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Ruins of Urban Phantasmagorias

Étienne-Gaspard Robertson's Phantasmagoria.
Illustration by Moreau, first published in *Magasin Pittoresque*, 1849.
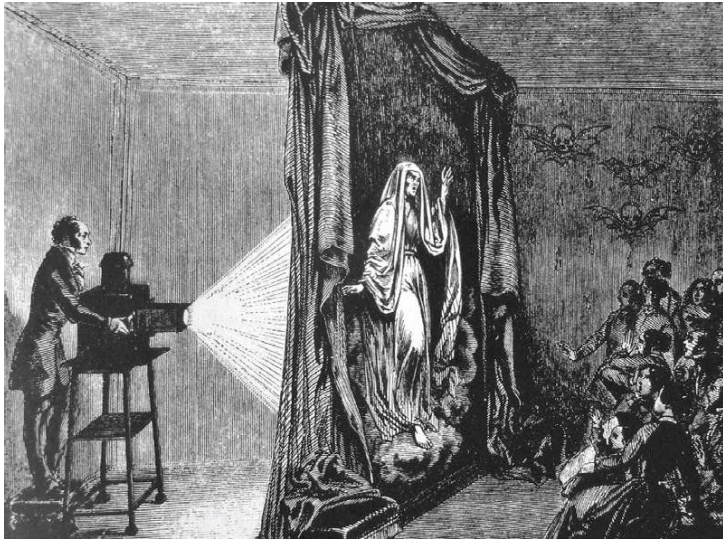
The question, in effect, is the following: if the infrastructure in a certain way (in the materials of thought and experience) determines the superstructure, but if such determination is not reducible to simple reflection, how is it then—entirely apart from any question about the originating cause—to be characterized? As its expression. The superstructure is the expression of the infrastructure […]. *The collective, from the first, expresses the conditions of its life.*[1]

In the "technical" terms of establishing a dialogue between the *camera obscura* and the *phantasmagoria*, Walter Benjamin tries to replace Marx's notion of *reflection* with one of *expression*.[2] The image, itself a machinic reproduction projected by the camera obscura, manifests *mechanically* as bare inverted reflection, whereas the phantasmagoria introduces the "mediator"—a magic lantern[3] that "inverts painted slides which are themselves artistic products."[4] It is only through the *mediation of a subjective process*, that the representation (inverted or not) of a reality becomes meaningful. The "phantasmagorical experience"[5] has a spectral projection of "ghosts" as dreams of the new society, and it supposes the presence of a *mediator* that acts as a filter between mass society and reality, "ideologically commodified."[6]

Working on this notion, Benjamin extends the phantasmagorical powers of commodity to cover the entire domain of cultural products of a city.[7] He is interested in how the "phantasmagorical reality of a relation of things is perceived and how the distorted traces of the social relation are immediately imprinted in the process of perception."[8]

The Communist Phantasmagoria

Characterized by such phantasms, the city becomes the *space of a dream*, extending these forces in every aspect of the experience.[9] The city acquires its phantasmagoric nature as it develops within the demands of a new world, a new modernity fueled by *dream images* or *wish experiences*. It entails transformations manifested in ideological transpositions of the material reality, reflecting a *mediated* and distorted image of the current reality. The created phantasmagoria offers *ready-made* manipulated spaces of distraction for masses. The notion of phantasmagoria in a communist context has to do with filling the gaps of reality. It is through the phantasmagoria, through the existence of a body of ghostly spectralities, that it negotiates between the spiritualization of objects[10] and the materialization of spiritual, substanceless ideology.[11]

Manifested generally as the "newness" of the nineteenth century, the phantasmagoria found its major expression in the forms of the arcades. In spite of their iconic character during the nineteenth century, in Benjamin's time, the arcades were in ruin and already identified as an out-of-date architectural form, filled with obsolete commodities. It was precisely this obsolete character of the arcades that made Benjamin interested in them. In Susan Buck-Morss's words: "Having lost their dream-power over the collective, they had acquired a historical power to "awaken" it."[12]

Manifested as the essence of the Benjaminian phantasmagoria, the arcades offered an a priori understanding of the changes and alimented utopian desires. In the communist city, new materials (precast concrete), new forms (the multistory apartment buildings), and new configuration (large avenues, erasure of the limits between center and periphery, "controlled" public spaces) were supposed to "modernize" the city. The *urban housing corridors* of the communist city are a space of passage and fuel for a *dreamworld* producing phantasmagorias, analogous to the nineteenth-century arcades. Large avenues reconfiguring the city were bordered on both sides by apartment buildings, covering up the remaining historical tissue behind them. They represent the coming together of a socialist economy with the extensive industrial, standardized production. Embodying the complex relations

of the socialist society, the new urban elements attempted to combine the political regulated experiences of the urbanity with an imposed rhythm of life.[13] Significant at both an urban and a private level, the corridor, as "concrete screen" represented a passage and limit between two conditions trying to (radically) mediate them. Passage between the old and new conditions of the city, the urban corridor, embodied the hyper-abstractness and standardization proposed by the ideology and oriented the inhabitants within the new urban and cultural topography.

