

**Warped Space**

**Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture**

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## Preface

Folds, blobs, nets, skins, diagrams: all words that have been employed to describe theoretical and design procedures over the last decade, and that have rapidly replaced the cuts, rifts, faults, and negations associated with deconstruction, which had previously displaced the types, signs, structures, and morphologies of rationalism. The new vocabulary has something to do with contemporary interest in the *informe*; it seems to draw its energies from a rereading of Bataille and a new interest in Deleuze and Guattari; its movies of choice would perhaps be *Crash* before *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix* before *Brazil*; its favorite reading might take in Burroughs (but no longer Gibson), Žižek (but maybe not Derrida). The representative forms of this by now strong tendency are complex and curved, smooth and intersecting, polished and translucent, thin and diagrammatic. Both the new vocabulary and its materializations intersect with and take many of their techniques from digital technology; indeed many of the projected and built designs would be unrealizable, if not unimaginable, without it. They are words and forms conceived and manipulated in a virtual space, with, nevertheless, an intimate relationship to production techniques and the technology of materials. Such a relationship would be impossible without the digital interface that constructs information, theoretical and practical, according to the same rules of representation and replication.

The terms and forms of this new tendency take their place, however, no matter how unprecedented they may seem, within a particular modernist genealogy, on which they draw for their imagery as well as their philosophy. A common concern for space albeit defined in an entirely different manner from that of the first avant-gardes, and a similarly shared registration of the after-effects of psychology and psychoanalysis, provide a historical continuity with early twentieth-century developments. The intersection of spatial thought

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## Metropolitan Montage

### The City as Film in Kracauer, Benjamin, and Eisenstein

The street in the extended sense of the word is not only the arena of fleeting impressions and chance encounters but a place where the flow of life is bound to assert itself. Again one will have to think mainly of the city street with its ever-moving anonymous crowds. The kaleidoscopic sights mingle with unidentified shapes and fragmentary visual complexes and cancel each other out, thereby preventing the onlooker from following up any of the innumerable suggestions they offer. What appears to him are not so much sharp-contoured individuals engaged in this or that definable pursuit as loose throngs of sketchy, completely indeterminate figures. Each has a story, yet the story is not given. Instead, an incessant flow of possibilities and near-intangible meanings appears. This flow casts its spell over the *flâneur* or even creates him. The *flâneur* is intoxicated with life in the street—life eternally dissolving the patterns which it is about to form.

Siegfried Kracauer, "Once Again the Street"<sup>1</sup>

#### The Lure of the Street: Kracauer

From the mid-twenties on, critics increasingly denounced what they saw as the purely decorative and staged characteristics of the expressionist film in favor of a more direct confrontation with the "real." If, as Panofsky asserted, "the unique and specific possibilities of film" could be "defined as *dynamization of space* and, accordingly, *spatialization of time*," then it was the lens of the camera, and not any distorted set, that inculcated a sense of motion in the static spectator, and thence a mobilization of space itself: "Not only do bodies move in space, but space itself does, approaching, receding, turning, dissolving and

For this, however, film had no need of an artificially constructed "decor" that simulated the foreshortening of perspective or the phobic characteristics of space: the framings and movements of the camera itself would serve to construct reality far more freely. In his later 1934 essay on "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," Panofsky himself argued against any attempt to subject the world to "aesthetic prestylization, as in the expressionist settings of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*," as "no more than an exciting experiment." "To prestylize reality prior to tackling it amounts to dodging the problem," he concluded: "The problem is to manipulate and shoot unstylized reality in such a way that the result has style."<sup>25</sup>

recrystallizing as it appears through the controlled locomotion and focusing of the camera and through the cutting and editing of the various shots."<sup>2</sup> And this led to the inevitable conclusion that the proper medium of the movies was not the idealization of reality, as in the other arts, but "physical reality as such."<sup>3</sup> Marcel Camé's frustrated question "When will the cinema go down into the street," calling for an end to artifice and the studio set and a confrontation of the "real" as opposed to the "constructed" Paris, was only one of a number of increasingly critical attacks on the architectural set in the early thirties.<sup>4</sup>

