core, cores into the city”.<sup>35</sup> The new city is the NSDAP: “Since the structure is quite organic, there is a striking resemblance to the structure of the party”.<sup>36</sup>

No anti-Semitic statements, no claims for racial hierarchies, only a glorification of Hitler. The new city is an expression of the city after race but not after racialisation. In the new city, race is not an issue anymore because racial hierarchies only exist elsewhere, outside its borders, outside the German *Lebensraum*. The Jewish question has been answered.

The new city is a phantasmagoria of modern society: a racist society that is able to abstract from the fact that it is racist.

### <8>

Modern phantasmagoria as the “lived experience on the part of a class that does not recognize itself as a class but a mass”.<sup>37</sup> Anti-modern modern phantasmagoria as the lived experience on the part of a class that does not recognise itself as a class but as a *Volks-gemeinschaft*, i.e. as a unity that combines all classes, that is supposed to overcome all class struggle and thus classes themselves.

Anti-modern is not the opposite of modern, nor is it pre-modern or post-modern. Anti-modern is the phantasmagorical – both distorting and illuminating – element that is folded into the modern. Through its opposition, the anti-modern remains tied to the modern.

Benjamin should have moved to New York.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin (2002) *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p. 905.

<sup>2</sup> David Frisby (2013) *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin*. Abingdon: Routledge, p. 244.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Hitler in Deyan Sudjic (2006) *The Edifice Complex: How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World*. London: Penguin Books, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Günter Gassner (2020) *Ruined Skylines: Aesthetics, Politics and London's Towering Cityscape*. London: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> Cameron McEwan (2022) Ghostwriting an authorship without aura, *Lo squaderno* 62: 9-12, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Cohen (1995) *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 219.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, p. 234.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 669 [X13a].

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, p. 240.

<sup>13</sup> Esther Leslie (2000) *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*. London: Pluto Press, p. 106.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

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- <sup>16</sup> Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, 254.
- <sup>17</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 14.
- <sup>18</sup> Benjamin in Esther Leslie (2007) *Walter Benjamin*. London: Reaktion Books, p. 116.
- <sup>19</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 405 [L1,3].
- <sup>20</sup> Lloyd Spencer (1985) Introduction to Central Park, *German Critique* 34: 28-31, p. 29.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- <sup>22</sup> Rem Koolhaas (1994) *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. New York: The Monacelli Press, p. 23.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- <sup>24</sup> Carol Willis (1995) *Form follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, p. 34.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45f.
- <sup>26</sup> Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, p. 119.
- <sup>27</sup> Gottfried Feder (1939) *Die neue Stadt: Versuch der Begründung einer neuen Stadtplanungskunst aus der sozialen Struktur der Bevölkerung*. Berlin: Springer Verlag, p. 479.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 472 (all translations are by the author).
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- <sup>31</sup> Theodor Fritsch (1896) *Die Stadt der Zukunft*. Leipzig: Verlag von Theodor Fritsch.
- <sup>32</sup> Feder, *Die neue Stadt*, p. 18.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 3.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2, 8.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.
- <sup>37</sup> Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, p. 193.