In the case of the apartment, the intended socialist "liquidation of the interior" by building everything almost identical, called forth the need to leave one's imprint. As a space of domesticity, it became the place where people could manifest their "aesthetic preferences," trying to embellish and add a personal trace to the standardized, concrete panels and massive furniture.

The massive gesture to resystematize the city promised a sense of security and comfort. The rhetoric of the new was extremely powerful: "It involved the removal of the traces left by the capitalist society, and the creation of a new appearance."[14] The new urban aesthetics was overshadowed by a functionality that had to accommodate "a wave of uprooted populace"[15] who came from the countryside to work either in the factories or on the building sites all over the city.[16] The factories are now at the core of the new housing districts, replacing the traditional structure of the city. Constituted as a mass production society, the *collective housing* and the *factory* become the elements to incarnate and generate sociality as well as to aliment the new idea of the city. Caught within a very abstracted space, deprived of the symbols and landmarks they had been used to, human beings could not help but be confused in the action of the resignification of the city. As Andrew Webber observed, the re-semantizati on of a space and the alienation of the habitus implies a *removal* of the personal trace.[17] A "perfect reality" established by a unique signifier unfolded in a "pseudo-reality."[18] Assuming a deep political significance, the reality becomes the "new urban-industrial phantasmagoria."[19]

Ruins as Awakening Topographies

In the communist context, we may speak of a mass utopia as a dream of the regime that transformed the actual society, having the power to invest industrially produced objects and the built environment with collective, political desire.[20] The fall of communism was expressed as a brutal rupture in the carefully created *dreamworld*, and was manifested as a shock of objectification[21] of all the elements belonging to the industrial realm, especially of the industrial sites. It is in this moment that the *dreamworld* of communism might be dispelled and that we might be able to interpret these elements as spaces for awakening. The awakening is "neither dream nor waking consciousness,"[22] but it is a synthesis of past and present brought together.

Benjamin will recognize in his time the newness of the nineteenth century, meaning the arcades, as a rather out-of-date element whose presence and reappropriation might provoke the dissipation of the dream. It is therefore in these residues of the previous time that we can find the key to grasp the "new modernity." The newness becomes the source of illusions alimenting the dream of Western capitalist societies, as well as it aliments the Eastern communist utopia. It entertained the utopia of the socialist physical and symbolic topography, but becomes, in the new condition of the city, obsolete. The fall of communism in 1989 and the demands of the capitalist era have profoundly challenged the place of these spaces in the present topography. As a former socialist city with large reserves of labor, industrial heritage, and accumulation of resources, it had to quickly integrate them into a new system of globalization of markets that also supposed a very abrupt transition. Its collapse manifests both as transformation of the human activity and emergence of a new physical framework that can accommodate the new praxis. However, the old structures still represent permanence in the urban life and manifest their impact on social practices that use and reproduce this infrastructure.[23]

Industrial space behind communist housing blocks. Bucharest, Romania. Photo: Iulia Statica, 2014.

Urban housing corridor. Bucharest, Romania. Photo: Iulia Statica, 2013.

Communist housing blocks and industrial ruins. Bucharest, Romania. Photo: Iulia Statica, 2013.

Industrial space behind communist housing blocks. Bucharest, Romania. Photo: Iulia Statica, 2013.

The dialectic stands now in some of the major themes of communism constituted as a *dreamworld* then, and as *residues*, material or symbolic, in the present time of capitalism. It is in this *tension* that the mythologizing of very few predominant themes during the former regime becomes free of any empowering attributes. To Benjamin, the *ruins* of the former era are the image of a tension in which the dialectics of history and myth are entangled. Taken out of the "milieu" they are now juxtaposed to another reality, which dispels the phantasmagoric nature of what has been. In terms of the urban collective and its topography, the awakening from the phantasmagoria of communism has to do with both the dissolution of physical bodies of industry and the ruination of their symbolical power. They manifest in the capitalist topography as physical voids in the urban tissue, embodying divergent market speculations of land value and discourses of memory. Ruins are now framing capitalist landscapes of postsocialist cities, and even if often their presence is seen as naturalization of self-destruction, their critical task is to enable new possibilities and to orient the subject in the changing topography of the city and of the political discourses.