Among the most rigorous of the new realists, Siegfried Kracauer, himself a former architect, was consistent in his arguments against the "decorative" and artificial, and in favor of the critical vision of the real that film allowed. From his first experience of film as a pre-World War I child to his last theoretical work on film published in 1960, Kracauer found the street to be both site and vehicle for his social criticism. Recalling the first film he saw as a boy, entitled significantly enough "Film as the Discoverer of the Marvels of Everyday Life," Kracauer remembered being thrilled by the sight of "an ordinary suburban street, filled with lights and shadows which transfigured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house facades and a piece of sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the facades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle—this image has never left me."<sup>5</sup> For Kracauer, the aesthetic of film was first and foremost material, not purely formal, and was essentially suited to the recording of the fleeting, the temporally transient, the momentary impression—that is, the modern—a quality that made the "street" in all its manifestations an especially favored subject matter. If the snapshot stressed the random and the fortuitous, then its natural development in the motion picture camera was "partial to the least permanent components of our environment," rendering "the street in the broadest sense of the word" the place for chance encounters and social observation.<sup>6</sup> But for this to work as a truly critical method of observation and recording, the street would first have to be offered up as an "unstaged reality"; what Kracauer considered film's "declared preference for nature in the raw" was easily defeated by artificiality and "staginess," whether the staged "drawing brought to life" of *Caligari* or the more filmic staging of montage, panning, and camera movement. Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, of 1926, was an example of this latter kind of staging, where "a film of unsurpassable staginess"

was partially redeemed by the way in which crowds were treated "and rendered through a combination of long shots and close shots which provide exactly the kind of random impressions we would receive were we to witness this spectacle in reality."<sup>7</sup> Yet for Kracauer, the impact of the crowd images was obviated by the architectural settings that remained entirely stylized and imaginary. A similar case was represented by Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphonie einer Grossstadt* (1927), where in a Vertov-like manipulation of shot and montage the director tried to capture "simultaneous phenomena which, owing to certain analogies and contrasts between them, form comprehensible patterns. . . . He cuts from human legs walking in the street to the legs of a cow and juxtaposes the luscious dishes in a deluxe restaurant with the appalling food of the very poor."<sup>8</sup> Such formalism, however, tended to concentrate attention not on things themselves and their meaning but on their formal characteristics. As Kracauer noted with respect to the capturing of the city's movement in rhythmic shots, "tempo is also a formal conception if it is not defined with reference to the qualities of the objects through which it materializes."<sup>9</sup>

For Kracauer, the street, properly recorded, offered a virtually inexhaustible subject for the comprehension of modernity; its special characteristics fostered not only the chance and the random, but more importantly the necessary distance, if not alienation, of the observer for whom the camera eye was a precise surrogate. If, in the photographs of Marville or Asger, one might detect a certain melancholy, this was because the photographic medium, interacting with the street as subject, fostered a kind of self-estrangement allowing for a closer identification with the objects being observed. "The dejected individual is likely to lose himself in the incidental configurations of his environment, absorbing them with a disinterested intensity no longer determined by his previous preferences. His is a kind of receptivity which resembles that of Proust's photographer cast in the role of a stranger."<sup>10</sup> Hence, for Kracauer and his friend Walter Benjamin, the close identification of the photographer with the flâneur, and the potential of flânerie and its techniques to furnish models for the modernist filmmaker: "The melancholy character is seen strolling about aimlessly: as he proceeds, his changing surroundings take shape in the form of numerous juxtaposed shots of house facades, neon lights, stray passers-by, and the like. It is inevitable that the audience should trace their seemingly unmotivated emergence to his dejection and the alienation in its wake."<sup>11</sup> In this

work of art the reception of which is consummated by the collectivity in a state of distraction" was made in this very context: the assertion of the "shock effect" of the film as that which allows the public, no longer distracted, to be put once more in the position of the critic. Thus the only way to render architecture critical again was to wrest it out of its uncritically observed context, its distracted state, and offer it to a now attentive public—that is, to make a film of the building.

Or of the city. In an evocative remark inserted apparently at random among the unwieldy collection of citations and aphorisms that make up the unfinished *Pasagen-Werk*, Walter Benjamin opened the possibility of yet another way of reading his unfinished work: was it not perhaps the sketch of a screenplay for a movie of Paris?

Could one not shoot a passionate film of the city plan of Paris? Of the development of its different forms [*Gestalten*] in temporal succession? Of the condensation of a century-long movement of streets, boulevards, passages, squares, in the space of half an hour? And what else does the flâneur do?<sup>13</sup>

In this context, might not the endless quotations and aphoristic observations of the *Pasagen-Werk*, carefully written out on hundreds of single index cards, each one letter-, number-, and color-coded to cross-reference them to all the rest, be construed as so many shots, ready to be montaged into the epic movie "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century"; a prehistory of modernity, finally realized by modernity's own special form of mechanical reproduction?

