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Occupied Space: The Bodies of Walter Benjamin's Aquarium Humain

"In order to understand the arcades from the ground up, we sink them into the deepest stratum of the dream."¹ The divagations of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* take place in the phenomenological field between corporeality and the dream. *The Arcades Project* is the turning of the optics of the dream towards the waking world; the project itself is part of this dream—a montage of concealed, latent thoughts still slumbering in history's womb with only the ability to suggest what it might have become. The constellation of the project bears the immediate sense of dislocation and distress. There is always a distance between the present and the historical, empiricism and the dream, Benjamin and the arcade. But they are always connected, by a debt owed to the Surrealists, by the *vague de rêves*. Just as Louis Aragon, sauntering through the Passage de l'Opera, was pulled by a wave of dreams into strange, unglimped realms of the Real, so Benjamin wanted to submerge himself in hitherto ignored and scorned reaches of history and to salvage what no one had seen before him. There should be no general leave taking of the Surrealist vocabulary which offers the most direct index into Benjamin's arcades in the state of their eventual decay. It is also here that we should find the leitmotif of this destined magnum opus. The nearly depopulated *aquarium humain*, as Aragon describes the Passage de l'Opera to be in its final moments before the ultimate completion of the Boulevard Haussmann, is the emphatic appearance of history's ruin, Benjamin's dialectical fairyland, and the central image of his project.

¹ [F°, 34]

When Benjamin writes of an architectonic Paris, it is always of a Paris that he himself can never enter; when he writes of the sensorium of the *flâneur* in the arcades, he writes from his desk at the *Bibliothèque nationale* of the arcades which have ceased to exist and which he could not possibly occupy. I abuse the term architectonic here intentionally with aims upon the Kantian schema which Benjamin so clearly defies. “These experiences are by no means limited to dreams, hours of hashish eating or opium smoking. It is a cardinal error to believe that, of ‘Surrealist experiences’ we know only the religious ecstasies or the ecstasies of drugs...But the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a *profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give a preliminary lesson.”² And thus Benjamin, always from a distance, illuminates a world in Aragon’s arcades, Haussmann’s boulevards, Baudelaire’s Second Empire, and Hugo’s Paris.

The arcade can only be constituted in this project through the paradox of the sensory experience of abstract knowledge, of “dead facts—as something experienced and lived through,”³ of mimetic ability as experience. Experience, therefore, always lies at the strong nexus that links abstracted cognition and mimesis, and relies upon a faculty for perceiving the nonsensuous. This bears an interesting implication upon the body whereby it has to be understood as unrepresentable while at once being the gravitas of the revolutionary project. Benjamin does not devote a convolute to the human body, less a complete text. In this sense, the human body is always an abstraction in Benjamin’s writing. But abstraction in its most general form implies—rather, asserts—the fundamental ontology of a lower-order idea. It is this

² Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 208.

³ [e°, 1]

absence-as-presence of embodiment that departs so radically from Marxist theory. Even where subjectivity and consciousness dissolves, the human body stands firmly within the trappings of the city.

This, in fact, is one of Adorno's central criticisms of Benjamin's perceived lack of dialectics in the body. He writes to Benjamin,

“For all those points in which, despite our most fundamental and concrete agreement in other matters, I differ from you could be summed up and characterized as an anthropological materialism that I cannot accept. It is as if for you the human body represents the measure of all concreteness.”⁴

The issue, it seems, for Adorno is Benjamin's reliance (whether or not this equates to faith is uncertain) on the human body's ability to act as the vector of revolutionary forces. Therein Adorno poses an equivalence between the corporeality of the flesh and a lack of dialectics.

“Anthropological materialism,” as the generalized term for the concreteness of the body, is for Adorno, undialectical. It is this understanding, or perhaps misunderstanding, of the body from which we must start, because Benjamin is rather explicit in his notes. Benjamin significantly remarks, “The anthropological materialism is comprised within the dialectical.”⁵

The fundamental disagreement here, it seems, concerns the imprecise function of what is termed “anthropological”. It is curious that Benjamin should adopt this designation of humankind, loosely, to parameterize the object rather than to take from the philosophic tradition with which he was certainly well-acquainted. There is implicit something of not a synthesis of the traditional dualistic conception of body and soul but a dismissal of any possible distinction.