City center of Bucharest, Romania.

From phantasmagorical presences in the communist world, the industrial spaces become an allegory of the new condition of the city, implying redemption as a possibility[24] and acting as a new mechanism to unravel cultural myths. The ruin as allegory emerges as the power to transcend symbolism by overcoming aesthetics and by asserting the superiority of destruction. Emptiness and debris have the resources to unlock the potential of "the non-existence of what it presents."[25] Emptied of social ritual, the ruins are not seen as mythological history, but as both object and process. They mark a passing and provide the infrastructure for acknowledging the present. This mechanism does not necessarily involve a loss, alimenting nostalgia and mourning, but it provides a shift in its meaning, allowing access to multiple perspectival projections of its conditions.

Expressing the absence of the dream image, it is the *allegory* that turns the *phantasmagoria* inside out and converts it into a new fragmentary and dialectical presence. In this way, the postcommunist topographies situate their project at a point of collision. Allegory "has to clear away the final phantasmagoria,"[26] so that the buildings express themselves through their *materiality* and physical presence rather than through the ghosts of ideology. The impossibility of dialectically reconciling these aspects leads to the understanding of the contemporary condition of the city in terms of "*difference* and *crisis*,"[27] as an incomplete project articulated by tensions. The ruins of communist spaces are the triggers of seeing the limits, traces, and borders of the various layers of the city and among them. They become *chronotopes*[28] marking both a spatial "topography" and a historical process. Heavily invested during communism, they represent an important space for the political unfolding through the social. Their decay and therefore vanishing of the empowering phantasmagoria reveals a weak structure and different relation to the containing of topography. The memorial character of these peculiar urban spaces engages in a discourse that attempts not only to aestheticize but more importantly, to project politicized memories as a way to reflect their ambivalent cast of perpetual interaction with a changing urbanity and the melancholy of time and space lost.[29] The allegorical seeing of the city can enable, in terms of design and urban praxes, the production and justification of more open-ended and heterogeneous forms and spaces.

However, this project of tensions does not necessarily entail autonomous architectures or urbanities, abstracted from reality,[30] but builds a complex ground, constituted from recollections able to generate forms of political praxes that negotiate various historical layers of appropriation and reappropriation, which can mediate different understandings of memory, and different experiences of urban topographies. The total project of the communist phantasmagoria is replaced with the contemporary postcommunist city of the dialectical juxtaposition of fragments and images. It is in this way that the topography is able to embody the permanence of an uncompleted condition and to negotiate various stances and sovereignties of the city. It is indeed Bucharest, a city of contrasts that embodies a *hyper-postmodern* figure of a permanent critical now. The space, as physical, disempowered object, is thus able to metabolize various conditions and to be associated with both totalitarianism and democracy. The complex cityscape—the ruins, the multiple infrastructures, and the shadows of the past—is the ground for the allegorical constellation of the contemporary postcommunist city, which still lingers on a threshold, looking toward past, but acting toward the future. It is

precisely the translation of this point of tension in terms of the allegory that might allow the possibility to liberate the present urban topography and imaginary from the ghosts of the recent ideology.

Industrial ruins in Bucharest, Romania.
Photo: Iulia Statica, 2013.

Endnotes

1 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. T. Eiland, T. and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 392.

2 The notion of *phantasmagoria* emerged in one of Marx's writings on commodity fetishism where he noted: "[…] the commodity-form, and the 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 the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic [*phantasmagorical*] form of a relation between things." Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol.1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1975), 165; in the original version, Marx uses *dies phantasmagorische Form*. In Marx's terms, phantasmagoria is produced by the abstraction and homogenization of labor, which becomes value, and which leads to the creation of the commodity-producing society. The object becomes a *ready-made* whose process of production is hidden. It therefore becomes fetish, magical object that fuels a world of commodities and the living in a *phantasmagoria*. ("The object becomes a magical object, insofar as the labor stored up in it comes to sum supernatural and sacred at the very moment when it can no longer be recognized as labor." *Arcades Project*, "Convolute X"). In Benjamin, the phantasmagoria derives primarily from its technological manifestation as a form of entertainment during the nineteenth century, but its understanding is tied to the theory of the relation base-superstructure in the commodified society. As Margaret Cohen observes, it could be grasped as an interpretation of Marx's notion of camera obscura, which was employed for defining the theory of the ideological superstructure. In this sense, Benjamin's discourse on phantasmagorias starts with Marx's discourse on ideology. Ideology projects, according to Marx, a distorted image of the social reality, as consequence of false consciousness, and in relation to the material reality and development of the socioeconomic conditions.