While obviously no "film" of this kind was ever made, an attempt to answer the hypothetical question "What would Benjamin's film of Paris have looked like?" would clarify what we might call Benjamin's "filmic imaginary." Such an imaginary, overt in the *Pasagen-Werk* and the contemporary essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and covert in many earlier writings from those on German baroque allegory to those on historical form, might, in turn, reveal important aspects of the theoretical problems inherent in the filmic representation of metropolis. For, in the light of Benjamin's theories of the political and social powers of mechanical reproduction as outlined in his "Conversations with Bertold Brecht," it is clear from the

respect, what Kracauer saw as Eisenstein's "identification of life with the street" took on new meaning, as the flâneur-photographer moved to capture the flow of fleeting impressions that Kracauer's teacher Georg Simmel had characterized as "snapshots of reality." "When history is made in the streets, the streets tend to move onto the screen," concluded Kracauer.

The Critic as Producer: Benjamin

Other critics were more optimistic about the potential of filmic techniques to render a version of reality that might otherwise go unrecorded, or better, to reconstrue reality in such a way that it might be critically apprehended. Thus Walter Benjamin's celebrated eulogy of the film as liberty of perception, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," was a first step in the constitution of the filmic as *the* modern critical aesthetic:

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. . . . An unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. . . . The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.<sup>12</sup>

Unconscious optics, the filmic unconscious, was, for Benjamin, itself a kind of analysis, the closest aesthetic equivalent to Freud's own *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, in its ability to focus and deepen perception.

In this characteristic, film obviously outdistanced architecture; Benjamin's remark that "architecture has always represented the prototype of a

outset that any project for a film of Paris would in no way have resembled other urban films of the interwar period, whether idealist, expressionist, or realist. Rather it would have involved Benjamin in an act of theoretical elaboration that, based on previous film theory and criticism, would have constructed new kinds of optical relations between the camera and the city, film and architecture. These would no doubt have been established on the complex notion of "the optical unconscious," an intercalation of Freud and Riegl, that appears in Benjamin's writings on photography and film in the late twenties and early thirties.<sup>14</sup>

On one level Benjamin's fragmentary remark is easily decipherable: what he had in mind was evidently an image of the combined results of the flâneur's petipatetic vision, montaged onto the history of the nineteenth century and put in motion by the movie camera. No longer would the implied movement of Bergsonian mental processes or the turns of allegorical text have to make do as pale imitations of metropolitan movement; now the real movement of the film would, finally, merge technique and content as a proof, so to speak, of the manifest destiny of modernity. In this sense, Benjamin's metaphor of a Parisian film remains just that: a figure of modernist technique as the fullest expression of modernist thought, as well as the explanation of its origins.

Certainly it is not too difficult to imagine the figure of Benjamin's flâneur, Vertov-like, carrying his camera as a third eye, framing and shooting the rapidly moving pictures of modern life. The etchings of Jacques Callot, the thumbnail sketches of Saint-Aubin, the "tableaux" of Sébastien Mercier, the rapid renderings of Constantin Guys, the prose poems of Baudelaire, the snapshots of Atget are all readily transposed into the vocabulary of film, which then literally mimics the fleeting impressions of everyday life in metropolis in its very techniques of representation. Indeed, almost every characteristic Benjamin associates with the flâneur might be associated with the film director with little or no distortion. An eye for detail, for the neglected and the chance; a penchant for joining reality and reverie; a distanced vision, apart from that distracted and unselfconscious existence of the crowd; a fondness for the marginal and the forgotten: these are traits of flâneur and filmmaker alike. Both share affinities with the detective and the peddler, the ragpicker and the vagabond; both aestheticize the roles and materials with which they work. Equally, the typical habitats of the flâneur lend themselves to filmic represen-

tation: the banlieu, the margins, the zones, and outskirts of the city; the deserted streets and squares at night; the crowded boulevards, the phantasmagoric passages, arcades, and department stores; the spatial apparatus, that is, of the consumer metropolis.

On another level, however, if we take the image literally rather than metaphorically, a number of puzzling questions emerge. A film of Paris is certainly conceivable, but what would a film of "the *plan* of Paris" look like? And if one were to succeed in filming this plan, how then might it depict the development of the city's "forms"—its boulevards, streets, squares, and passages—at the same time as "condensing" a century of their history into half an hour? How might such a film, if realized, be "passionate"? If, as Benjamin intimates, the model of the film director was to be found in the figure of the flâneur, how might this figure translate his essentially nineteenth-century habits of walking and seeing into cinematographic terms? It seems that step by step, within the very movement of Benjamin's own metaphor, the ostensible unity of the image is systematically undermined; as if the result of making a film of the plan of Paris were to replicate the very fragmentation of modernity that the metropolis posed, the flâneur saw, and the film concretizes. Benjamin's image thus emerges as a complex rebus of method and form. Its very self-enclosed elegance, beginning with the film and ending with the flâneur as director (a perfect example of a romantic fragment turning in on itself according to Schelling's rules), seems consciously structured to provoke its own unraveling. It is as if Benjamin inserted his cinematographic conundrum into the formless accumulation of the *Passagen-Werk's* citations and aphorisms to provoke, in its deciphering, a self-conscious ambiguity about the implied structure of his text, and, at the same time, a speculation on the theory of film that he never wrote.