⁴ Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940* (Harvard University Press, 2001), 147.

⁵ [U12, 4].

Using a set of vocabulary that evokes the “living” body—rhythms, gestures, sensualisms beyond ‘subject’ and ‘object’—Benjamin treats the body as an enigma with, if not the capacity to produce historical differences, a set of entropic energies.

Perhaps the most vivid account of the coordinates of the body are gleaned from the stark contrast drawn between the fragments devoted to the figures of the wax museum as opposed to the—perhaps overdetermined—act of vacating the bodies of urban life from the scenes drawn by Hugo, Baudelaire, and Balzac. Benjamin—perhaps most notably because he elaborates on these ideas in standalone essays— identifies in and takes from Baudelaire the alienated individual. Mediated through a reading of Baudelaire, the individual remains as subject. “At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through [them] in rapid succession,” pedestrians have to stare in all directions “in order to keep abreast of traffic signals.”⁶ Though rapidly loosening, the individual maintains a grip on some semblance of (nervous) emotion.

The question of individuality and individual consciousness in the Marxist imaginary of collective action and revolution is, of course, widely represented. The theoretical inquiry into the place for subjects and subjecthood in Marxist thought became the foundation for existential Marxism in postwar European society. The question can perhaps be phrased as such: if it is neither a sociality outside of ourselves, nor the Spirit, nor collective consciousness, then what is, for Marx, the motivating force of the dialectic? In neither Marx nor Benjamin is there a subject in history. Popular allusions to subjectivity or the lack thereof, in Benjamin, commonly turn to the example of Edgar Allan Poe’s *Man in the Crowd*, co-opted by the generalized image of Benjamin’s *flâneur*. The *flâneur* is vested with the task of allegorizing the body of the mass,

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 172.

giving it structure, and deciphering its assemblage of constituent parts. The *flâneur* is the dialectician of mass individualism. The flâneur's objectifying gaze, however, never perceives the mass as a political agent. He does not interpret his ambiguous relationship to the mass as the reflection of socio-economical antagonisms and is therefore fundamentally unable to understand it. The flâneur, even as dialectician, is not the vehicle of history.

The flâneur, constituted as both member and observer of the crowd, puts an emphasis on the interpersonal dimension of the relations of the crowd. The virtual distinction between crowd-mass and interpersonal-intersubjective is that which makes discernable the flâneur, who abandons himself to the phantasmagoria of the marketplace where man only appears to him as types. The flâneur's relationship to his object is deeply ambivalent: his distanced attitude is mingled with strong affects of fascination and repulsion. The crowd appears only to him as an object of knowledge and of contemplation—a knowledge which constantly escapes the flâneur's scrutiny. The inaccessibility of the crowd is paradoxically conditioned by its absolute availability; it is the abstract outline of a body that escapes closure and escapes the flâneur's many attempts to shape this body into the body of a mass. While this remains a scene without a subject—a shapeless body—there are, situated around it, objects in production in this systemic space. The flâneur as body-without-a-subject, while failing to produce the body of resistance, does clearly have productive capability. The body of the flâneur, with its various energies, produces space. Assuredly, this production is not to be understood as a literal generative act; rather it is to denote an immediate relationship between the body and its space, between the flâneur's deployment in space and the fact of its occupation of space.

The capitalist production of objectified space is countered with body-centered spatial practices that can arguably take any form, as they emerge out of contingency. This is the

ambiguity that makes possible the urban wandering of the flâneur. This also provides some relief to the vague reference to the *ánthrōpos* of anthropological materialist methodology. What the “body” means is never clarified in Benjamin’s constellation of jottings. Not referring to the biological body, it becomes instead an elusive synonym for a set of spatial and temporal practices that produce what Benjamin describes, variously and amongst others, as “awakening,” “anamnestic,” “intoxicated,” and “precipitous.”⁷ The temporal dimension of the body is central to his conceptualization of the flâneur, for it implies repetition, dispersal, and dissemination extending from the body. “Rather than pass the time, one must invite it in. To pass the time (to kill time, expel it): the gambler. Time spills from his every pore—*To store time as a battery stores energy: the flâneur.*”⁸ The body, not just automaton, becomes central to the ebbing of time—to history.