3 Panoramas, dioramas, cosmoramas, and so on—defined by Benjamin as phantasmagorical experiences—were literally illuminating. "Using a movable magic lantern called phantoscope, it projected for its spectators a parade of ghosts." Margaret Cohen, "Benjamin's Phantasmagoria," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. D. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 90, 199–220).

4 Cohen, *Benjamin's Phantasmagoria*, 94.

5 The idea of a phantasmatic presence of an object is also articulated in the medieval phantasmology, as a mechanism that served the creation of a "topology of the unreal," constituted as the realm of interaction between the imaginative projection of a mental, unreal object and the actual object. Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: World and Phantasm in the Western Culture* (1977), trans. R. L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

6 In an analogy, the mediation of a distorted reality as well as the emergence of a *communist commodity* will open the possibility for interpreting the communist condition in terms of phantasmagoria. In this peculiar context, the notion is related to the juxtaposition of ideological mystification and cultural or social embodiment. It finds its expression in the "architectural utopia"—aiming to rebuild the city; in the fetishist character of the objects—which comes precisely from their absence and fuels—not only desires, but more than anything, necessity; and from the abstraction of the "cult of labor," as both heroic labor (propaganda) and forced labor (coercion). It is in this sense that I associate Benjamin's dialectical interpretation of the capitalist city to the communist context—it is both, a physical construct and an abstract "commodification" of ideological objects that allow these associations to be justified.

7 Cohen, *Benjamin's Phantasmagoria*, 88.

8 Sami Kathib, "Fantasy, Phantasmagoria, and Image-Space. Walter Benjamin's Politics of Pure Means," paper presented at the conference series *Die Politik des Phantasmas*, # 5: *Phantasma und Politik*, at Hebbel am Ufer Theatre, Berlin, November 23, 2013.

9 David S. Ferris, *The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 117.

10 Here the notion of object should be understood in terms of both domesticity—the daily products, very difficult to be procured—and urban reality—the embodiment of the ideology in a new infrastructure of rigorously standardized and large-scale urban projects commissioned by the state.

11 Slavoj Žižec, *Mapping Ideology* (New York: Verso: 2005), 20.

12 Susan Buck-Morss, "The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe," *October*, Vol. 73 (summer 1995), 3–26.

13 Reference to the urbanization of the villages and the translocation of the peasants from the countryside to the urban areas as a consequence of the forced industrialization of the cities.

14 Ana Maria Zahariade, *Architecture in the Post-Communist Project. Romania 1944–1989* (Bucharest: Simetria, 2011), 62.

15 Laura Visan, "Partially Color—Rethinking Exterior and Interior Spaces in Communist Romania," *The Anthropology of East Europe Review* 29, no. 2 (2011), 51–66; esp. 55.

16 A second condition of the housing spaces was the compact district. Constituted as a labyrinth with identical apartments, it emerged especially around the spaces for production.

17 Andrew Webber, *Berlin in the Twentieth Century. A Cultural Topography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 118

18 Marian Petcu, *Puterea și cultura: o istorie a cenzurii* [Power and Culture: A History of Censorship].(Iași, Romania: Polirom, 1999).

19 Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 24.

20 Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), ix.

21 Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

22 Ferris, *The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin*, 119.

23 Karol Kurniki, "Ideology and Power in a Post-Socialist City," *Autoportret* 1, no. 36 (2012) 34–37, esp. 37.

24 Cohen, *Benjamin's Phantasmagorias*, 96.

25 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925), trans. Osborne, J. (London: Verso, 1977), 233.

26 Ibid., 232.

27 Massimo Cacciari, "Di alcuni motivi in Walter Benjamin," in *Critica e storia: Materiali su Walter Benjamin* (Venice: Cluva,1980), 41–71, esp. 67

28 Webber, *Berlin*, 55.

29 Ibid., 67.

30 Teresa Stoppani, "The Building of Tensions—Manfredo Tafuri's Legacy: from Operative Criticism to Historical Project, between Critical Practices and Material Practices in Architecture," in *Reflections on Creativity*, ed. H. van Koten and L. Holm, (Dundee, Scotland: Duncan of Jordanstone College, 2007), 1–17, esp. 13.