For it was not simply that the flâneur and the filmmaker shared spaces and gazes; for Benjamin these characteristics were transferred, as in analysis, to the spaces themselves, which became, so to speak, vagabonds in their own right. He spoke of the phenomenon of the "*colportage* or peddling of space" as the fundamental experience of the flâneur, where a kind of Bergsonian simultaneity allowed "the simultaneous perception of everything that potentially is happening in this single space. The space directs winks at the flâneur."<sup>15</sup> Thus the flâneur as ragpicker and peddler participates in his surroundings, even as they cooperate with him in his unofficial archaeology of spatial settings. And, to

paraphrase Benjamin, what else does the filmmaker do for a viewer now opened up "in his susceptibility to the transient real-life phenomena that crowd the screen"?<sup>16</sup>

#### Architectural Montage: Eisenstein

Here we are returned to Eisenstein's "street," reminded, in Benjamin's desire to have shot a "passionate" film, of Eisenstein's own long analyses of the notion of filmic "ecstasy," the simultaneous cause and effect of movement in the movie. The "ecstatic" for Eisenstein was, in fact, the fundamental shared characteristic of architecture and film. Even as architectural styles had, one by one, "exploded" into each other by a kind of inevitable historical process, so the filmmaker might force the shot to decompose and recombine in successive explosions. Thus, the "principles of the Gothic . . . seem to explode the balance of the Romanesque style. And, within the Gothic itself, we could trace the stirring picture of movement of its lancet world from the first almost indistinct steps toward the ardent model of the mature and postmature, 'flamboyant' late Gothic. We could, like Wölfflin, contrast the Renaissance and Baroque and interpret the excited spirit of the second, winding like a spiral, as an ecstatically bursting temperament of a new epoch, exploding preceding forms of art in the enthusiasms for a new quality, responding to a new phase of a single historical process."<sup>17</sup>

But Eisenstein goes further. In an essay on two Piranesi engravings for the early and late states of the *Carceri* series, he compares architectural composition itself to cinematic montage, an implicit "flux of form" that holds within itself the potential to explode into successive states.<sup>18</sup> Building on his experience as architect and set designer, Eisenstein developed a comprehensive theory of what he called "space constructions" that found new meaning in the romantic formulation of architecture as "frozen music": "At the basis of the composition of its ensemble, at the basis of the harmony of its conglomerating masses, in the establishment of the melody of the future overflow of its forms, and in the execution of its rhythmic parts, giving harmony to the relief of its ensemble, lies that same 'dance' that is also at the basis of the creation of music, painting, and cinematic montage."<sup>19</sup> For Eisenstein a kind of relentless vertigo is set up by the play of architectural forms in space, a vertigo that is cas-

ily assimilable to Thomas De Quincey's celebrated account of Coleridge's reaction to Piranesi's *Carceri*, or, better, to Gogol's reading of the Gothic as a style of endless movement and internal explosions.<sup>20</sup>

And if Eisenstein is able to "force," to use Manfredo Tafuri's term, these representations of architectural space to "explode" into the successive stages of their "montage" decomposition and recomposition, as if they were so many "shots," then it is because, for Eisenstein, architecture itself embodies the principles of montage; indeed its special characteristics of a spatial art experienced in time render it the predecessor of the film in more than simple analogy.