Highlighting the indistinguishability of the flâneur’s production of space—its ambiguous status between resistance and perpetuation— Benjamin is already mapping the emergence of a mutative system, albeit without a (proper) name. The text is a performative theorization of not only a capitalist affect, but also the emergence of phenomenology—a method of inquiry that unravels the human sensorium as the torsion of interiorities and exteriorities, wherein lies the desires, anxieties, ambivalences, and potential strategies of resistance toward an invisible totality called Capital.

The body, as described thus far, is a phenomenological relation—claims about determinism and agency without. The phenomenology of embodiment contains within it the dialect of alienation and emancipation. It is interesting to note that the terms of this dialect, while

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 879.

⁸ [D3, 4]

Marxian itself, are asymmetrical. Semiotically, alienation is not the natural negation or contradiction of emancipation. Alienation-emancipation are not brought together in natural accordance with the terms of thesis-antithesis. That they exist in dialectical relation is made possible, and made legible, only while mediated by the body—the body that is transformed in the late Marxian hybridization of man and machine. The body of the worker is at once what makes possible the formulation of this dialectic and what the dialectician must set out to recover. All of this once again returns the body to an ambivalent relation, if only through slightly different means. The body is the force behind the dialectic—that which motivates it—but what must be resolved in the dialectic is the body's phenomenological relation with matter; that is, whether the body is an agent of praxis. The point here is not to resolve this paradox, but to advance, through it, towards the definition of the supposed body.

If in one treatment in the *Arcades* Benjamin alludes to the reification which makes legible the Marxian dialectic, it is in his reading of Victor Hugo, and specifically, of *Les Misérables*. If *The Arcades Project* has an unsung hero, it is Victor Hugo. On the whole, this connection between Benjamin and Hugo rests largely ignored. Benjamin's widely overlooked attraction to Hugo is often always overshadowed by the former's completed writings on Charles Baudelaire and as well, though to a lesser extent, his inherited thoughts on Honoré de Balzac. Much of the surrounding scholarship remains subscribed to Benjamin's conception of Baudelaire as a modern poet of the decay and the artist of urban detritus. But if Baudelaire is the writer of modern life, Hugo is the writer of Paris. Out of Hugo's oeuvre, *Les Misérables* receives the most attention in Benjamin's text.

Benjamin quotes Hugo in the *Arcades*, “‘Cities, like forests, have their dens in which all their vilest and most terrible monsters hide’.”⁹ He continues to invest in this motif of the forest when he explicates more fully in *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, “‘With the crowd, nature exercises its fundamental rights over the city. But it is not nature alone which exercises its rights in this way. There is an astonishing place in *Les Misérables* where the web of the woods appears as the archetype of mass existence.’”¹⁰ In Hugo, Benjamin identifies the crowd as a bastardized body—a chimeric form—which mystic superhuman powers create from “those below human beings.”¹¹ There exist incredible resonances between the two, particular where thought arises from an ambivalent place between demystification and the drive towards the mystic. As *The Arcades Project* unfolds as a series of contradictions, the thematic project eventually reaches a point—in Hugo—where contradiction ceases. There is Hugo, and there is nothing else. Victor Hugo is Benjamin’s bourgeois ideologue par excellence.

“For the crowd really is a spectacle of nature— if one may apply the term to social conditions. A street, a conflagration, or a traffic accident assemble people who are not defined along class lines. They present themselves as concrete gatherings, but socially they remain abstract— namely, in their isolated private interests. Their models are the customers who, each in his private interest, gather at the market around their 'common cause'. In many cases, such gatherings have only a statistical existence.”¹² This existence of collective man in Hugo conceals the monstrous fact of this type of gathering, that it coalesces only by the coincidence of their

⁹ [L5, 4]

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire.” In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 4: 1938–1940* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 36.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 62.

¹² *Ibid*, 62.

private interests—that is, the accident of the market economy.¹³ This appears to Benjamin as the realist brilliance of Hugo, the uneasy conflagration of the bourgeois spirit world and revolutionary speculation.

It is especially noteworthy in light of these characterizations (and of popular characterizations) of Hugo’s works—*Les Misérables* certainly—that evoke the strong imagery of crowds from the Parisian underbelly, that Benjamin’s *Les Misérables* is completely vacant of the human image. In very unintuitive fashion, Benjamin takes the miscreants, and toilers that underscore the physiognomic dimension of revolt and social movement, nor the novel’s philosophical digressions.¹⁴ What Benjamin notes and, in some instances directly transcribes, from *Les Misérables* are instead what might function as documentary images.

“Thirty years ago...it was still...virtually the sewer it had been in ancient times. A very large number of streets, whose surface is now crowned, were then hollow causeways. You very often saw, at the low point where the gutters of a street or a square terminated, large rectangular gratings with great bars, the iron of which shone, polished by the feet of the multitude, dangerous and slippery for wagons, and making horses stumble...In 1832, in many streets...the old Gothic cloaca still cynically showed its jaws. They were enormous, sluggish gaps of stone, sometimes surrounded by stone blocks, displaying monumental effrontery’.”¹⁵

Similarly, he extracts the images of subterranean cellars:

¹³ Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire.” In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 4: 1938–1940* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 63.

¹⁴ [d7a, 2]

¹⁵ [P4a, 1]

“‘There was, at the Chatelet de Paris, a broad long cellar. This cellar was eight feet deep below the level of the Seine. It had neither windows nor ventilators. The cellar had for a ceiling a stone arch, and for a floor, ten inches of mud...Eight feet above the floor, a long massive beam crossed this vault from side to side; from this beam there hung, at intervals, chains...and at the end of these chains there were iron collars’.”¹⁶

Benjamin makes the rare unmediated remark, even, that “Hugo, in *Les Miserables*, has provided an amazing description of the Faubourg Saint-Marceau.”¹⁷ He goes on to reproduce a note from Paul Bourget in an obituary notice at the time of Hugo’s death:

“‘Apropos of Victor Hugo's ‘command of image. The few insights we have into his methods of composition confirm that the faculty of interior evocation was much stronger in him than in other people. This is why he was able—from memory, and without taking any notes—to describe the *quartier* of Paris through which Jean Valjean escapes in *Les Miserables*; and this description is strictly accurate, street by street, house by house’.”¹⁸

Notes of this nature are plentiful and almost all recorded as direct quotations from Hugo’s work without the intervention of Benjamin’s own commentary. The convolutes organized under the aegis of “Subterranean Paris”, in fact, overwhelmingly derive from Hugo’s written descriptions of the city. Benjamin does not extract the lackeys, beggars, and convicts from Hugo’s realist cast—he chooses only the near-photographic captures of Paris without a glimpse of Hugo’s miscreant characters in sight. From Hugo, Benjamin creates images of deserted

¹⁶ [C5a, 1]

¹⁷ [M3a, 6]

¹⁸ [P3, 6]

Parisian streets that seemingly separate the material existence of the world from any presence of a human subject.

In this gesture we see Benjamin the surrealist. If we consider this Benjaminian curation of Hugo's Paris as metaphorically photographic, they are typical of the salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings typical of surrealist photography. The image relinquishes any intimate relation between the human figure and the surroundings it inhabits, altering the relation between the human and the material world, and emancipates the material object from the human subject. Benjamin chooses, very deliberately, this confrontation with images of urban landscape from which the human subject is absent. But what these vacancies serve is paradoxically not a dismissal of human action and agency. These eerily deserted cityscapes, which are as much about urban matter as they accentuate the absence of the human figure, indicate that matter is "something must in fact be built up, something artificial, posed."¹⁹ In other words, it figures the phenomenological role of the human through a resounding presence-in-absence.

The phenomenological role or capacity indicated here—it should be clarified—does not center the human on its subjectivity. Deviating little from Marx himself, Benjamin's interpretation of the philosophy of praxis is as well a history without a subject. In light of this, the centripetal force of these surrealist 'photographs' of Hugo's city are palpably tense. They are not centerless, to be sure, because the absence of the figure puts emphases on the phenomenological production of matter, not its idealist origins. If not the subject at the center, what steps in at the center that organizes the perceptual field? This, I argue, at the center of the Benjaminian world of object matter, is the embodied human.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 526.

The revolutionary body without a subject of history is not necessarily antagonistic to reality. At the same time that its insights are trapped to experiential parameters, neither should this body be used to simply reclaim the sensuous human being that Marx describes in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. While the Benjaminian body cannot reconcile itself with the emerging bourgeoisie, it bears the signature of the lifestyle of the rising class. This is a vision of a body fundamentally embodied and without the traditional dualistic conception that dispelled the body from the mind into the abyss of the object world. There exists a strong and immediate unity between interior consciousness and immanent present of the lived body that differs immensely from the postmodern conception of a mindless body.