In the article "Montage and Architecture," written in the late thirties as a part of the uncompleted work on montage, Eisenstein sets out this position, contrasting two "paths" of the spatial eye: the cinematic, where a spectator follows an imaginary line among a series of objects, through the sight as well as in the mind—"diverse positions passing in front of an immobile spectator"—and the architectural, where "the spectator moved through a series of carefully disposed phenomena which he observed in order with his visual sense." In this transition from real to imaginary movement, architecture is film's predecessor. Where painting "remained incapable of fixing the total representation of an object in its full multi-dimensionality," and "only the film camera has solved the problem of doing this on a flat surface," "its undoubted ancestor in this capability is . . . architecture."<sup>21</sup>

Here, Eisenstein, former architect and an admitted "great adherent of the architectural aesthetics of Le Corbusier," turned to an example of the architectural "path" that precisely parallels that studied by Le Corbusier himself in *Vers une architecture* to exemplify the "promenade architecturale": the successive perspective views of the movement of an imaginary spectator on the Acropolis constructed by Auguste Choisy to demonstrate the "successive tableaux" and "picturesque" composition of the site.<sup>22</sup> Eisenstein cites Choisy's analysis at length with little commentary, asking his reader simply "to look at it with the eye of a film-maker": "It is hard to imagine a montage sequence for an architectural ensemble more subtly composed, shot by shot, than the one which our legs create by walking among the buildings of the Acropolis." For Eisenstein the Acropolis was the veritable answer to Victor Hugo's assertion of the cathedral of a book in stone: "the perfect example of one of the most ancient films."<sup>23</sup> Eisenstein finds in the carefully sequenced perspectives presented





## X Marks the Spot

### The Exhaustion of Space at the Scene of the Crime

Both would have agreed with Robert Mallet-Stevens, who was troubled by the invasion of the decorative into filmic architecture, the potential to create "imaginary" forms that illustrated rather than provided settings for human psychological emotions. Mallet-Stevens warned against the tendency to view architecture as a photogenic aid to film, thereby creating a "forescen" dynamic that in real space would be provided by the human figure: "the ornament, the arabesque, is the mobile personage who creates them."<sup>25</sup> Rather than expressionist buildings imitating their cinematic counterparts, he called for a radical simplification of architecture that would, in this way, offer itself up naturally to the filmic action, always preserving the distance between the real and the imaginary. "Real life is entirely different, the house is made to live, it should first respond to our needs."<sup>26</sup> Properly handled, however, architecture and film might be entirely complementary. He cited a screenplay by Ricciotto Canudo that would perhaps realize this ideal:

It concerned the representation of a solitary woman, frighteningly alone in life, surrounded by the void and nothingness. The décor: composed of inarticulate lines, immovable, repeated, without ornament: no window, no door, no furniture in the "field," and at the center of these rigid parallels a woman who advanced slowly. Subtitles become useless, architecture situates the person and defines her better than any text.<sup>27</sup>

In this vision of a cinematic architecture that would return through its own laws of perspective to the essential characteristics of building, Mallet-Stevens echoed Le Corbusier and anticipated Eisenstein. In his depiction of a decor framed as the very image of isolation, agoraphobic or claustrophobic, he also answered those in Germany who were attempting to "express" in spatial distortion what a simple manipulation of the camera in space might accomplish.

Such arguments between these two possibilities of filmic architecture have hardly ceased with the gradual demise of cinema and the rise of its own "natural" successors video and, more recently, digital hyperspatial imaging. That their influence on architecture might be as disturbing as those observed by Le Corbusier and Mallet-Stevens is at least possible to hazard, as buildings and their spatial sequences are designed as illustrations of implied movement or, worse, as literal fabrications of the computer's-eye view.

The exact position of the X that in common lore marked the most significant spot at the scene of the crime has more than often been in doubt. Precise terminology, and of course in geometrical accuracy, the spot has been, so to speak, on the move throughout the last century and a half of modern criminological practice. The place of the body might be marked by tape and chalk on the ground to which it had fallen; the alleged site of the crime might be gridded with painstaking care in order to provide a coordinate system by which to situate the evidence, carefully collected in labeled bags for presentation in court; the tracks of the criminal, the traces of blood, the dispersed weapons, and their hastily jettisoned ammunition might all be gathered together and plotted on the special kind of map that criminologists have defined as appropriate to fix the "scene" of the crime in legally tenable terms. But all this precision, as fictional and real defenders have demonstrated since Edgar Allan Poe, falls apart at the slightest questioning of a spatial kind. The question of *what* has generally been easily answered, at least until the most sophisticated technologies (such as those of DNA analysis) have proved too much "beyond a doubt" to be believable. The question of *where*, however, has always been readily thrown into obscurity, by the simple trick of denouncing the various projections, suppositions, and assumptions that are gathered around any exercise in mapping. Objects can be presented in the courtroom, but spaces have always to be imagined, and represented; and representation has, from the early nineteenth century at least, been an art, controlled by psychological projection and careful artifice, more than a science.

This was no doubt the message of Georges Bataille when, in his brief review of the photographic album *X Marks the Spot* (issued appropriately enough by the Spot Publishing Company of Chicago in 1930), he remarked on the