The present-in-absence body in Aragon's *aquarium humain* materializes at the intersection between individual life and historical process. This should not be confused with the personal body. The body-as-leitmotif is singular but it very much so escapes perceptual faculty. It is the presence that is verifiably felt in the images of a deserted Paris cityscape yet cannot be seen in Benjamin's reading of *Les Misérables*. The conception of this body which sees the empty *aquarium humain* but which cannot be seen is an oxymoronic simultaneity of diffusiveness and singularity—that is, the body is human but it is linked to a distant limitless order.

The image of the body as such, which discreetly finds itself observing the *aquarium humain*, the empty streets, the ruined arcades presents a picture of mankind wildly different than that composed in the crowd. The body, as has been noted, has valences of both the transcendent and the singular. Yet, the nature of this transcendent order in which it oxymoronicly manifests individually is left unclear, though it might be concluded that this bond formed being the body and the 'transcendental' is not political, else the problem of unifying politics and ethics would

cease to be a Marxist problem of history. If the multiplication of this body is ultimately what populates the crowd, what then binds these bodies together?

Returning to the apolitical notion of mass allows Benjamin to overcome the conceptualization of collective agents as collective subjects. The premise of this protocol relies necessarily on several earlier formulations. There is the importance of the Parisian metropolis, a capital metropolis—the very *capital* of the nineteenth century. Founded upon this urban scene is the conceptual body that inhabits it. This is the contour of the genealogy of the flâneur, which takes from this scene a series of reactions that come together to define a corporeal body without subjectivity. This is not an expression of melancholia or an undialectical way of renouncing faith in the collective physis, Adorno seems to suspect when he labels Benjamin's theorization of the body as an anthropological materialism. It is precisely that these bodies nearly veer towards the depiction of automaton, so devoid of subjective consciousness that they are vulnerable— and not rigidly ontological as Adorno understands it—and paradoxically able to act historically as a collective agent. For Paris to have fallen into the dream of the nineteenth century, Benjamin invokes the imagery of contagion. It is through this same model of diffusion, that while has not been able to wake these bodies from their collective dream, remains as the singular mechanism which is understood to be able to generate collective action.

It is only in their disappearance from the *aquarium humain* and the Paris of *Les Misérables* that these bodies can furnish their own identities. As such, it is not that Benjamin falls back on an undialectical ontology of the body, an exasperated confidence in the sensuous subject as historical agent, or allegorizing a revolutionary, monolithic mass. The ambivalence of the *Arcades* notes towards an unnamed, unmentioned revolution points inwardly instead to the only empirically knowable entity in these fragments, which is the truth of the body observing

these phenomena of nineteenth century Paris. It is not paradox that the bourgeoisie Hausmannization of Paris conceives of these bodies as monolithic entities capable of threatening the capitalist order whilst from inside the crowd and inside the mass, these bodies are nothing but unstable, subjectless objects far from realizing themselves as political agents. They are asymmetrical, centerless bodies bound together in the absence of a normative schema.

While *The Arcades Project* remains ambivalent about the terms of phantasmagoria and awakening and the prospect of the individual is synthesizing these dialectical terms, the core of Benjamin's observations, if not theorizations, in these fragmented notes resides in an ability to realize an embodied center of gravity. This is perhaps as far as Benjamin's conception of the body can be taken; certainly well short of the humanist model that Adorno disdains to be undialectical ontology. It is not a body that organizes the world from its position. It is not anthropocentric, privileged, or emancipatory; it is a completely disintegrated sense of embodiment that haunts the ruins of the arcades, Aragon's vacated *aquarium humain*, Hugo's emptied out streets irreconcilable with both an organicist structure of the individual and the sublated notion of the ego as separating self and object. The anthropological materialism that Adorno takes issue with is not born of an undue faith in the agency of the human body, but on the phenomenological appreciation of the disrupted boundary between body and world—individual and collective. Benjamin makes room, not for the bourgeois humanist subject and not for a promised subject of the revolution, who is constituted by the ensemble of historical relations. Benjamin makes room for what humans may yet become.

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